

The Crusades, Catholic Piety and Chivalry in the Novels of Walter Scott

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In recent years historians such as Jonathan Riley-Smith have depicted the crusades as strictly religious, as well as political and economic, enterprises.¹ How did our eighteenth- and nineteenth-century forebears view them? This article explores the novelist Walter Scott's (1771-1832) depiction of the crusades and their relationship to concepts of piety and chivalry in two of his most famous novels, *Ivanhoe* (published in 1819) and his later lesser-known work *The Talisman* (published in 1825), both of which are set in medieval times. In these novels Scott deliberately and frequently makes references to the Catholic Church for literary reasons – primarily, as we shall see, to play upon the emotions and sensibilities of his readers.² It is his depiction of the medieval Catholic Church and more widely medieval Catholic society, which we shall examine. Furthermore, in both *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman* we are presented with what first appears to be a romantic and idealized version of medieval society. However, when we start to look deeper, we find that Scott's faithfulness to the constructs of conventional idealistic romanticism and Chivalry is often much more nuanced, realistic and critical than we might assume.³

Scott's crusading novels, *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman*, should be understood – I will argue – as a comparison of medieval Catholic society with the state and prospects of nineteenth-century Britain. But the story is a complex one. Scott plays with the Protestant contrast between 'good' Saxons – apparently the 'pre-Roman' Church in England – and the bad 'Roman' / French Normans. Yet his treatment is ambiguous: he suggests that chivalry is the leaven in the Catholic lump, but then notes its ambiguities. As for the Saracens, they look good when compared with the villains in the Military Orders, but are far from representing any post-Enlightenment ideal. As for crusading itself, Scott

recognizes its religious motivation but wonders whether such religious fervour is acceptable.

The crusades which took place between 1095 and 1291, the 'golden age' of crusading, remain a source of fascination to modern historians. Yet it is remarkable how much our ideas about them are still affected by the works of novelists and historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For the eighteenth-century philosopher-historian William Robertson (1721-1793) crusades were the incursion of glamorous but uneducated westerners, childish and destructive, into a civilization superior to their own; for his near contemporary Joseph Michaud (1767-1839) they were unashamedly glorious instruments of nationalism and proto-imperialism.⁴ Although such ideas have been thoroughly questioned by modern scholarship, they remain present in how we think about crusading today. Even recent supposedly 'politically-correct' films such as Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) still bring out many of the same stereotypes about the crusades. Hence although the cause of the western crusaders is no longer seen as glorious, more often than not the depiction of their Muslim foe remains stereotypical.⁵

For nineteenth-century novelists especially, the crusades were romantic enterprises – as we see clearly in Walter Scott's literary works. Scott was a Scot from Edinburgh, a life-long Conservative, but in many ways also a product of the Enlightenment.⁶ His novels are an excellent example of how writers have interpreted the past in the light of the *Zeitgeist* of their own age. *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman*, both of which have a medieval setting, allow the general public not only to enjoy stylish fiction but to retrieve and appreciate its medieval past.⁷ In the eighteenth century people had been fascinated by the classical myths of Athens and Rome. By contrast, Scott's depiction of the Middle Ages appealed to the particular sensibilities of his nineteenth-century audience: a desire not just to imbue the past with a sense of permanence but to heroicize the individual and to unify and order society. The nineteenth-century idea of 'merry England' was a reaction to the drabness of a contemporary society in the throes of the industrial revolution, and encapsulated the ideal of 'joy in widest commonality spread' idolised by contemporary poets such as Wordsworth, Blake and Coleridge.⁸ Hence, *Ivanhoe* is set in England rather than Scotland, is narrated not by 'The Author of Waverley' – Scott's more common

nom de plume, but by the fictitious English antiquary Laurence Templeton, and is concerned with medieval times, while *The Talisman*, set in the crusader states of Palestine and the Near East, allows Scott to explore the relationship between 'merry England' and the exotic Orient.⁹ Nevertheless, despite Scott's love of and sensitivity towards the medieval past, the manners and mores of his characters remain those of the nineteenth century.

Scott's fascination with the medieval world is not particularly surprising. As with many of his contemporaries, the idea that England had once been Catholic was an intriguing concept.¹⁰ Novelists and historians had long been fascinated by the Middle Ages, partly because of an antiquarian interest in a long-vanished era, but also because it was a means of propagating a certain view of the medieval past in support of a particular version of English history glorifying the Tudors and the establishment of the Church of England. Writers of ecclesiastical history such as the Protestant John Foxe (1516/17 - 1587) or Archbishop Matthew Parker (1504 - 1575), founder of the Society of Antiquaries, who published works such as Asser's *Life of Alfred* to justify the Anglican establishment, had deliberately created a view of the medieval Catholic Church as superstitious and degenerate in order to endorse the belief that it had been unquestionably necessary for England to secede from Rome at the Reformation.¹¹

Indeed some within the Church of England - for example the Scottish philosopher, historian and writer Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) - refused to countenance the idea that a new vision and template for society's common good might be found in England's Catholic past.¹² Yet, although an interest in medievalism was strongly associated with the Catholic Church and so inevitably had to contend with anti-Catholicism, from the latter half of the eighteenth century, hostility towards the medieval period as one of 'Romish superstition' was increasingly tempered by its more positive association with 'Nature' - since this hearkened back to a supposed idyllic innocent, rustic, simplicity so different from the age of industrial revolution.¹³ The architect Augustus Welby Pugin (1812-1852), was inspired in part to convert to Catholicism in 1835 because he believed medieval England was an aesthetically - which for him entailed ethically - superior era to his own.¹⁴ Pugin compared unfavourably the workhouses and the

