Walking through Cathedrals: Scholars, Pilgrims, and Medieval Tourists

Stephanie Trigg

We no longer dwell in the Parthenon, but we still walk or pray in the naves of the cathedral.

Umberto Eco, Faith in Fakes

The institutions and practices of contemporary medieval tourism and heritage culture raise powerful questions for medievalists about the uses and significance of the medieval past. These questions take us far beyond our rarefied discussions of the interpretation and meaning of medieval texts and events, towards an interrogation of our role in perpetuating or challenging general understandings of tradition and heritage for particular communities. This essay takes its epigraph from Umberto Eco as a starting-point for a meditation on the experience of visiting medieval religious sites, in our various capacities as medieval scholars, as pilgrims, and as tourists. Eco contrasts the discontinuity of our classical heritage with the more active continuity that it is possible to experience with the medieval past: ‘We no longer dwell in the Parthenon, but we still walk or pray in the naves of the cathedral,’ he claims. But such acts of walking—and indeed, of praying—are far from straightforward; nor are they reducible to the simple tropes of ‘authenticity’ or ‘continuity’, any more than the ‘we’ who walk or pray represent any kind of homogeneous collectivity, or that the selves who perform those acts are constituted in any single or simple way.

This essay examines a range of medieval religious sites, and aims to articulate the complex forms in which they are presented for a range of

visitors, in order to negotiate the potentially conflicting interests of those groups: worshippers, pilgrims, tourists, and scholars. Visitors are drawn to medieval religious buildings in part because they seem to represent an easy continuity with the past, in the repetition of familiar or stable religious rituals and practices on the same sacred site. The interior of the Gothic cathedral in particular, moreover, encourages the imagination to transcend present realities: its soaring columns and arches; its remarkable depth of field from every perspective; its play of light and shade, austerity and intricacy in its structural and decorative elements—all these aspects have the effect of diminishing individual or modern response in favour of an imagined collective, communal response, conceived, however vaguely, as ‘medieval’. Visiting such sites is already a historicist project, for many visitors.

Historicism was not the original purpose or function of the cathedral, of course. Among others, Otto von Simson emphasizes that for the twelfth-century designers of Chartres and other cathedrals, ecclesiastical architecture was an intellectual exercise as much as it was an expression of faith:

Designed in an attempt to reproduce the structure of the universe, not unlike the great scientific experiments of the modern age in this respect, the cathedral is best understood as a 'model' of the medieval universe. That may give us a better idea of the speculative significance of these great edifices, a significance that transcends their beauty and practical purpose as a place of public worship.  

When considering modern responses to these medieval models, we must also consider the importance of the Gothic revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The imaginative leap from modernity to the medieval period is significantly mediated and facilitated by the resurgence of Gothic as the predominant—even the naturalized—style for ecclesiastical architecture, especially in the nineteenth century. As Chris Brooks demonstrates, however, the semantics of 'Gothic' as a cultural and stylistic signifier are remarkably rich, mutable, and even contradictory.  

For example, the greatest and most prolific proponent of Gothic as a building style, Augustus Welby Pugin, described it tellingly as 'Pointed or Christian Architecture', believing that a revival of Gothic style would aid in the revival of the Catholic faith. This programme of design and archi-

---


tecture was intimately linked to medieval forms and the belief that the external form would produce the appropriate religious sensibility:

Restore the old reverence, and gladly will men welcome the old things—arch and aisle, and pillar and chancel, and screen, and worship as their fathers worshipped, who now sleep in Christ; and the green bough will twine in the tracery, and the tapers sparkle round the rood, and surpliced clerks sing in chancel stalls, whilst the saints shine bright in the mullioned lights—venit hora et nunc est—when the old glory of the sanctuary will be restored and solemnity revived with returning faith.4

Unfortunately for Pugin's programme, it was not the Catholic but the Anglican Church and the English establishment that had the resources to build so spectacularly in this style.5 The fashion for Gothic architecture in this period was also strongly mediated by the twinned romantic preoccupations with the Sublime and the Picturesque, as Brooks demonstrates.6 In this sensibility, however, medieval religion is less important than subjectivity or, rather, the delicious abeyance of the self. Coleridge's remarks can stand as representative here:

But the Gothic art is sublime. On entering a cathedral, I am filled with devotion and awe; I am lost to the actualities that surround me, and my whole being expands into the infinite; earth and air, nature and art, all swell up into eternity, and the only sensible impression left is, 'that I am nothing!'7

Whereas Coleridge is transported beyond the material 'actualities' of style and architecture, Pugin affirms much stronger associative links between Gothic architecture as style and medieval Christianity. In the same way, Gothic architecture in Australia would later conjure up a complex set of familiar and nostalgic associations with Englishness.8

Modern visitors may experience a residual trace of Coleridge's Sublime when entering Gothic cathedrals, but the dominant perspective of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is surely that of heritage culture. Accordingly, many visitors enter medieval cathedrals looking for traces of the medieval as a historical period, however imperfectly or generally

6 Brooks, Gothic Revival, 140–52.
conceived. Conversely, for the imaginative re-creation of the medieval to take place, the architecture itself need not be perfectly or exclusively 'authentic'. For many of us who live outside Europe, our first experience of walking in a Gothic cathedral took place in nineteenth-century buildings.

Most medieval buildings and religious establishments do not survive unmodified as medieval buildings, of course; they have distinctive histories of discontinuity, disruption, and violent destruction, especially in Protestant countries, which have left material structures and traces. Moreover, these are often narratives of problematic intersections between religious, political, national, and social interests. In the contemporary social and local sphere, churches also have ongoing responsibilities to their parishioners, and the broader spiritual community, while for many, their greatest source of income comes from the heritage tourists and culturally minded visitors who may be little concerned with those spiritual or social missions. The visitors who pass through the doors of the cathedral represent many different communities and constituencies. Recent scholarship on the anthropology of religious pilgrimage similarly insists on the heterogeneity of the experience, recognizing that 'pilgrimage is above all an arena for competing religious and secular discourses', an arena in which differences are both resolved and contested.9

Eco seems to countenance the possibility of cultural difference, when he admits the secular possibility of walking or praying in the medieval cathedral. I read this as an acknowledgement that as historians and medievalists, we use these medieval sites in ways that often resemble a kind of scholarly tourism as much as a spiritual or devotional ritual. For many of us, especially those living in countries with no medieval history, walking in cathedrals involves considerable time and expense in travel: it is an activity that closely resembles tourism. There must also be substantial and important differences amongst us, according to whether we share the same faith or creed as the church's community. Medievalists are not always exclusively either scholars, tourists, or pilgrims, but far from lessening or diluting our responses, I suggest that this mixed experience offers instructive shifts in our own subject position as we stroll through these sites with notebook in hand, and/or with family in tow.

