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Religion, Morality, and Horror

Morality is something that is hard to define and judge, as there are many people and institutions who have their own rules and variations of morality. Most agree that being a moral person means taking many options into account and thinking critically about how to proceed. One institution that encourages that is religion, for in its purest form it encourages kindness and aid towards others. In a modern society where religion has been corrupted and people have begun to move away from it, there comes the worry that the world has become less moral as a result. One man who expressed those concerns was M.R. James, who was a very religious antiquarian, historian, and horror author. He believed that the world was becoming less moral as it became less tuned to its spirituality, a concern addressed in many of his ghost stories. In his short story "Cannon Alberic's Scrapbook," M. R. James uses his knowledge of medieval Catholicism to warn the world of becoming increasingly more immoral.

M. R. James uses his stories to warn the world of becoming increasingly more immoral, but to do this he employs his knowledge of medieval Catholicism and history to create a vivid world that allows his message to come across clearly. One way James makes these worlds so vivid is the use of real-life locations. Many scholars have taken note of this use of real places, like English critic Julia Briggs, who noted that the town of St Bertrand de Comminges in "Cannon Alberic's Scrapbook," is a real town in France. This was done in James' stories to allow readers to immediately insert themselves into the world, as it was just a copy of the world they

inhabited. By setting the stories in a familiar world, readers pay close attention when there is something that does not belong, or if there is someone acting strange. He achieves this by not leaving out a single detail about the places his stories are set, that way the thing that is not supposed to be there catches readers off guard, (Briggs 1-2).

To emphasize his worries that the world was becoming more immoral, James would often use places that were found in the world he was concerned for to tell twisted tales that emphasized his point, using the smallest details to his advantage. James was a medieval historian, and he used the knowledge that came with the profession to his advantage. James often pulled from many historical sources and figures, this is the topic of the essay “The Antiquarian Diaries of Thomas Hearne and Mr. Poynter,” by Patrick J. Murphy and Fred Porcheddu, professors of Miami and Denison University respectively. This essay points out the amount of detail James puts into his stories by pulling from history, believing there to be lessons to be learned from the past’s respect of the spiritual. James will often make parts of his characters allusions to historical figures. In “Cannon Alberic’s Scrapbook,” the main protagonist, Dennistoun, is named after the historical scrapbooker James Dennistoun, linking James’ career as a writer to his career as a historian, (Murphy, Porcheddu 339-340). This shows James’ use of history in his work, but the reason he used history is he often found the people of the past to be more connected to the spiritual world than the people of modern day.

To point out how immoral the modern world was becoming, M. R. James often used the imagery of medieval Catholicism, due to how connected they were to the spiritual aspects of their religion. This was used as both an example of those close to their faith, and as a warning to not get too comfortable with the supernatural. James often would depict Catholic characters, or ruins, as something to begin the hauntings of his characters. In “Cannon Alberic’s Scrapbook,”

an old sacristan is depicted as giving Dennistoun the titular cursed scrapbook without a second thought, “there was the same hesitation, the same plunge of determination that he had noticed before, and then came the welcome answer, “If monsieur pleases,” (James 7). Despite depicting Catholics as villainous or untrustworthy, James had a respect for their devotion to faith. His complex views of the Catholic faith were studied by Daniel Frampton, a writer who studies Catholic intellectual and artistic culture, in the article “The Haunting of M. R. James.” In this essay Frampton discusses how James’ interest take on Catholicism, was fueled by his conflicting desires as an Anglican and an antiquarian scholar. James, the scholar, respected the Catholic sense of superstition, as he believed that as the world became less superstitious and spiritual, it would lose its fear of the unholy. This would cause the morality to be drained from society as its back would turn against God while demons took advantage of it. James, the Anglican, however, believed that the medieval Catholics turned their back to God and caused their own downfall. Believing that their connection to the spiritual world was good, but they got too close to the supernatural forces and strayed from God. This showed that he believed society should follow the examples of the Catholic, while also using them as a cautionary tale of turning away from religion and God.