Utilitarian-influenced Poor Law Amendment Act, commonly known as the New Poor Law, passed by the Whig Government in 1834, with the compassionate charity practiced in many medieval monasteries.¹⁵ Indeed, despite the continuing propagation of the idea of a medieval Church cram-packed with self-seeking clergymen, fat, greedy abbots, wicked knights and heinous villains in the shape of the Military Orders, even within the conventional arms of the Church of England, many believed that the Reformation had unrelentingly and catastrophically dehumanised many important aspects of Christianity.

Added to this mixture of contemporary ideas about Catholicism, there was also the influence of popular imagery of the medieval world in general and in particular of monasticism. Such images were captured by the writers of Gothic novels, fascinated by medievalism and revelling in its supposed darkness, ghoulishness and exotic, yet bigoted, nature, strove to create a sense of fanaticism and terror.¹⁶ Given the popularity of such works, it is not surprising that Scott's own 'medieval' novels struck a similar chord.

This was the historical and literary context which formed the backdrop to *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman*. As we have noted, on a first read we find in both novels a stereotypical view of medieval society. On the surface there is everything we would expect: merry crusaders and castles, feasting and fasting, chivalry and tournaments, gallant knights rescuing damsels in distress, fat, rollicking - if not frolicking - friars.¹⁷ Western Europeans are embarked on chivalric pilgrimage crusades against their eastern foe; King Richard the Lionheart is at war with Saladin: the comfortably familiar West is pitted against the exotic East.

In this medieval world good and bad are easy to distinguish. England is ruled by the evil Prince John who has usurped the power of his brother, the good King Richard, as these passages of *Ivanhoe* explain:

In that pleasant district of merry England which is watered by the river Don, there extended in ancient times a large forest, covering the greater part of the beautiful hills and valleys which lie between Sheffield and the pleasant town of Doncaster...

Such being our chief scene, the date of our story refers to a period towards the end of the reign of Richard I., when his

return from his long captivity had become an event rather wished than hoped for by his despairing subjects, who were in the meantime subjected to every species of subordinate oppression...¹⁸

The condition of the English nation was at this time sufficiently miserable. King Richard was absent a prisoner, and in the power of the perfidious and cruel Duke of Austria...

Prince John, in league with Philip of France, Coeur-de-Lion's mortal enemy, was using every species of influence with the Duke of Austria to prolong the captivity of his brother Richard, to whom he stood indebted for so many favours...¹⁹

Prince John is depicted as a tyrant. This theme of medieval England subject to tyrannous rule reveals Scott's interest in the idea of nationhood.²⁰ Scott could not resist bringing the nineteenth-century political problems of England and Scotland into his 'medieval' novels as we see in this extract from *The Talisman* in which the Muslim foe debates with the hero, the Scottish crusader Sir Kenneth:

"...Surely, Sir Kenneth, you and the other good men of your country should have submitted yourselves to the dominion of this King Richard, ere you left your native land, divided against itself, to set forth on this expedition?"

Hasty and fierce was Kenneth's answer. "No, by the bright light of Heaven! If the king of England had not set forth to the Crusade till he was Sovereign of Scotland, the Crescent might, for me, and all true-hearted Scots, glimmer for ever on the walls of Zion."²¹

The theme of national identity is also prevalent in *Ivanhoe*.²² Indeed, one of Scott's major preoccupations in the novel, is how a nation must make the painful but necessary transition from a romantic, heroic era to a comparatively boring period of unity, progress, prosperity and peace.²³ In *Ivanhoe*, however, the theme is not England

versus Scotland, but Saxons - who stand for England - versus Normans - who stand for the Catholic European continent.

Hence in *Ivanhoe* Scott emphasises the 'Normanness' of bad Prince John, who is deliberately associated with the Catholic Church. *Ivanhoe* does not explore in any significant depth the role and importance of the Catholic Church in twelfth-century England;²⁴ yet according to the received historical opinion of Scott's day, John had lost his battle with Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) and had thereby humiliated himself and by extension England, through his capitulation to Rome. Although early post-Reformation Protestant writers may have seen John as a victim, by the nineteenth century they were more disposed to regard him as a failure who should never have allowed the English state Church - by which they implied the Church of England - to submit to the evils of the Scarlet Woman.

Scholars have suggested that in depicting John as surrounded by sycophantic favourites and intent on dovetailing his interests to that of the Catholic Church, Scott deliberately invited comparison to his contemporary Prince George (1762-1830) - the later George IV (1820-1830) - who, despite his debts, drinking and dissolute lifestyle had recently caused a constitutional furore by his quasi-marriage to 'Mrs Fitzherbert', the renowned Catholic beauty and socialite of the day.²⁵ If it is possible, as some have suggested, that Scott deliberately associated bad prince John with George IV to indicate a Tory prophecy of the dangers of Catholic emancipation - Catholics were only finally removed from restrictions on political participation in 1828, not long after both *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman* were published - it is very likely that this was part of a more general Protestant suspicion of Catholic involvement in state affairs.²⁶

In contrast to John in both *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman* good King Richard is not Norman but very definitely Saxon. Although, as we have noted, many poets and artists were increasingly drawn to the idea of a medieval and therefore Catholic English society, some in the established Church of England still propagated the idea of medieval England as maintaining a strongly Saxon self-identity as a way of reclaiming history for Protestantism. According to this narrative, the English Reformation which had brought about the establishment of the Church of England, was really a 're-formation' of the pre-Norman Church. It could therefore be claimed that the Church of England was

no break with England's Catholic past but a return to an historically accurate interpretation of the early Church.