In the context of such diversity, it is clear that the concept of 'authenticity' is deeply problematic. Medieval scholars are more than conscious

---

of this, of course: all our training as historicists bids us be wary of the post-medieval accretions, revisions, and reforms of medieval artefacts, to reject them as spurious or, at best, to consign them to the field of reception studies or the still uncertain discipline of medievalism studies. This process is more straightforward when we are dealing with medieval texts, however, even when we read a medieval manuscript with, for example, sixteenth-century annotations in nineteenth-century binding in a twentieth-century library. While the manuscript remains the preserve of the specialists who are its material and intellectual custodians, medieval churches belong to a much broader, more diverse community. Entering these buildings demands a more complex cultural and social identity than does entering the specialized, elite spaces of the manuscript reading-room; they have a much more dramatic and immediate effect on the subjectivity of the visitor, in ways that are both intellectual and embodied.\(^{10}\) To invoke Bourdieu's terminology, the cathedral, assigned with a special privilege in historical, cultural, religious, and tourist practice, receives a more emphatic and more general kind of cultural consecration than the texts which are the usual domain of scholars.

In this essay I seek to make some distinctions between the various ways in which medieval English religious sites are mediated for a range of visitors, while they still affirm a distinctive sense of national heritage. My examples, all from the Anglican tradition, range from medieval cathedrals and buildings in which we can still walk or pray in their original location (cathedrals and churches such as Canterbury Cathedral and Westminster Abbey), to specially constructed museums which foreground their archaeological or topographical claims to the medieval 'real' (for example, the Canterbury Tales Visitor Attraction in Canterbury), or sites whose religious orientation has been more or less displaced onto a more general notion of heritage or royal tourism, such as St George's Chapel at Windsor Castle, home of the Order of the Garter. It is a central assumption of this essay, which concludes with some examples of post-modernist medievalism, that the easy and customary distinction we so often draw between 'medieval' and 'medievalist' is brought into question by these examples. Authenticity is a far more mixed category than it first appears,

\(^{10}\) Jill Mann discusses the 'dialogic' possibilities for the modern atheist medievalist reading medieval Christian texts, in her Presidential Address to the New Chaucer Society, 'Chaucer and Atheism', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 17 (1995), 5–19. The subject formation I am considering here is more mixed and less stable than that of the atheist tout court, but Mann's essay opens up some intriguing possibilities for a more sustained study of the embodied and social politics of scholarly medievalism.
while the forms of alterity—spiritual, cultural, historical—offered by such sites are also highly variable.

These debates are familiar in the field of tourism studies, where it is recognized that the desire for 'authentic' and 'special' experience, no matter how heavily mediated, or contradictory, propels the visitor's attention. Dell Upton develops an important critique of the modern intellectual's 'loyalty to modernity's concept of authenticity', which we might apply to medieval studies, and its insistence on its own difference from medievalism. He comments:

As architects, planners, historians, anthropologists, and preservationists [and I would add, medievalists], we are part of the mechanism that manufactures heritage. As relatively prosperous, privileged people, we are consumers of tradition. As postmodern intellectuals, we understand that authenticity is an elusive, perhaps non-existent quality. [my emphasis] . . .

To reconcile our emotional investment in authenticity with our intellectual scepticism, we commonly locate authenticity in the realm of identity, defined by difference and validated by culture. Tradition is evidence of the continuity of identity through time. [original emphasis] 12

This understanding of tradition lies behind comments like Eco's and a myriad similar assumptions about the possibility of recuperating an authentic medieval experience, through the visitation of medieval sites, the reading of medieval manuscripts, or walking through medieval cathedrals. This appeal to the authentic as much forms part of scholarly discourse as it drives the tourist experience, though the scholar is typically more of a purist about the distinction between the medieval and the post- or quasi-medieval. I argue, however, that in the case of medieval tourist sites, with their variable mix of continuous use and the effects of historical change, the distinction rapidly becomes blurred, with profound, and sometimes disturbing, effects on our hard-won scholarly identity.

As a consequence of these diverse interests in medieval religious sites, we can distinguish different kinds, or degrees, of investment amongst both visitors and custodians or guardians of their heritage. The work of Pierre Bourdieu offers the neatest formulations of the complexities here:

we can distinguish different kinds and degrees of cultural capital being negotiated and distributed, while also thinking about the ways in which academics, historians, and the clergy bring 'distinction' on themselves, through their response to, or management of these sites.

**The Canterbury Tales**

The Canterbury Tales Visitor Attraction in Canterbury is the most specialized of all the sites I discuss in this paper, since the whole museum is dedicated to the realization of selected Tales; that is, the narrative and contextual frame of just one medieval text. This specialization alone demands a detailed reading, but because the Canterbury show thematizes the activities of medieval and medievalist tourism and pilgrimage to a sacred site, it is a particularly fitting starting-point.

The Canterbury Tales is housed in what was formerly the parish church of St Margaret in the city of Canterbury, though the building was not used as a church after suffering extensive bomb damage in World War II. In 1987 it was purchased by Heritage Projects (the company that also designed the Yorvik Centre at York), who established the current exhibition. It is a deconsecrated site, but nevertheless one that celebrates and enacts a religious ritual, interpellating its visitors as virtual pilgrims to the Cathedral.