M. R. James would use his knowledge of history and religion to build a world in which his moral message could be told, nothing is a better representative of this than his use of “The Testament of Solomon” in “Cannon Alberic’s Scrapbook.” “The Testament of Solomon,” is about being careful that the supernatural does not lead you astray, this message is like the one in “Cannon Alberic’s Scrapbook,” especially since the protagonists of both stories are tricked into inviting demons into their lives. This similarity shows James’ message about modern society becoming immoral and destroying itself, as Solomon does the same. The use of this story in

“Canon Alberic’s Scrapbook” can be proven by the demon in the short story. James’ story features a demonic antagonist that bares resemblance to Asmodeus in “The Testament of Solomon. In “The Testament of Solomon,” Asmodeus’ physical appearance is only briefly described, but what is there is described as, “...yet he shot at me with a glance of anger and rage/... .. and I, Solomon, on hearing this, bound him more carefully, and ordered him to be flogged with ox-hide,” (Conybear verse 85 and 91). Asmodeus is filled with rage and needing to be beaten to calm down and work for Solomon. This is used in the description of the demon in “Canon Alberic’s Scrapbook,” “...The eyes, touched in with a burning yellow, had intensely black pupils, and were fixed upon the throned King with a look of beast-like hate...,” (James 7). The demon is described like Asmodeus, looking upon Solomon with anger, this shows James using medieval Christianity to craft his stories.

The amount of real-life inspired detail M. R. James uses in his stories, to craft an intricate lesson in becoming immoral and straying from God, is astonishing, but James himself seems to be unimmune to his own criticisms. James puts a bit of himself in all his characters because of how his Anglican faith causes him to see himself and his own flaws. By briefly viewing James’ life, one can see how his faith affected his view on his own morality and spiritual nature, this is exactly what is done in the article “James M. R.,” by Joshua Grasso, an English professor at East Central University. Grasso’s article points out that James spent his entire childhood absorbed in the affairs of the Anglican church. He was so involved with the church at a young age, his mind developed an attachment to the imagery and stories found in the bible. This would lead him to wanting to collect and study older interpretations of the Bible, leading him to pursue history at Eton’s. James’ many years of scholarly writing and obsession with the past, led him to writing about the supernatural. He had loved the supernatural aspects of religion ever since his bible

study days, but as he studied the ghostly lands of medieval England, he noticed that the supernatural was real in a way and that modern societies ignorance of it would only lead it to fall like the medieval Catholics. James would pump his years of studying history into his ghost stories, writing academic, yet chilling stories that are written in a detached manner. Despite this detached manner, James' stories were still very personal as every ounce of his academic career can be found in his stories, (Grasso 83-98).

James was a very religious man, seeing the world ignore the lessons of the past and become more immoral as it lost its connection with faith made James want to use his own personal religious experience to tell horror stories that would scare their messages into the hearts of readers. James did not just put his experiences in these stories he put himself into them by making his characters mirrors of himself. This is evident in "Cannon Alberic's Scrapbooks," as Dennistoun reacts to the scrapbook, in the same way James reacts to the "Testament of Solomon." In "Cannon Alberic's Scrapbook," Dennistoun realizes that something is not quite right with the scrapbook and becomes terrified by it but continues to purchase it anyway as his curiosity about an ancient text gets the better of him, "as soon as the first shock of his irresistible fright had subsided, Dennistoun stole a look at his hosts. The sacristan's hands were pressed upon his eyes; his daughter, looking up at the cross on the wall, was telling her beads feverishly. At last the question was asked, "Is this book for sale?" (James 7). James reacts to "The Testament of Solomon" in a similar way, in his essay "The Testament of Solomon," he discusses his views. He says that while the text is interesting it is too long and drawn out, in desperate need of an editor. He says that there is too much description and not enough plot, but he says that the story is worth the read. He claims that the importance of analyzing the context in which the story was written is

far more important than his enjoyment of it, (James). This is just like Dennistoun, putting himself second because history needs to be studied.

M. R. James often made his characters reflections of himself because he believed that he was guilty of contributing to the immorality and lack of faith society had, as he was guilty of the same immorality and comfort with the occult as modern society was. To show this he often his made characters reflections of himself, making his message more personal, allowing him to get it across to more readers. By making his characters reflections of himself, he uses his own personal connection with religion to encourage others to connect to Christianity through his stories. Sarah Iles Jhonston, writes how supernatural horror fiction is allowed to naturally crop in religion. Christian stories, like the ones in the Old Testament, use horror to warn its readers and followers about sin. In playing to these religious tropes James finds a way to apply his religion without forcing it onto others allowing his stories to connect deeper with audiences. He uses Old Testament figures and extrabiblical sources, like “The Testament of Solomon,” to allow readers to naturally conclude that they must return to god or the spiritual world will doom them. This allows him to spread his message to as many readers as possible and allows those readers to come to their own religious conclusions, (Johnston 113-137).