Scott's depiction in *Ivanhoe* of the opposition between King Richard who favours the Saxon underdogs and King John who favours the Norman oppressors offers a picture of evil versus good. When Scott wrote *Ivanhoe* in 1819, the word 'revolution' would have brought to mind not only the French Revolution, but fears of revolution closer to home following the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. Hence in *Ivanhoe* we find Cedric the Saxon's proposed rebellion against the Normans as a 'revolution' and 'civil war' which is intended to suggest a single nation divided rather than merely Saxons refusing to yield to Norman oppression.²⁷

Despite his moral preference for the Saxons over the Normans, Scott the Tory cannot countenance such an idea; rather he points to the answer for England as the combination of the best of Saxon and Norman through the unifying force of good King Richard. So although some of Scott's contemporaries argued that the English Reformation had been a true 're-formation' of the pre-Norman church which brought back Anglo-Saxon Christian values to the British isles, Scott prefers to emphasise the theme of unity. Only in the 1840s, when historians debated the famous quarrel between Henry II of England and Thomas Becket and what it meant for the religion of medieval England, did the idea of the Saxons as a superior race become important.²⁸

Nevertheless, even if an extreme version of racial symbolism is lacking in *Ivanhoe*, there is no doubt that Scott deliberately pits Normans against Saxons to highlight morality or lack of it.²⁹ Scott's Normans, with their more refined sensibilities, but their less-developed sense of integrity and loyalty, and their commitment to Catholicism are stereotypically French.³⁰ They are also undoubtedly evil: they have no compassion for the subject Saxons over whom they rule and their lust for power is supported by the wiles of the Catholic Church is represented by the Hospitallers and Templars - Military Orders supposedly created to defend Christianity but according to Scott a source of wickedness and overweening power.³¹ Through characters such as the decadent Cistercian monk Prior Aymer - reminiscent of the Friar in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* - who fritters his time away attempting to impress beautiful maidens, or the proud Templar

crusader Brian de Bois-Gilbert - whose moral corruption is finally his own undoing - they represent not only spiritual and moral degeneracy, but also the two stereotypical centres of medieval England: the Church, the centre of Catholic piety, and the Court, the centre of Chivalry.³²

Scott emphasises that the medieval society he depicts is reliant on the Catholic Church for its moral steer. Thus, near the beginning of *Ivanhoe* one of his characters, Prior Aymer, a monk, remarks:

“Nay, by St Mary, brother Brian, you must not think you are now in Palestine, predominating over heathen Turks and infidel Saracens; we islanders love not blows, save those of Holy Church, who chasteneth whom she loveth...”³³

In particular, as we shall see, he focusses on the Church's relationship to the crusades, which he rightly recognized as an integral part of medieval Catholic life.

Scott depicts the western crusaders as brawny, powerful and brave, as in his depiction of the Templar Brian de Bois Gilbert in *Ivanhoe*:

The companion of the church dignitary was a man past forty, thin, strong, tall, and muscular; an athletic figure, which long fatigue and constant exercise seemed to have left none of the softer part of the human form, having reduced the whole to brawn, bones, and sinews, which had sustained a thousand toils, and were ready to dare a thousand more...³⁴

By contrast Muslims from the east - albeit graceful and sophisticated - are disturbingly strange, while their manners and customs are dangerously exotic:

These two squires were followed by two attendants, whose dark visages, white turbans, and the Oriental form of their garments, showed them to be natives of some distant Eastern country. The whole appearance of this warrior and his retinue was wild and outlandish; the dress of his squires was gorgeous,...

The steeds of these attendants were in appearance as foreign as their riders. They were of Saracen origin, and consequently of Arabian descent; and their fine slender limbs, small fetlocks, thin manes, and easy springy motion, formed a marked contrast with the large-jointed heavy horses, of which the race was cultivated in Flanders and in Normandy for mounting the men-at-arms of the period in all the panoply of plate and mail, and which, placed by the side of those Eastern coursers, might have passed for a personification of substance and of shadow.³⁵

This stereotypical depiction of Muslims and the Orient is, of course, exactly what we should expect from Scott, imbued as he is in the mores of nineteenth-century European colonialism.³⁶

Such contrasts between West and East are taken to even more extreme lengths in passages from *The Talisman* which compare the hero Sir Kenneth with his Muslim adversary:

The champions formed a striking contrast to each other in person and features, and might have formed no inaccurate representatives of their different nations...A military hardihood, and careless frankness of expression, characterized his language and his motions; and his voice had the tone of one more accustomed to command than to obey, and who was in the habit of expressing his sentiments loudly and boldly, whenever he was called upon to announce them.³⁷

And again:

The Saracen Emir formed a marked and striking contrast with the Western Crusader. His stature was indeed above the middle size, but he was at least three inches shorter than the European, whose size approached the gigantic...But, on looking more closely, his limbs, where exposed to view, seemed divested of all that was fleshy or cumbersome; so that nothing being left but bone, brawn, and sinew, it was a frame fitted for exertion and fatigue, far beyond that of a bulky

champion, whose strength and size are counterbalanced by weight, and who is exhausted by his own exertions...³⁸

And again:

This haughty feeling of superiority was perhaps equally entertained by his new European acquaintance, but the effect was different; and the same feeling, which dictated to the Christian knight a bold, blunt, and somewhat careless bearing, as one too conscious of his own importance to be anxious about the opinions of others, appeared to prescribe to the Saracen a style of courtesy more studiously and formally observant of ceremony. Both were courteous; but the courtesy of the Christian seemed to flow rather from a good-humoured sense of what was due to others; that of the Moslem, from a high feeling of what was to be expected from himself.³⁹

What is so interesting is that there is no doubt in the minds of Scott's protagonists that the crusades are being fought for religious purposes: the recovery of Jerusalem which has fallen to the Muslim Saladin, as is revealed in this passage from *Ivanhoe*: a conversation between a Templar and his guide, who is in fact Ivanhoe in disguise:

...Finding himself now at his ease and near shelter, his curiosity began to awake, and he demanded of the guide who and what he was.

"A palmer, just returned from the Holy Land", was the answer.

"You had better have tarried there to fight for the recovery of the Holy Sepulchre," said the Templar.

"True, Reverend Sir Knight", answered the Palmer, to whom the appearance of the Templar seemed perfectly familiar; "but when those who are under oath to recover the holy city are found travelling at such a distance from the scene of their duties, can you wonder that a peaceful peasant like me should decline the task which they have abandoned?"⁴⁰

Crusades are holy pilgrimages, as *The Talisman* also emphasises:

“Brave Saracen”, said the knight, “if I were not on a pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre, it should be my pride to conduct you, on assurance of safety, to the camp of Richard of England, than whom none knows better how to do honour to a noble foe; and though I be poor and unattended, yet have I interest to secure for thee, or any such as thou seemest, not safety only, but respect and esteem. There shouldst thou see several of the fairest beauties of France and Britain form a small circle, the brilliancy of which exceeds ten thousand-fold the lustre of mines of diamonds such as thine.”⁴¹

Even the pragmatic and worldly Prior Aymer has a sense of a higher calling and a duty to religion, which the would-be liberators of the Holy Land believed they were fulfilling through the crusades - as in this passage from *Ivanhoe*:⁴²

...Prior Aymer also assented to the general proposition, observing, however, “That the blessed Jerusalem could not indeed be termed a foreign country. She was *communis mater* - the mother of all Christians...”⁴³

Furthermore, in both *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman* the morality of the crusades appears from a surface read not to be in doubt: the Christians are in the right, the Muslims in the wrong. Hence in *The Talisman*, Scott contrasts the noble and devoutly religious hero of the piece, the crusader Sir Kenneth, with an unknown, decadent and unbelieving Muslim opponent - who is in fact, unbeknown to the hero, Saladin in disguise:

...Sir Kenneth knew enough of the Eastern languages to be assured that he chanted sonnets of love, containing all the glowing praises of beauty, in which the Oriental poets are so fond of luxuriating, and which, therefore, were peculiarly unfitted for a serious or devotional strain of thought, the feeling best becoming the Wilderness of the Temptation.

With inconsistency enough, the Saracen also sung lays in praise of wine, the liquid ruby of the Persian poets, and his gaiety at length became so unsuitable to the Christian knight's contrary train of sentiments, as, but for the promise of amity which they had exchanged, would most likely have made Sir Kenneth take measures to change his note. As it was, the Crusader felt as if he had by his side some gay licentious fiend, who endeavoured to ensnare his soul, and endanger his immortal salvation, by inspiring loose thoughts of earthly pleasure, and thus polluting his devotion, at a time when his faith as a Christian, and his vow as a pilgrim, called on him for a serious and penitential state of mind...⁴⁴

Indeed Scott goes out of his way to emphasise the difference between the truth of Christianity and the contrasting falseness of the religion of Islam in one of his hero's speeches:

“Saracen,” said the Crusader, sternly, “blinded as thou art, and plunged amidst the errors of a false law, thou shouldst yet comprehend that there are some places more holy than others, and that there are some scenes also, in which the Evil One hath more than ordinary power over sinful mortals...”⁴⁵

Such passages recognize the centrality of religion in the medieval world the protagonists inhabit, and at first sight appear to endorse it.

Nevertheless, further analysis of both *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman* shows that Scott is extremely critical of medieval religion. When we look closer at both novels, we begin to realise that the veneer of medieval piety which embellishes the world Scott depicts is often a mere covering for a sinister fanaticism. Although the crusades are undoubtedly depicted as religious enterprises, the piety of the crusaders themselves is treated with a great deal of suspicion and contempt. Their stupidity and bungling - in stark contrast to their more sophisticated eastern foe - is continually emphasised. In *Ivanhoe*, even the truce which the good King Richard has been able to secure with Saladin is ridiculed by the protagonists:

“These truces with the infidels”, he [Wamba] exclaimed, without caring how suddenly he interrupted the stately Templar, “make an old man of me!”