Visitors queue up in the street outside St Margaret's, and assemble into small groups, who walk together through a series of chambers, first clustering around a life-size model of Chaucer at the Tabard Inn, who warms his hands by the fire, while a voice audible through one’s hand-held speaker sets the scene for the visit. The voice is that of an old man looking back in solitude: Chaucer tells us how the Host organized the pilgrims into a story-telling competition. The retrospective nature of the scene constructs history unambiguously as a form of nostalgia, and thus eases its visitors into a comfortable state of familiarity with the presentation of history as personal, authentic memory. The visitors then walk through a vividly realized street scene, representing Borough High Street, Southwark. They make their own pilgrimage, as it were, though various darkened passages and chambers, with lights and sound springing to action when the group is assembled in each chamber to hear a tale en route. The

---

13 Unless otherwise specified, I use this phrase here to refer to the Visitor Attraction, not Chaucer's poem.
timing of each group's stay in each chamber is carefully monitored; doors open invitingly onto the next scene, while the Host's voice also encourages them on.

The Host briefly outlines the characters and appearance of the five pilgrims whose tales are told—Knight, Miller, Nun's Priest, Wife of Bath, and Pardoner—while the tales themselves are performed in varying ways. Stained-glass windows, lit up and darkened in sequence, illuminate the *Knight's Tale*; and a rowdy series of life-size wooden or plaster figures moves dynamically, with a rowdy clatter, in and out of windows for the *Miller's Tale*; while the *Pardoner's Tale* display makes dramatic use of lighting to heighten the cavernous cheeks of the Pardoner and the haunting face of the Old Man. The narratives are wonderfully condensed, though, as we might expect, this condensation comes at the cost of most of their distinctive literary and rhetorical qualities. The medieval specialist or student wanting to hear Chaucerian English will be sadly disappointed. Textual subtlety gives way to narrative plot and visual pleasure in these retellings.

After the last tale, the visitors pass through the Westgate Towers of Canterbury and into another street scene. Strolling through the Market Place at Canterbury, we see fishmongers, souvenir sellers, and so forth, and are invited to marvel at a piece of crude dentistry being performed as we pass: here the 'medieval' clearly signifies the pre-modern and the pre-technological. All the street scenes and the tableaux themselves are finished to a high degree of verisimilitude; they have clearly been made with great attention to detail, and cannot easily be faulted on the grounds of historical accuracy. The plastic artefacts of clothing, building, and daily life are more easily translated for immediate consumption than texts of Middle English. When visitors reach the high point of the pilgrimage, the Cathedral itself is suggested by another marvellous piece of condensation: visitors stand in front of a model of the famous effigy of Edward the Black Prince, interred in the Cathedral, and look beyond that to a 'reconstruction' of the Shrine of St Thomas à Becket (the original was destroyed in the Reformation), both guarded by a blue-lit image of the saint himself.

As the commentary makes clear, we are but a stone's throw from the Cathedral, on the other side of the High Street, while our pilgrimage from Southwark to Canterbury, to the shrine of St Thomas, has imitated the pilgrimage made by so many others, framed by the other distinctive aspect of tourism: consumerism. Emerging into the area of the bookshop, gift shop, and café, we are asked to choose, by placing a bead counter in a
clear perspex tube, which tale we enjoyed the most, bringing a kind of closure to the competition that Chaucer was unable to do. For the record, the day I visited, the Wife of Bath's Tale was the clear winner.

The Canterbury Tales Attraction depends heavily on a sense of place, and a condensed virtual 'pilgrimage' through its darkened chambers and streetscapes, towards its own holy of holies, the Cathedral and the shrine of St Thomas. It successfully mediates the potential contradiction between pilgrimage as a spiritual journey and tourism as a secular, spectacular, and commercial concern.

The text of the *Official Guide* plays an important role in re-enforcing the mutual imbrication of pilgrimage and tourism, articulating a subtle relationship between the two, in ways that allow the reader a choice of positions with which to identify. Initially, the Guide readily embraces the more generalized, secular sense of 'pilgrimage':

After the death of Canterbury's most famous archbishop, Thomas Becket, the city began to attract visitors who came on a journey of public penance. For those unable to travel as far as Jerusalem or Rome a pilgrimage to the shrine of a great saint might, they believed, effect a cure or miracle, or bestow virtue upon the penitent . . .

To visit the splendid cathedral, wander through historic streets, to shop and sightsee is to follow in the footsteps of countless visitors.¹⁴

The spiritual dimension of pilgrimage is firmly identified, yet isolated and distanced as an anthropological curiosity ('pilgrimage might, they believed, effect a cure . . .'), while the Guide also invites its readers to embrace the idea of historical continuity around the more secular and attractive tourist activities of sightseeing and shopping, of walking through 'the splendid cathedral', presented here primarily as a spectacle, rather than a holy place. Yet the Guide also describes the Pilgrim's Way, and includes pictures of modern backpackers walking with staffs, heading towards Canterbury, and attending a candlelit service in the Cathedral. Such images allow secular tourists a means of acknowledging the seriousness with which some 'others' still treat the idea of pilgrimage.

Nevertheless, the text reassures those who are not making a religious pilgrimage that there are other reasons for coming to Canterbury: it certainly avoids the assumption that we are all simple tourists, interested in spectacle alone. Michael Harkin, among others, stresses that most

18 Stephanie Trigg

cultural tourists resist such an identification. Any anxiety of this kind is gently assuaged by the Guide:

... as Chaucer wryly observed, people then—as now—came to Canterbury for many different reasons. They came as an expression of faith or simply to 'get away from it all'.

The modern visitor is interpellated as one who is seeking knowledge, while also wanting to identify in very particular and restricted ways with medieval customs. Again, this consolatory strategy allows visitors to transcend their own modernity, with its habitual scepticism. The pressure of such anxiety is eased by the Guide's assimilation of modern sensibilities into an accessible medieval world-view. This comment about Chaucer is given very little supporting evidence, but it does appeal to a familiar image of the poet—making a 'wry observation' that is little more than a generalization. The historical dimension is introduced, only to be immediately collapsed in an easy, anachronistic universalism: 'getting away from it all'.