To help readers draw their own conclusions on the immoral nature of modern society, M. R. James would keep a scholarly detachment to his writing. This allowed readers to insert their own thoughts in views into one of his stories and create a deep personal connection that could lead to self-discovery. This is the topic of the essay “Amateur Error, Templar Terror, and M. R. James’ Haunted Whistle.” This essay explains that James’ detached use of history and religion in his stories, allowed readers to insert themselves into his stories and draw their own conclusions. In doing so, James encouraged critical thinking, and ideas of finding your own salvation. In

making it vague what sect of Christianity he worships, James allows readers to find their own religious answers to his moral question, (Murphy and Porcheddu 389-405).

James set his stories up to allow readers to draw themselves in and find his concerns about society's immorality on their own, but to make his message stand out he uses very effective horror. This horror is enhanced by his attention to detail. James used his historical knowledge to craft very realistic settings, but in doing this he set the stage for his monsters to terrorize readers page after page. According to Julia Briggs, James' ability to recreate the past is what makes his stories terrifying. He goes to incredible lengths, describing even the conditions of the walls, so he can bring his world and its history to life. In using real life history, it makes even more engaging for readers when something is off. In recreating real places James can play with his settings and reader expectations. When he describes something and then has one little detail off despite everything else being right, audiences know that the demon has been invited in, and the fear sets in, (Briggs 2). This technique is seen in "Cannon Alberic's Scrapbook," when he describes the church and its sacristan "once," Dennistoun said to me, "I could have sworn I heard a thin metallic voice laughing high up in the tower. I darted an inquiring glance at my sacristan. He was white to the lips. 'It is he—that is—it is no one; the door is locked,' was all he said, and we looked at each other for a full minute," (James 2-3). By setting the stage in a pristine church, only to hear laughter that scares the sacristan is alarming. In setting these ghost stories in a mirror of the real-world readers will know to be cautious of the supernatural.

James' attention to detail extends beyond his use of setting, he can use the similarities between himself and his protagonists to draw the conclusion of an immoral society. According to Murphy and Porcheddu, in their essay "The Antiquarian Diaries of Thomas Heanre and Mr., Poynter," all of James' protagonist fit the bill of a history scholar and antiquarian from

Victorian England. All his protagonists are unimaginative skeptics, that criticize all who do not interpret the spiritual the same way they do as superstitious idiots. This comes from James' own skepticism and experiences as an antiquarian. This is him commenting on himself and how he can be judgmental towards others, even though he can be just as sinful. James uses his characters to throw his own personal touch of immorality into his stories so he can connect with the audience he is trying to reach. Showing his own immorality allows him to tell readers about the dangers of growing too skeptical. He uses his own skepticism to show what happens when one loses all fear of the supernatural. His protagonists did not ask enough questions, or have open enough minds, misfortune befalls them in the form of hauntings (Murphy and Porcheddu 339-355). This is highlighted by the entirety of "Cannon Alberic's Scrapbook," where Dennistoun is haunted by a rage filled demon because he was not open to the possibility that the sacristan's warnings meant something.

Many of James' stories are warnings that society should listen to the warnings of the past and believe in the supernatural. He believed that society should take note of the Catholic's superstitions, and their relationship with the supernatural, and that society should believe the supernatural but not verge on worshipping it like the Catholics did. According to Daniel Frampton, James believed the Catholics caused their own downfall in England, much like Solomon to himself. James' Anglican views affected how he viewed the Catholics. He respected their knowledge on demons and spirits, but believed they lost their fear of them and were stolen away from God's light as a result. He feared the same thing was happening to modern society. That it was going the route of the Catholics and being stolen from God. James believed all this could be solved by learning to fear the supernatural, (Frampton 111-131). This belief is shared at the end of "Cannon Alberic's Scrapbook," "...it is he—it is he! I have seen him myself," was his

only comment; and to all questionings but one reply was vouchsafed: "Deux fois je l'ai vu; mille fois je l'ai senti." He would tell them nothing of the provenance of the book, nor any details of his experiences. "I shall soon sleep, and my rest will be sweet. Why should you trouble me?" he said. 2 We shall never know what he or Canon Alberic de Mauléon suffered....," (James 10).