“Go to, knave – how so?” said Cedric, his features prepared to receive favourably the expected jest.

“Because”, answered Wamba, “I remember three of them in my day, each of which was to endure for the course of fifty years; so that by computation, I must be at least a hundred and fifty years old.”⁴⁶

Likewise, in *The Talisman* the crusaders as a group receive much criticism for their petty jealousies, and tactical miscalculations:

The scene must change, as our programme has announced, from the mountain wilderness of Jordan to the camp of King Richard of England, then stationed betwixt Jean d’Acre and Ascalon; and containing that army with which he of the Lion Heart had promised himself a triumphant march to Jerusalem, and in which he probably would have succeeded, if not hindered by the jealousies of the Christian princes engaged in the same enterprise, and the offence taken by them at the uncurbed haughtiness of the English monarch, and Richard’s unveiled contempt for his brother sovereigns, who, his equals in rank, were yet far his inferiors in courage, hardihood, and military talents. Such discords, and particularly those betwixt Richard and Philip of France, created disputes and obstacles which impeded every active measure proposed by the heroic though impetuous Richard, while the ranks of the Crusaders were daily thinned, not only by the desertion of individuals, but of entire bands, headed by their respective feudal leaders, who withdrew from a contest in which they had ceased to hope for success.⁴⁷

Furthermore, throughout *Ivanhoe* there is great underlying suspicion of religion, a horror that bloodthirsty crusades should be waged for ‘pious’ reasons and an appeal to enlightened common-sense. In particular, it is through the speeches of the Anglo-Saxons such as the

noble Saxon Cedric, who, for Scott, in his nineteenth-century colonial and imperial world, stands for everything English and sensible, the religious nature of the crusading enterprise is ridiculed; 'Holy Church' turns out to be not so holy after all:

"Palestine!" repeated the Saxon - "Palestine! how many ears are turned to the tales which dissolute crusaders or hypocritical pilgrims bring from that fatal land! I too might ask - I too might inquire - I too might listen with a beating heart to fables which the wily strollers devise to cheat us into hospitality; but no - the son who has disobeyed me is no longer mine; nor will I concern myself more for his fate than for that of the most worthless among the millions that ever shaped the cross on their shoulder, rushed into excess and blood-guiltiness, and called it an accomplishment of the will of God."⁴⁸

Similarly in *The Talisman* although we find emphasis on the undeniable importance of religious faith as a motivating force for medieval people, there is again the same emphasis on the excess of piety pervading the medieval world which has, as it were, to be overcome by the heroes of the piece:

The distinction of religions, nay, the fanatical zeal which animated the followers of the Cross and of the Crescent against each other, was much softened by a feeling so natural to generous combatants, and especially cherished by the spirit of chivalry. This last strong impulse had extended itself gradually from the Christians to their mortal enemies the Saracens, both of Spain and of Palestine...⁴⁹

For Scott, steeped in the ideology of the Enlightenment, there is mistrust, if not disgust, with a religious piety he sees as little less than fanaticism when taken to extremes. Such fanaticism seems to be tempered only by the spirit of Chivalry.

Indeed the theme of Chivalry constantly re-occurs in both novels. Thus, in *The Talisman* we find this speech of the hero:

“Know, Saracen,” said the Christian, since such is thy style, that the name of a knight, and the blood of a gentleman, entitle him to place himself on the same rank with sovereigns even of the first degree, in so far as regards all but regal authority and dominion. Were Richard of England himself to wound the honour of a knight as poor as I am, he could not, by the law of chivalry, deny him the combat.”⁵⁰

Hence at first glance the solution to the problems of the medieval world appears for Scott to be Chivalry: a noble ideal with which he seems much more comfortable than with religious piety. Chivalry is held up as the panacea which mitigates the excesses of religious fervour. Sir Kenneth, the hero, embodies it.

By contrast, the anti-hero, the Templar Brian de Bois-Gilbert, although a courageous crusader, betrays chivalric values. It is no surprise that Scott gives the Templar a French name, deliberately portraying him as French, Catholic, even by implication – horror of horrors for the Hanoverian England of George IV – ‘Jacobin’.⁵¹ Brian de Bois-Gilbert’s moral failings, which include hedonism, hypocrisy, carnality, and ambition – indeed his very rationalization of these vices – are supposedly particularly French, and so by implication, Catholic. They are vices which Scott’s readers would have particularly associated with monasticism and the Religious Orders – which, as we have already noted, suited perfectly the conventions of Gothic fiction.⁵²

Nevertheless, as with his ideas about medieval Catholicism, when we look more closely at both *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman*, Scott’s ideas about Chivalry are not as straightforward as they appear. Scott had already made clear his serious concerns with the concept of Chivalry in 1818 in an essay published in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. He criticized its fanaticism, superstition, and extravagance and was unequivocal in his condemnation of what he saw as an all-too-often ridiculous moral code, fundamentally flawed by the seemingly random choice of a few particular virtues which he argued were practiced to such excess as to become vices.⁵³

Indeed Scott’s real views on Chivalry are apparent through the creation of *Ivanhoe*’s greatest fictional character, Rebecca. It is Rebecca, a Jew, rather than Rowena, the banal Saxon love-interest of

the hero Ivanhoe, who is the real heroine of the piece. Scott's heroine is Jewish for a deliberate reason. For Scott, as for many historians and novelists of the Enlightenment, the very worst of Catholic medievalism had been embodied in the persecutions of Jews by crusaders who massacred Jewish communities on the eve of the First Crusade in 1096.⁵⁴ Through Rebecca, Scott highlights his dissatisfaction with the medieval world which he portrays.