In a later discussion of pilgrimage, the Guide once more treads this delicate line between embracing continuity with the medieval past and acknowledging the modern, more secular interests of its visitors. As a tourist attraction built around a specific medieval spiritual practice, it claims a second-order level of consecration, in Bourdieu's terms, to reinforce its own cultural centrality and heritage value, without alienating those who do not actually share the beliefs commemorated in the Cathedral. It does so by holding together the potential contradiction between the diversity of people's needs and the apparently universal character of pilgrimage. Again, the Guide comments:

the character of pilgrimage has changed over time. Where piety may have been the motivating force to begin with, in medieval times it provided a means of escape from the restrictions of feudal society. Pilgrimages became holidays and pilgrims became tourists, eager to satisfy a desire for travel and new experiences.

17 Harkin comments that 'an anxiety about authenticity pervades the tourism experience, and reflects the perceived inauthenticity of modern life' (‘Modernist Anthropology’, 653).
18 I borrow the term 'consecration' from Pierre Bourdieu, but it is doubly appropriate here for its sense of the added layer of religious or spiritual significance. See especially his 'The Market of Symbolic Goods', *Poetics*, 14 (1986), 13–44.
Walking through Cathedrals

It is a very familiar, even prototypically modernist construction of feudalism as a set of constraints from which the ‘natural’ urge is to escape. In another neat collapse of historical distinctions, the commentary naturalizes, even praises, the ‘desire for travel and new experiences’ with which the modern tourist easily identifies. But the impulse towards diversity, sanctioned earlier by no less an authority than Chaucer himself, is closed down, in the final comment in this section. ‘Noblemen and common folk, they came from many different backgrounds with but one aim— “To be a pilgrim”.’ This last quote is particularly fascinating: it is presented here as a reprise from the fuller quotation from Sir Steven Runciman, ‘“The desire to be a pilgrim is deeply rooted in human nature”’; but it surely evokes for many readers John Bunyan’s famous hymn, whose stirring lyrics have echoed through countless British and Commonwealth school assemblies.

The tour guide and the voiced commentary at the show itself cover all bases. Simultaneously conscious of the historical difference between then and now, they also allow the visitor to identify with all or part of their representation of medieval tourism and pilgrimage. They naturalize the very idea of pilgrimage as tourism, and the idea of consumerism associated with such sites, giving it a long and honourable history. In the Canterbury Tales’ insistence on the importance of place, these commentaries also justify the importance of the show’s location in Canterbury.

Yet the show also undermines its own dependence on place. Its structuring ideology, after all, is predicated on the idea of a pilgrimage: it commences by imaginatively transporting its visitors back to Southwark, and so disrupts—by means of the deliberate defamiliarization produced by the black-outs—any immediate sense of location. Similarly, while the show is located in a medieval church, the visitors’ experience of the building qua church is limited to the wait outside the walls, themselves faced with flints in the nineteenth century, ‘giving it a characteristically Victorian appearance’.20 Once inside, there is no sense of the building as a sacred space; its original architecture and topography are completely overlain and overrun by the exigencies of the dramatic performance and the necessities of the black-out, to transport us back into the past, and to fourteenth-century Southwark and Canterbury. In the Guide’s schematized map of the site, we see the split levels of the Tales themselves, and the ‘route’ followed up and down and round about the building, while the Norman bell-tower is renamed ‘The Control Tower’, with an image of a

20 Ibid. 13.
As a representation of Chaucer's texts, there is no doubt that the show is dramatically thin: the Chaucerian expecting a nuanced reading of the interplay between irony and allegory would be bitterly disappointed. While the retellings are not dramatically 'untrue' to the spirit of Chaucer's text, the stories are stripped of much, though not all, of their philosophical depth and rhetorical colour. The poet himself appears as a snuffling old man warming himself by the fire, and I, at least, was relieved when his wheezy old voice was displaced by the more lively conversation of the Host and the dramatic characters of the pilgrims. The professional medievalist's confidence is not inspired, though, by the brochure, which I read as I waited for my group's turn to enter, with its staggering misquotation of Chaucer:

'From every shires ende
of Engelond to Canterbury they wende,
the hooely blisful martir for to seke,
That hen hath holpen that they were seeke. [sic]

It would be naïve to expect a sophisticated post-colonial or queer Chaucer, of course, and perhaps unreasonable to expect to hear Chaucer's own words in the retelling, but it is not unreasonable to expect an accurately quoted text. The Attraction's chief mission, though, is one of popular entertainment: if it is organized around a literary figure from high culture, that figure is heavily mediated by his eighteenth-century reputation as a comic poet of human frailty and sexual cheer. It came as no surprise, searching the various British tourist sites for references to the Attraction, to find the pilgrims described as an 'unforgettable rumbustious' band. But this image is just one of many: the signifier 'Chaucer' can be pressed into the service of a number of agendas and cultural associations. A page from the Outdoor Britain site lists Chaucer first in their 'Be Inspired' section, with a side link: 'Are you a fan of Chaucer? Then why not get out and enjoy the wonders of the countryside that inspired him? The North Downs Way National Trail follows for a part the route that the pilgrims may have taken.'

This picks up on the very familiar idea of Chaucer as a national poet of nature, landscape, and Englishness. It also licenses readerly passions and

---

welcomes visitors, by virtue of their knowledge and love of Chaucer, to claim their cultural heritage. The flattening effect of the World Wide Web is evident here: another link on this page, to ‘Very British Activities’, or ‘Quirky Events’, offers these options: ‘Experience the beauty of Britain’s countryside by snorkelling through a bog, or chasing cheese down a hill.’ These sites are crucial for the cultural bridge of transition they offer to international tourists. Where Chaucer’s text mentions pilgrims coming merely ‘From every shires ende of Engelond’, tourism sites like the Canterbury Tales Attraction also need to attract international visitors. This one delicately negotiates the appeal of the familiar with information for the less familiar, or those less strongly identified with Britain’s cultural heritage. Mention of the ‘quirky’ activities of bog snorkelling or cheese chasing taps into the familiar trope of the eccentric English, reassuring for anyone in danger of feeling awed by Britain’s cultural heritage or suffering the agonies of cultural cringe.