Dennistoun learns to fear the supernatural, and in turn learn to put his trust and faith into God to protect him. He even reflects on the value of learning from past mistakes, stating that they will never know what happened to Cannon Alberic, only that it will not happen to them.

Through researching M. R. James, it is evident he had a message that he wanted to share with the modern world. He went as far as putting his own life and experiences into his story, using religion and ancient texts to create monsters that make skin crawl. He was able to expertly weave together stories in a way that allowed all who read them to know that the only way to be moral is to try. Through his texts, both fictional and scholarly, James shared his views of the world, and his hope that they would listen to what he had to say. Julia Briggs, in her essay on him, wrote about his use of himself and his historical knowledge. She highlighted that he wanted all to see that the world has many layers to it. He added on to those many layers, creating one where the supernatural meet the natural. Where demons can stalk and kill, but people still be safe. Through his stories James created a world that could learn how to be moral, (Briggs 1-6).

James' stories are still being read today and his message his still being spread. In a world that has become more immoral, stories like the ones James wrote are needed to remind society that there is one common goal. Whether it is his goal to connect with God, or something else entirely. James was very much a moral author, and he used his pieces to teach the world how to be more moral.

Using his knowledge as a medieval historian, M. R. James put his life and soul into stories like “Cannon Alberic’s Scrapbook,” to warn the world that it was becoming immoral and losing its way. He used his religion and his profession to try to guide the world back to God. Though his stories are terrifying, there was a kind heart and good intentions behind every stroke of James’ pen. He was able to craft new worlds out of the familiar and make the old new again. He used the Bible, and all its extra sources to create ghost stories that were one of a kind. M. R. James changed the literary landscape and created something new out of history. This is something that the whole world should strive to do. James may have been the one person on earth to understand what it meant to learn from history.

Annotated Bibliography

Briggs, Julia. "No Mere Antiquary: M. R. James." *Short Story Criticism*, edited by David L. Siegel, vol. 16, Gale, 1994. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1420029543/GLS?u=viva2_vccs&sid=bookmark-GLS&xid=d605c13f. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023. Originally published in *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story*, Faber & Faber Limited, 1977, pp. 124-141.

Summary: This article is an analysis of how M.R. James used his knowledge as an antiquarian and medieval historian to craft his ghost stories. It examines how he was able to create realistic worlds that felt alive, and how the amount of detail he includes about the history of the land and its artifacts and temple, makes the world feel real. The article takes note on how James' stories are terrifying because something in this world he has crafted feels off. Showing how is knowledge of history allows him to create a past for the object, or person, of interest in his stories, and then create chills by adding purposeful inconsistencies, and things that do not belong.

Relevance: This article about James' historical knowledge and worldbuilding is important to this paper. It shows how his knowledge of history works with his writing skill to create ghost stories that are rooted in his faith and passion for knowledge.

Conybeare, F. C. "The Testament of Solomon." *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1898, pp. 1–45. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1450398>. Accessed 28 Nov. 2023.

Summary: This story is about the biblical King Solomon and how he gained control over many demons. The story is made up of interviews Solomon has with each demon and explains the ring that was given to him by an archangel. The story ends with him being overwhelmed by the

power the demons grant him, and he begins to worship idols as the light of God leaves him. He leaves this testament for others as foolish as him.

Relevance: This story is relevant to this essay as M. R. James uses inspiration from this story in many of his pieces, including “Cannon Alberic’s Scrapbook.” This story will help highlight the religious influences in James’ work by drawing connections between the demons that appear in this piece, and the demon in “Cannon Alberic’s Scrapbook.”

Frampton, Daniel. "The Haunting of M. R. James: An "English Catholic Sensibility"?" *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, vol. 23 no. 1, 2020, p. 111-131. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/log.2020.0005>.

Summary: This is an article from a journal about Catholic ideas. It is about how the Anglican upbringing of M. R. James seems to clash with his Catholic mindset. Noting how he took interest in the superstitions and lore of medieval Catholicism, and how his Anglican views affected how he saw and wrote about the supernatural entities that were perceived by Catholics.