At the very heart of *Ivanhoe* is Rebecca's rescue by Ivanhoe from the Trial by Wager orchestrated by the Grand Master of the Templars. Its position in the novel is there to emphasize the importance of Rebecca's character to the novel. She alone of all Scott's protagonists recognizes prejudice and religious bigotry for what it is; it is her empathy, compassion, forbearance and tolerance which make her a true nineteenth-century heroine.⁵⁵ In particular Scott's depiction of the attempt by the Grand Master of the Templars to convert Rebecca serves as Scott's critique of how Catholics have historically treated Jews. She is tried by the Templars for witchcraft, which Scott intends us to equate with the papal Inquisition which - however few or many it actually despatched in comparison to contemporary secular authorities - Protestant historians never wearied of re-assuring their readers was an undeniable example of Catholic zeal, bigotry and oppression. In *Ivanhoe* the charge of witchcraft is in fact a mere pretext to incriminate Rebecca for being a Jew and to try to force her to convert, as the Grand Master himself, emphasises:

“...Repent, my daughter, confess thy witchcrafts, turn thee from thine evil faith, embrace this holy emblem, and all shall yet be well with thee here and hereafter...”⁵⁶

Scott wants his readers to condemn the fanaticism, superstition and xenophobia that this investigation causes.

Scott goes out of his way to emphasise the evil of forced conversion when at the threat of death by fire, Rebecca, the Jewish 'witch' is asked by her oppressors to convert.⁵⁷ Scott has already presented the reader with the theme of forced conversion through the 'Saxon witch' Ulrica, who earlier in the novel has allowed herself to be burned to death in the castle of the Norman nobleman Front-de-Boeuf.⁵⁸ Both Rebecca and Ulrica are willing to embrace death in order to maintain their racial

origins, identity and culture. Even in King Richard's dismissal of the Templars near the end of *Ivanhoe* and the Grand Master's threat of an 'appeal to Rome' for ultimate arbitration, we see both a reference to nineteenth-century debates about 'the Jewish question' and a reason why England needs to steer clear of Catholicism and continue to embrace the Reformation.⁵⁹ Scott, like so many writers in English of the early nineteenth century, wanted his readers to contrast unfavourably the Catholic nations of Europe, which had once included medieval England, with Protestant countries in the way they treated Jews.⁶⁰

Throughout the description of the Trial by Wager, Scott deliberately focusses attention not only on the fact that Rebecca is a Jew, but on the fact that she is all alone as the moral presence in the novel. At the trial before the Grand Master, Rebecca's personal identity is central to the interpretation of the evidence:

Less than half the weighty evidence would have been sufficient to convict any old woman, poor and ugly, even though she had not been a Jewess. United with that fatal circumstance, the body of proof was too weighty for Rebecca's youth, though combined with the most exquisite beauty.⁶¹

Her keen sensibilities mean that she suffers more acutely than anyone else for her compassion and tolerance. Indeed, when the Templars attempt to distort and exaggerate her character and religious beliefs, their religious prejudice, blind zeal and rampant bigotry are only further exposed. And the Wager of Battle in *Ivanhoe* also shows yet again how ambivalent is Scott's attitude towards Chivalry - just as towards Catholicism.⁶² Even the hero, Ivanhoe, who learns from Rebecca's example and acts heroically to save her, is impeded not just by his human limitations but by the Chivalric trappings of the medieval world he inhabits; hence he lacks the necessary freedom to commit himself to her truly noble ideas.⁶³ Hence Scott, through Rebecca, presents a nuanced but very definite critique of Chivalry as a social ideal.⁶⁴

Scholars have argued that in depicting the trial of Rebecca, Scott deliberately borrowed ideas not just from national politics but of a much

more local nature. They have pointed to the obvious comparisons between her Trial by Wager and the notorious case of Mary Ashford which came to Scott's attention while he was writing *Ivanhoe*. In this case, in 1817 a certain Abraham Thornton, accused of murdering Mary Ashford, challenged her brother to settle the matter by the medieval 'trial by battel'. This was an appeal to the fact that English law in the nineteenth century still gave defendants in certain circumstances the right to demand armed combat as a way of determining innocence or guilt. Although many were convinced by the circumstantial evidence of Thornton's guilt, he was nevertheless acquitted because of testimony which showed that just after the murder he had been far away from where it had taken place. Subsequently, although Mary Ashford's brother William called for a second trial, the law governing this appeal still included the defendant's right to 'battel'. This meant that when the court upheld Thornton's claim of the right to combat, Ashford was obliged to abandon the case because he was not physically fit enough to fight.⁶⁵