Returning to the question of pilgrimage, however, The Canterbury Tales is a perfect site for cultural tourism, as it offers the ready-made possibility of historical otherness combined with the easy entertainments of bawdy or moralizing narrative. We can pay homage to Chaucer from a modernist perspective, while also participating in a genuinely medieval activity. We need look no further than the anonymous The Tale of Beryn for a fifteenth-century account of Canterbury pilgrims, touring the Cathedral and staring up at its stained-glass windows, and collecting souvenirs. The Canterbury Tales show thematizes and authorizes a very similar notion of cultural tourism around the theme of pilgrimage to a medieval cathedral, while also tapping into a well-recognized cultural icon: the image of Geoffrey Chaucer.

'Recovering the Calm': Tourist Management

Cathedrals and churches are far from silent, passive monuments, to be consumed by either the tourist or the scholarly gaze. Nor do they bear much relationship to the modern interpretative museum, where visitors are encouraged to make their own narratives. Medieval churches that are still in use as places of worship are governed by a range of constraints that are given very practical, material form by the chapters, colleges, or parishes that maintain them. Larger churches have developed elaborate programmes and plans to direct the movement of tourist traffic, to sequester various parts of the church from the more casual visitor, and to
regulate the flow of visitors, especially at service times. Tea-rooms, souvenir stalls, bookshops, and gift shops are similarly subject to careful management plans. More subtly, too, the demeanour of the attendants, and the many notices and signs, all work to mediate the tourist visit.

In his discussion of tourism and ritual, Michael Harkin comments:

tourism is, rather, precisely a desacralization, not merely in the most obvious sense of the tourist tramping through Gothic cathedrals, but rather in the project as a whole, the object of which is precisely to appropriate alterity. Ritual constitutes an irreducible otherness, tourism negates otherness altogether.22

Harkin invokes the easy target of the tourist 'tramping through Gothic cathedrals' to exemplify his first, most 'obvious' sense of desacralization, but this is radically to simplify the visitors' experience of such places, and to assume a misleadingly homogeneous tourist identity. As the Canterbury Tales Guide makes quite clear, not all tourism negates otherness absolutely. There is a whole series of varied negotiations that cultural tourists and modern scholars, both Christian and non-Christian, make for themselves in such sites, while 'otherness' is also a much less absolute quality for many visitors. Historical knowledge or curiosity still renders these sacred sites of deep cultural, and sometimes emotional interest— even if visitors do not all come to worship—while even the least interested visitor simply does walk and talk and behave differently in such places, either under the influence of the general atmosphere or admonished by guides or parents.

As Eco suggests, walking or praying in the naves of medieval cathedrals can imply an experience closely resembling a medieval one; it seems possible here to construct a fantasy of medieval presence, of aesthetic, spiritual, or cultural continuity. Everything we know about the phenomenology of built space tells us that to walk the naves of medieval cathedrals must be a distinctive experience. The very scale and design of their arches and buttresses, their symbolic orientation and topography, the visible and tangible signs of their history, all produce a powerful impact on the visitor. But of course, such an experience will always be a mixed one. Most cathedrals are themselves architectural and social accretions, and most bear signs of radical or minor rebuilding, reconstruction, the vicissitudes of war, or of religious reform—especially in England—and changes in fashion. They are hung with the flags of past wars and the trophies of Empire, so they play an important role in the way a nation

22 Harkin, 'Modernist Anthropology', 655.
Walking through Cathedrals

imagines itself as a community of shared interests; they feature statuary and monuments from later centuries; as well as appeals for famine relief and other signs of use by the modern church community. The music heard there is rarely medieval, and sometimes features women's voices, for example, while the English prayers offered up bear little relation to those of medieval Catholicism. For the tourist, and for the medieval scholar, these signs of modernity are strictly controlled and framed by the overall significance of the cathedral as a site of pilgrimage and heritage, but they do, all the same, need to be negotiated in order to produce the symbolic import of the visit.

Sometimes the negotiations are quite complex. Lincoln Cathedral offers a radical rereading of one of its famous medieval monuments. Next to the shrine of Little Saint Hugh, a notice-board reads:

Trumped up stories of 'ritual murders' of Christian boys by Jewish communities were common throughout Europe during the Middle Ages and even much later. These fictions cost many innocent Jews their lives. Lincoln had its own legend, and the alleged victim was buried in the Cathedral in the year 1225.

Such stories do not redound to the credit of Christendom, and so we pray:

Lord, forgive us what we have been,
amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be.

The Cathedral's recognition that the Church's Christian legacy is a mixed one, and that the patterns and practices of Christian belief are mutable, not only reminds us that we are 'walking' in a modern institution whose history is in fact a history of change, but makes the important concession that change is value-laden. Such a notice 'teaches' the visitor something about medieval anti-Semitism, and about the Church's willingness to correct its past; it is a powerful reminder that the Cathedral is not simply a place of tourist visitation or even simply scholarly research, that it actively reaches out to the visitor to invite their involvement. However, the 'we' here is problematic. Is the speech-act 'and so we pray' constative (when we pray, this is what we say)? Or does it have performative force (Let us pray)? It is a most productive ambiguity, forcing the issue for the medieval scholar. What is it we want the past to teach us, and how? If the Church itself has already developed its own internal critique of its past, what role is left to the scholar or even the tourist interested in medieval history? How can he or she recover an 'authentic' sense of medieval anti-Semitism when the tomb is so clearly marked as a lesson from the past, speaking to present concerns in ways which are profoundly ahistorical, but which
take for granted the idea that history can indeed 'teach' us things about ourselves?  