Relevance: This article is relevant to this paper as it points out how important religion is to James’ writing. It also shows the biases he may have had about Catholicism, and how they affected his depiction of those who practice it and the monsters that make up its lore.

Grasso, Joshua. "James, M. R. (1862–1936)." *British Writers, Supplement 20*, edited by Jay Parini, Charles Scribner's Sons, 2014, pp. 83-99. *Gale Literature: Scribner Writer Series*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3705800015/GLS?u=viva2_vccs&sid=bookmark-GLS&xid=93f25322. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.

Summary: A brief biography of M. R. James that tells the tale of how he perfected his ghost stories. It discusses his religious views and his career as a medieval historian. It shows his biases and how he used Catholicism in connection to Protestant religions to show the smallest thing can offset the world. It describes how he was able to imagine a world where academia slowly morphs into horror.

Relevance: This piece is important to this paper because it shows how James incorporated religion history more and more as his writing developed. It will help to explain how medieval Christianity inspired his work.

James, M. R. "Cannon Alberic's Scrapbook." *National Review*, 1895, pp. 1–11.

Summary: A short story by M.R. James about a British antiquarian traveling to a town in France. In the town he meets a sacristan who sells him a scrapbook put together by Cannon Alberic. The book is cursed and the protagonist is haunted by a demon.

Relevance: This short story is relevant to this essay as it showcases many of James' tropes and styles. It is also usable as proof of many of the religious and historical influences in James' work. By using this piece this essay will be able to hold a solid body of evidence.

James, M. R. "The Testament of Solomon." *Ghosts and Scholars*, Rosemary Pardoe, Accessed 11 Nov. 2023. www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/ArchiveSolDemons.html.

Summary: This web article is an essay written by M.R. James that was uploaded to the internet. In this essay

James discusses how *The Testament of Solomon* inspired many of the themes in his stories. He writes about how his background as a historian and a Christian led him to incorporating elements of the story into his ghost stories. He admits to using many of the demons and supernatural ideas in this story to add to the religious realism of his work.

Relevance: This essay is important to this paper because it is M. R. James himself discussing how his religion and scholarly duties affected his work. It is James admitting the impact religion has on his stories.

Johnston, Sarah Iles. "The Religious Affordance of Supernatural Horror Fiction." *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions*, vol. 70, no. 2/3, Apr. 2023, pp. 113–37. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.ezlfcc.vccs.edu/10.1163/15685276-20231688>.

Summary: This article is about religious influence in supernatural horror. It states that religions, such as Christianity, use supernatural horror to make the points in their stories stand out. It also claims that religion is important in writing supernatural horror stories, as they take religion and twist it in an uncomfortable way that makes it scary.

Relevance: This article is important to this paper because it explains what makes super-natural horror, like ghost stories, scary. This article points out the tactic of using religion in horror, which is something that M. R. James is known for, so by understanding the relation of horror and religion, one can understand the importance religion has in the works of M. R. James.

Murphy, Patrick J., and Fred Porcheddu. "Amateur Error, Templar Terror, and M. R. James's Haunted Whistle." *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 92, no. 3, Summer 2013, pp. 389–415. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=98124993&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Summary: Murphy and Porcheddu explain the level of professionalism James used in his writings. They explain how his detached, academic, style allowed him to create terrifying worlds that readers could insert themselves into.

Relevance: This is important to this essay, as explaining how James detached himself from his work helps to highlight his encouragement of religious expression.

Murphy, Patrick J., and Fred Porcheddu. "The antiquarian diaries of Thomas Hearne and Mr. Poynter in the fiction of M. R. James: Duty Unfulfilled." *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, vol. 55, no. 3, summer 2012, pp. 339+. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A320731945/GLS?u=viva2_vccs&sid=bookmark-GLS&xid=30944238. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.

Summary: This is an essay about how M. R. James was able to make the jobs of antiquarians and historians terrifying. It states that because these were professions James was a part of, he understood how to make his protagonists realistic, and make their jobs very detailed and real. It also explains that James was able to take the mundane life of scholars and add something that was not supposed to be there, and in doing so the antiquarians he wrote about would go from opening the doors of the past, to opening the doors to a realm of demons.

Relevance: This essay is relevant to this paper because it shows how James's knowledge of history and religious lore was able to turn the worlds, he crafted upside down. It shows how he was able to use his religion to tell cautionary tales.