It is more than likely, given its romantic and Chivalric connotations, that Scott was fascinated by this case. Yet as a Conservative he was deeply troubled by its conclusions since these appeared through English law to legitimize brute force as a way of settling a dispute in favour of a verdict contrary to the evidence. Indeed it is possible that the Trial by Wager in *Ivanhoe* is an ultimately unsuccessful attempt by Scott, given his concern about the outcome of the Mary Ashford case, to legitimize reliance on strength as a way of solving moral problems and to reaffirm men's role as the protectors of women from male aggression.⁶⁶ If we follow this line of argument, Scott was trying in *Ivanhoe* to make sense of a contradiction that could only be resolved by understanding the workings of power in regard to women in a male-dominated society: about which he was not - as a Conservative of his age - comfortable either ideologically or politically to undertake. Furthermore, the clumsily crafted victory of Ivanhoe in the Trial by Wager annuls Scott's attempts to legitimize reliance on strength and reclaim male dominance since it reveals his own insecurities when he tries to marry his idea of Chivalry with the correctives of nineteenth-century society.⁶⁷ The Norman-Saxon contrast in Scott's novels is there to give his readers a sense of moral contrast rather than to provide his readers with a way of solving nineteenth-century England's inequalities. In neither novel does

Scott propose that a return to medieval Saxon times before the Norman Conquest, or a return to Catholicism, or even a return to Chivalry, is the answer to contemporary problems.⁶⁸

What should we conclude about Scott's depiction of the crusades, Catholic piety and Chivalry in *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman*? It is striking, that, like many more recent crusade historians, Scott chose to focus on the religious motivations for crusading, albeit they are depicted as liable ultimately to lead to fanaticism. There is no doubt that Scott also felt deeply ambivalent about Chivalry. As a Conservative, in some ways he admired the concept because he believed it helped implement and maintain social order, not least at a time when so many of his contemporaries were worried by the political and social implications of the French Revolution. On the other hand he realised that its nature could be extremely problematic, even morally dubious: a concern which he highlighted most clearly through the speeches of his Jewish protagonist Rebecca and which made him ambivalent at best in his depiction of the Trial by Wager. In both *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman* he reveals his undoubted belief that the idea of Chivalry must be nuanced by the development of constitutional liberties and communal and national identity.⁶⁹ As a post-Enlightenment figure he believed that Britain could not return to its medieval past but needed to 'progress'. The Trial by Wager reveals his ambivalence not only to Chivalry but to the Catholic world from which it derived.⁷⁰

What were Scott's feelings about Catholicism? Like many Scotsmen of his age, and influenced as he was by Whig History, he would have been brought up to be unquestioningly anti-Catholic. He was also influenced by contemporary interest in the Gothic: a fascination with what the Victorians saw as the most horrid aspects of superstition and magic, which many associated with Catholicism. Nevertheless, his interest in all things medieval from a small child provided a certain counterweight to the prevailing culture. He doubtless influenced and in turn was influenced by a nineteenth-century trend to love all things medieval, a mentality strongly endorsed and encouraged by the Pre-Raphaelite movement which can said to have begun in 1848, not many years after the publication of *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman*.

Scott was alive at a time when many were interested in the medieval period as associated with Romanticism and the idea of a purer, freer, rural age, before Industrialisation. As a sensitive writer drawn to the arts he could not but love the medieval Catholic past, even if he (and others) could not admit such love and needed to proclaim that the true Church had always been fundamentally English as a way of justifying the creation of the Church of England. His novels reveal a deeply held belief that the post-Reformation world in which he lived could not welcome the possibility of a Catholic revival.⁷¹ Yet he also lived at a time when, due to Catholic emancipation, Catholics were starting to come out of the woodwork; even famous men like Pugin were converting to Catholicism. This of course was a challenge and a worry to many; yet to some it was a great relief. Scott imbibed a measure of anti-Catholicism because that was still the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. Nevertheless, despite the obvious stereotyping of Catholic culture in *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman* - which speak of his concern about fanaticism - he is not virulently anti-Catholic by the standards of some of his contemporaries; rather his description of Catholic piety, chivalry and the crusades shows him as representative of the age in which he lived and of the literary and historical circles in which he made his mark.

Notes

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- 1 J. Riley-Smith, *What were the Crusades?*, 4th ed. (London, 2009), xiv-xvii.
 - 2 C. A. Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest: History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (New Brunswick, London, 1990), p. 101.
 - 3 K. R. Sroka, 'The Function of Form: *Ivanhoe* as Romance', *Studies in English Literature*, 19/4 (Autumn, 1979): 645.
 - 4 J. Michaud, *Histoire des croisades*, 7 vols (Paris, 1813-1822).
 - 5 E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 2003), pp. 60, 172.
 - 6 For invaluable insight into Walter Scott's life and works see Walter Scott, *Some Unpublished Letters of Sir Walter Scott from the Collection in the Brotherton Library, compiled by J.A. Symington* (Oxford, 1932), passim, and Walter Scott, *Private Letters of the Seventeenth Century*, with an introd. by D. Grant (Oxford, 1947), passim.
 - 7 S. Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (New York, Toronto, 1995), pp. 96-7; C. Brooks, *The Gothic Revival* (London, 1999), pp. 150-2.
 - 8 Chandler, *A Dream of Order*, p. 51. For an excellent discussion of the influence in particular of Spenser on these Romantic poets see G. Kucich,