Even if we confine ourselves to the search for architectural or archaeological authenticity, the medieval monuments in such sites are rarely offered in a pure, unmediated form. Sometimes it is the exigencies of conservation and preservation that moderate our access to medieval artefacts, even when they survive in their original sites. In Canterbury Cathedral, the Black Prince's tomb is placed in the Trinity Chapel, while his achievements—his helm and crest, surcoat, shield, gauntlets, and his scabbard—hang above his tomb. But these are replicas. Interestingly, however, they are neither as shabby and worn in appearance as the originals, preserved in a glass case below the tomb, in the crypt, nor as bright in colour as if they were brand new: the replicas simulate age and antiquity, but are far more legible as heraldic icons than the real items.

Because they are governed not simply by curators, but by chapters and parishes, medieval cathedrals have a complex mission, when it comes to balancing the needs of tourists, or visitors interested in heritage or history, with the needs of those who come to worship. In the cities of London, York, and Canterbury, where there are so many visitors, cathedrals, churches, and abbeys must develop elaborate plans by which to direct the traffic, control crowds and noise, and encourage various behavioural patterns and responses in their visitors.

One of the most problematic examples of medieval tourism of this kind is Westminster Abbey. It is one of the most famous tourist sights, and one of the most public places in London; it is deeply entrenched in the national consciousness as the site of coronations, royal weddings, and funerals; it remains an important site for commemoration of many kinds, and also for scholarly research. It is also the most extensively 'managed' of medieval religious sites; its crowded chapels and naves force the visitor to confront the potential contradiction between tourism and pilgrimage.

Like most such buildings, the Abbey's administration is torn between the rival impulses to attract visitors while also protecting the Church's life of prayer. It does this by establishing a hierarchical order of places open to the public at various times, as a means of regulating the paths of its visitors, and keeping some parts closed to tourists. Most notably, the shrine

---

23 My thanks to Elizabeth Allen for helping me formulate these questions.

24 In Tony Bennett's formulation, it is 'a truism ... whose implications are significant', that 'the past, as it is materially embodied in museums and heritage sites, is inescapably a product of the present which organizes it' (The Birth of the Museums: History, Theory, Politics (London, 1995), 129).
Walking through Cathedrals

of Edward the Confessor is sequestered away from the tourist gaze completely. According to John Field, author of *A Historical Guide to Westminster Abbey*, it ‘remains, appropriately, a mystery apart, unvisited, but glimpsed between other royal tombs’.  

The history of many of the Abbey’s other medieval artefacts is a mixed one. The rival tombs of Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots attract more attention than the more humble tombs of the Plantagenets, for example, while the Coronation Chair is now displayed with a gaping hole where the Stone of Scone lay until its removal to Edinburgh Castle in 1996, whence it will return to the Abbey only for coronations. The stone’s abduction by Ian Hamilton and others in 1950 is now part of the Abbey’s history, while viewers of the Scottish television series ‘Hamish MacBeth’ will also experience a double *frisson* of modernity and familiarity when they recall the Stone’s role in the series’ mystical concluding episode.

As Field remarks: ‘The Abbey cannot survive without the visitors who threaten to wear it out.’  

He describes the programme put in place in 1997 by the Dean and Chapter, called ‘Recovering the Calm’, as a means of controlling the tourist-led chaos that threatened the tranquillity of the Abbey. Field attempts to make concessions to the ‘up to three million visitors a year, the vast majority of whom do not attend a service and are not practising Christians’, but in fact, his tone is somewhat condescending as he describes the reforms.  

After 1997, visitors must pay to enter the Abbey, he says, but they are ‘calmed’ by the ‘psychologically shrewd’ preliminaries of their visit and their ‘high quality ticket and brochure bearing the gilded image of Edward the Confessor from the Litlyngton Missal’, and the fact of being channelled at a slower pace into the Abbey. Moreover, ‘Many visitors are calmed further by the handsets they carry, like blessed one-way mobile phones, as intent as if they are listening to God direct.’

A similar tone is evident in William Swatos’s account of the management of visitors to services such as Evensong in St Paul’s Cathedral. Many visitors want to be more than casual sightseers and wish to take part in the service, but are not familiar with the elaborate conventions of Anglican worship. Accordingly, the printed order of service contains directions for when to stand, sit, or kneel. Swatos attempts to examine the ‘interplay’ between ‘various levels of pilgrimage and tourism’ in various London

---

26 Ibid. 149.
27 Ibid. 148.
28 Ibid. 150.
churches, but in fact his rhetoric is more comfortable distributing a hierarchy of those who are more and less familiar with the practices of the church:

Virtually all of the participants follow the printed directions regarding standing and sitting, but the majority will not kneel, notwithstanding the kneeling pads (which some attendees use instead as back supports)—though perhaps the most curious posture, seen on rare occasions, is those in the crossing who kneel facing into their chairs, rather than toward the altar.

Such comments not only reveal the perspective of the custodians of medieval churches and their sense that tourist or visitor behaviour can and should be regulated or modified; Field and Swatos also betray the superior understanding of the insider, comfortably demonstrating their own familiarity with Anglican rituals and the ‘proper’ understanding of its monuments, assumed to be well beyond the majority of visitors. A more interesting question might be the interrogation of this refusal, or unwillingness, to kneel, to adopt such a very unmodern bodily gesture: we can read this, perhaps, as an embodied marker of the limits to the modern empathy with the medieval.  

"Restricted Access"

While the official discourse of most large English churches is more welcoming to a range of visitors, there is an important subset of smaller churches and private chapels, in the care of the monarchy or the aristocracy, where the possibilities for the visitor are much more limited. One of the most dramatic cases in point is St George’s Chapel at Windsor Castle, the home of the Order of the Garter. Once a year, in June, the annual procession takes place from the Castle to the Chapel: it is one of the highlights of the year for the substantial enterprise of royal tourism. Membership of the Order is still limited to the Queen, the Prince of Wales, and twenty-four Knights Companion and a small number of Stranger (i.e. non-English) Knights; so entry to the Chapel on this day is restricted to the thousand or so guests of the Order. However, the grounds of the Castle are crowded with visitors, who come, not to worship, but to

29 In this example, Swatos is writing of St Paul’s Cathedral, not a medieval building at all, but his observations about the behaviour of visitors are applicable to most cathedrals, whatever their architecture.
Walking through Cathedrals 27

watch the elaborate procession of those who do enter the chapel, according to an elaborate hierarchy of members of the royal household, the military knights of Windsor, the Officers of Arms, the Knights and Ladies of the Garter, other members of the royal family, the Officers of the Order, including Black Rod, and other officials. It is a colourful procession, dominated by the deep blue velvet robes, with gold and red trimmings, and the distinctive white ostrich feathers on the caps of the Companions. This is not a completely open event: tickets for the day must be requested from the College of Arms, and the crowds are predominantly English fans of the royal family, the self-styled ‘real Royalists’. In her important study of these royal-watchers, Anne Rowbottom describes their activities as a kind of ‘civil religion’.

