

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

Rebecca Rist

University of Reading

In recent years historians such as Jonathan Riley-Smith have depicted the crusades as strictly religious, as well as political and economic, enterprises.

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. Although such ideas have been thoroughly questioned by modern scholarship, they remain present in how we think about crusades 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.

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 lifelong Conservative, but in many ways also a product of the Enlightenment. His novels are an excellent example of how writers have interpreted the past in the light of the Zeitgeist of their own age. *Van Helsing* 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. 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. Hence, *Van Helsing* is set in England rather than Scotland, is narrated not by 'The Author of Waverley' - Scott's more common

Utilitarian-influenced Poor Law Amendment Act, commonly known as the New Poor Law, passed by the Whig Government in 1834, the compassionate charity practiced in many medieval monasteries. Indeed, despite the continuing propagation of the idea of a medieval Church crammed 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, ghouliness and exotic, yet bigoted, nature strove to create a sense of fanaticism and terror. 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 *vanhoe* 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, 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 spitted 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 and the

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

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

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.

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:

ôNay, 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...ö³³

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...ö³⁴

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 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,ö

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

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

Crusades are holy pilgrimages. *The Talisman* also emphasises:

ô Brave Saracenô, said the knight, ô 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 the lustre of mines of diamonds such as thine.ô⁴¹

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

ë Prior Aymer also assented to the general proposition, observing, however, ô That the blessed Jerusalem could not indeed be termed a foreign country. She *was* *munis mater*ô the mother of all Christiansëô⁴³

Furthermore, in both *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman* the morality of the crusades appears from a surface 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:

ë Sir Kenneth knew enough of the Eastern languages to be

With inconsistency enough, the Saracen also sung lays in
praise of wine, the liquid ruler of the Persian poets, and his

“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 misadventures:

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.

Furthermore, throughout *vanhoe* 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 Englishmen 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:

ôPalestine!ô repeated the Saxon ô Palestine! how many ears are turned to the tales which dissolute crusaders or hypocritical pilgrims bring from that ~~land~~! I too might askô I too might inquireô 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~~ 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.ô⁴⁸

Similarly in *The Talisman* although we find ~~re~~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 ~~ast~~ strong impulse had extended itself gradually from the Christians to their mortal enemies the Saracens, both of Spain and of Palestine.ô⁴⁹

For Scott, steeped in the ideology of the Enlightenment, there is mistrust, if not disgust, with a religious ~~piety~~ 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 ~~pro~~ceurs in both novels. Thus, in *The Talisman* we find this speech of the hero:

ôKnow, 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

the hero Ivanhoe, who is the real heroine of the piece. Scott's heroine

origins, identity and culture. Even in King Richard's dismissal of the Templars near the end of *Granholm* 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 furthered.

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 (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.⁷ 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 era in which he lived and of the literary and historical circles in which he made his mark.

Notes

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), 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, 1813–22).

5 E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York 1978) 25 (ce)-5(r) T 152 1056 595>4(,)18() TJ ET

- 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 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 Roman 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. 14.
- 48 Scott, *Ivanhoe*, pp. 38-9.
- 49 Scott, *The Talisman*, p. 19. See also the cony8 /F2 149

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

70 Simmons, *Popular Medievalism in Romantic 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, 1820-1870* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 2013), pp. 245.