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- Keats, Shelly and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park, Penn., 1991), pp. 65-133.
- 9 J. Millgate, 'Making It New: Scott, Constable, Ballantyne, and the publication of *Ivanhoe*', *Studies in English Literature*, 34/4 (Autumn, 1994): 796; Said, *Orientalism*, p. 192.
 - 10 Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, pp. 102-12.
 - 11 A. Chandler, *A Dream of Order* (London, 1971), pp. 13-14.
 - 12 Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, p. 102.
 - 13 Chandler, *A Dream of Order*, p. 17.
 - 14 C. A. Simmons, *Popular Medievalism in Romantic-Era Britain* (New York, 2011), p. 193.
 - 15 Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, pp. 101-2.
 - 16 Chandler, *A Dream of Order*, p. 19.
 - 17 Rosemary Mitchell, 'The Uncomfortable Chivalry of Sir Walter Scott' at *Open Letters Monthly*, p. 2.
 - 18 Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (London, 1819), p. 7.
 - 19 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, p. 74. See also p. 519; pp. 80-1.
 - 20 For an excellent discussion of Walter Scott and how historical writing, both fact and fiction, could be used as a tool for affirming ideas of nationhood see V. Nemoianu, 'Learning over Class. The Case of the Central European Thesis', in *Cultural Participation: Trends Since the Middle Ages*, ed. by A. Rigny, D. Fokkema (Amsterdam, 1993), pp. 102-3.
 - 21 Walter Scott, *The Talisman* (London, New York, 1906), p. 36.
 - 22 M. Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton, 2000), p. 281.
 - 23 J. E. Duncan, 'The Anti-Romance in *Ivanhoe*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 9/4 (March, 1955): 299.
 - 24 P. J. deGategna, *Ivanhoe: the Mask of Chivalry* (1994), p. 9.
 - 25 Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, p. 81.
 - 26 Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, pp. 81-2.
 - 27 C. R. Vanden Bossche, 'Culture and Economy in *Ivanhoe*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 42/1 (June, 1987): 61.
 - 28 Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, p. 112.
 - 29 Walter Scott's depiction in *Ivanhoe* of Normans and Saxons still at war with each other in the 1190s long after the Norman Conquest of 1066 was deliberate; see M. Alexander, *Medievalism: the Middle Ages in Modern England* (New Haven, London, 2007), pp. 131-2.
 - 30 Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, p. 95.
 - 31 Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, pp. 79-80.
 - 32 deGategna, *Ivanhoe: the Mask of Chivalry*, pp. 33-4, 39-40.
 - 33 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, p. 24. See also p. 26.

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- 34 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, pp. 18-19.
35 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, pp. 20-1.
36 Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 101-2, 360.
37 Scott, *The Talisman*, pp. 23-4.
38 Scott, *The Talisman*, p. 24. See also further such descriptions on pp.17, 25.
39 Scott, *The Talisman*, p. 25.
40 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, p. 29.
41 Scott, *The Talisman*, pp. 28-9.
42 Simmons, *Popular Medievalism in Romantic-Era Britain*, p. 177.
43 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, p. 146.
44 Scott, *The Talisman*, p. 37.
45 Scott, *The Talisman*, p. 38.
46 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, p. 47.
47 Scott, *The Talisman*, p. 69. See also p. 314.
48 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, pp. 38-9.
49 Scott, *The Talisman*, p. 19. See also the conversations on pp. 18, 21.
50 Scott, *The Talisman*, p. 34.
51 Dyer, 'Ivanhoe, Chivalry, and the Murder of Mary Ashford': 399-400.
52 Dyer, 'Ivanhoe, Chivalry, and the Murder of Mary Ashford': 400.
53 deGategna, *Ivanhoe: the Mask of Chivalry*, p. 63.
54 M. Ragussis, 'Writing Nationalist History: England, the Conversion of the Jews and Ivanhoe', *English Literary History* 60/1 (Spring 1993): 181.
55 Sroka, 'The Function of Form: *Ivanhoe* as Romance': 654.
56 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, p. 425.
57 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, p. 495.
58 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, p. 327.
59 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, p. 509.
60 Ragussis, 'Writing Nationalist History: England, the Conversion of the Jews and Ivanhoe': 201.
61 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, p. 422; M. Shoenfield, 'Waging War: Ashford V. Thornton, Ivanhoe, and Legal Violence', in C. A. Simmons, ed., *Medievalism and the Quest for the 'Real' Middle Ages* (London, Portland, OR, 2001), pp. 73-4.
62 Simmons, *Popular Medievalism in Romantic-Era Britain*, p. 181.
63 deGategna, *Ivanhoe: the Mask of Chivalry*, p. 79.
64 Mitchell, 'The Uncomfortable Chivalry of Sir Walter Scott', p. 4.
65 G.R. Dyer, 'Ivanhoe, Chivalry, and the Murder of Mary Ashford', *Criticism*, vol. 39 (Summer 1997): 383.
66 Dyer, 'Ivanhoe, Chivalry, and the Murder of Mary Ashford': 402.
67 Dyer, 'Ivanhoe, Chivalry, and the Murder of Mary Ashford': 402.
68 Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, p. 86.

69 Mitchell, 'The Uncomfortable Chivalry of Sir Walter Scott', p. 5.

70 Simmons, *Popular Medievalism in Romantic-Era Britain*, p. 181.

71 For example see his novel of 1820, *The Abbot*; Walter Scott, *The Abbot* (Thomas Nelson, 1909), passim; M. E. Burstein, *Victorian Reformations: Historical Fiction and Religious Controversy, 1820-1900* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 2013), pp. 24-5.