After the procession has passed, a picnic atmosphere develops amongst the crowds waiting on the grass. The service is broadcast over the grounds, but it is almost impossible to catch more than a faint murmur of voices and muted singing. The crowds wait, however, to witness the return to the Castle, though the Companions do not walk, but make the uphill journey in cars or carriages.

Like many royal rituals, the annual procession at Windsor does not represent any long medieval history. In its current form, the procession dates only from 1948. Nor has the Chapel itself, first established in 1475 (superseding an older chapel built by Henry III), enjoyed continuous use. When the body of Charles I was brought there for burial in 1649, ‘no-one remained who belonged to St George’s, and the Chapel was “so altered and transformed” by the pulling down of all its familiar landmarks that it was impossible to find the royal vault until an aged poor knight appeared to point it out’. Nevertheless, the Chapel, like the Order itself, and like many institutions of the English monarchy, offers a subtle mediation between the twinned appeals to continuity (affirming heritage values) and to modernity (affirming contemporary relevance). The guidebook to the Chapel, first published in 1933 but revised in 1992, comments:

The Most Noble Order of the Garter, founded six centuries ago and prayerfully supported through the years by the College of St George, reminds us of the aims and ideals of those far off days of chivalry, which are in their essence in no way

---

inappropriate to modern times, and which should be, by present generations, by no means forgotten.\(^{12}\)

'Present generations', of course, is deceptively inclusive and modern: membership of the Order is not open to anyone not already a peer.

It is easy to forget that many important medieval monuments are not so publicly accessible as those in the great cathedrals. Like manuscripts, many are held in private collections, or form part of private chapels, or are chapels in the royal residences with restricted public access. During the course of some research into the Order of the Garter, I visited the church of Stanton Harcourt, in Oxfordshire, which contains one of two surviving fifteenth-century effigies of women wearing their insignia around the forearm or upper arm, instead of around the left calf, as male Companions do.\(^{33}\) As a parish church, St Michael's was open to visitors, but the tombs of Margaret Byro and her husband Sir Robert Harcourt were firmly locked away, with other family tombs, behind an iron grille. Once I had been directed towards the village, to the front door of the lady of the manor, the Hon. Mrs Gascoigne, I had to explain why I wanted to photograph her family's tomb. Deeply conscious of my jeans and Australian accent, and never having met a member of the English nobility before, I nervously explained what I wanted to see and why. She was at first reluctant—'It's private, you see', she explained—and there were one or two races at Ascot which she needed to watch first. However, once she joined me at the church and unlocked the grille, she was all courtesy and helpfulness, even encouraging me to climb up and lean over Sir Robert so that I could inspect the garter draped above the left elbow of Lady Margaret.

This episode, and my visit to Windsor, made a huge impression on me, reminding me that in spite of Britain's magnificent public institutions, its libraries and cathedrals, the ruling elite still governs and maintains many of its medieval religious resources very firmly in private hands. If we are scholars, if we are lower or middle class, and perhaps especially if we are foreigners, we do not 'own' this heritage in the same way as we can enter a cathedral, though our recognition of its significance is crucial. I related my adventures to my New Zealand colleague Kim Phillips, who commented astutely, 'Yes, it's not for you', she said, 'but they need you all the same.'


\(^{33}\) The other effigy is part of the beautiful double tomb of Alice Chaucer, Duchess of Suffolk, at St Mary's Church, Ewelme, also in Oxfordshire.
Post-modern Medievalism

In the examples considered so far, I have distinguished between different kinds of visitors, institutions, and kinds and degrees of management and custodianship of medieval churches, cathedrals, and chapels. In this final section, I want to compound the complex act of walking in cathedrals by introducing the troubling perspectives of post-modernism. At the risk of solipsism, my concern here is principally with academic subjects: medievalists walking through cathedrals. At every level—architectural, historical, and conceptual—we do not enter the same Gothic cathedrals as Coleridge did. We observe our own responses just as he did; but we are more likely to observe the contradictions in our own desires, and our own histories, as we approach the sacred things of the medieval past, just as we are conscious of the mixed histories of the buildings through which we walk. Our experiences, then, are strategic and hybrid, rather than naturalized, or given. Despite the easy appeal of my epigraph from Umberto Eco, there is little straightforward cultural continuity in the experience of walking through medieval cathedrals, perhaps especially for medievalists, so well trained to distinguish what is authentically medieval from its post-medieval accretions or imitations. In all likelihood, it is easier for non-specialists to experience or imagine a form of continuity with the medieval past.

This essay concludes with two examples which give material or cinematic form to the dialectic of post-modern medievalism. The obvious architectural example of hybridity is the cultural translation displayed in the Cloisters Museum in Fort Tryon Park, part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The cloisters of Saint-Guilhem, St-Michel de Cuxa, Bonnefont, and Trie were 'collected' by George Grey before 1914, and were bought by the Museum, with funds donated by John D. Rockefeller, Jr, in 1925. Rockefeller also presented to the City the land on which the Cloisters Museum stands, overlooking the Hudson River in Upper Manhattan, while also reserving the land around the Museum to protect its views and vistas from development.

The Cloisters Museum presents a very privileged form of cultural tourism. In these very selective reconstructions, the curators have

---

34 I borrow the formulations of Dell Upton, who proposes a strategic—even hybrid—understanding of concepts such as 'the authentic' and its relation to ideas of identity, heritage, and tradition: 'Individuals routinely shift from one cultural position to another, adopt one identity or another, as occasion demands. Sites likewise seem to take on varying colourations according to the angle from which one views them' ("Authentic" Anxieties", 300).
stripped the stones of all post-medieval traces, planted gardens, and piped appropriate music through strategically placed speakers. The mixture of the technological and the 'real' encourages visitors to project themselves into the imagined past of these medieval spaces, whether that past is primarily spiritual or historical. What is on offer is a very generalized and open 'alterity': it is the otherness of the medieval, the European, and the religious, in whatever mix appeals to the visitor, but firmly lifted out of the urban routines of Manhattan. Jean Baudrillard describes the Cloisters as 'an artificial mosaic of all cultures', commenting that the proposed 'repatriation' of the cloister of St-Michel de Cuxa, in the name of authenticity, would, rather, be a 'total simulation'.

As Baudrillard remarks, no one is 'fooled' by the Cloisters. Visitors are fully conscious of their artificiality, and are implicitly invited to marvel not only at the spectacle of the site, but at the phenomenon of translation. There is even a second-order degree of nostalgia for a period when such grandiloquent gestures of cultural appropriation were naturalized as a form of social philanthropy, and when a city like New York seemed to need its own set of medieval European buildings. The Cloisters is a very privileged, even an elite museum. Not only is it somewhat difficult of access, well off the main city grid of Manhattan, but its very specialization, and the relative purity of its exhibit, attract a very distinctive kind of visitor, one who already feels at home, we must suspect, in the nave of a cathedral or in the 'cloistered' spaces of medieval studies.

There are a number of ways in which we can use the Cloisters example to read back through the examples I have considered in this essay. First, we can use it to interrogate and challenge the privilege customarily accorded to the link between authenticity and place, or continuous use. The extremely artificial 'use' made of these medieval artefacts permits a rare architectural purity to emerge, even as it strips away the idea of continuous religious community. Second, the Cloisters reminds us that all medieval objects have a reception history which also often involves a history of *translatio*—that is, of cultural movement, whether this is movement across space or time, in the transformation from me-
dieval Catholic to post-Reformation Anglican ritual, the movement of a predominantly spiritual to a predominantly secular society, or the transition from a privileged aristocratic class to a professional caste of medievalists.

My final example condenses many of these concerns, in a way that is typical of the cinematic medium. Brian Helgeland’s post-modern medieval romance, *A Knight’s Tale* celebrates the possibilities of play with anachronism and authenticity, particularly in its sound-track, its costume, and its founding premiss, that despite the repeated official insistence on class hierarchy and nobility through birth, a man who is ‘noble’ at heart can still ‘change his stars’. It is a film about ‘passing’—as a jousting knight, an aristocrat, a courtly lover; and it is deeply concerned with the importance of class for reading embodied forms of behaviour, especially gesture and language.

Most interesting for my purposes, *A Knight’s Tale* also features a number of love scenes set in cathedrals. When the heroine, Jocelyn, and her maid enter Notre Dame in Paris, for example, they pause at the font and cross themselves with holy water. When ‘Ulrich von Lichtenstein’ (in reality, a humble English thatcher’s son named William) enters the cathedral three steps behind them, he too stops and wets his hands, but in order to wash them and to smooth back his hair before pursuing his lady. It is an interesting scene, in that it affirms William’s status as an outsider by virtue of his birth (the actor, Heath Ledger, after all, is also an Australian) while also ‘showing’ us how to behave; how, precisely, to ‘walk or pray in the naves of the cathedral’. This scene is also the locus for one of the film’s quasi-feminist moments, in one of many instances that invite the modern viewer’s empathy. When the lovers begin to quarrel, an officious priest turns up to bid Jocelyn to be quiet, and she retorts loudly, ‘Do not shoosh me and spare him!’

Helgeland interpellates his audience as very knowing: we do not need to be medieval historians or scholars to tell the difference between medieval and modern in this film, though if we have read Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, or know that there really was an Ulrich von Lichtenstein, we will certainly experience the familiar joys of scholarly expertise. At the same time the film reassures us that the difference between medieval and modern, between ‘real’ and ‘fake’, does not really matter: it is just a romantic comedy, after all. This disjunction is played out at a thematic

---

level, too. When the Black Prince formally recognizes Sir Ulrich as a knight, he announces that his 'personal historians' have discovered that William 'truly' is of noble birth. There is a real question in the film as to whether Sir William's new 'patents of nobility' are any more real than those forged for him by Chaucer, but again, the question of textual authenticity takes second place to the question of narrative closure and ideological resolution. The patents, like Chaucer's forgeries, are not dissimilar to modern manuscript facsimiles, whether they are designed, like the Ellesmere facsimile, to protect the original and serve the purposes of scholars, or like the commercial facsimiles produced by Moleiro editions, to conjure up the texture, colours, and 'smells' of the originals.

Many medievalists—and I count myself amongst them—still wish to make a meaningful theoretical and practical distinction between the original and the facsimile, between, say, the Ellesmere manuscript in the Huntington Library and its recent facsimile edition. But this does not mean that facsimiles do not play an important role in medieval scholarship. Which would be the more useful practical guide to medieval textuality? A single leaf of a medieval manuscript, ripped from its original context, sold separately and framed behind glass: the single leaf as fetish for the lost medieval? Or a complete facsimile, produced on a modern press, but presenting a medieval text in its entirety?

Because it is such an embodied and socialized experience, because it has such powerful, if contradictory, historical and dehistoricized effects, walking through cathedrals is a far more complex act than scrutinizing medieval documents. This is not to deny the undoubted frisson of holding the manuscript of a beloved poem in our hands for the first time, or to diminish the difficulties of gaining access to some of the more remote or forbidding libraries. One of the chief differences, however, is that when we walk, we walk in such mixed company, so that whether we pray or not, whether we feel we are making a cultural pilgrimage or engaging in 'pure' scholarly research, our experience of the visit is necessarily mediated both by pragmatic policies and by cultural contexts that are beyond our control, that are not really directed at us. It is only rarely that these policies and contexts reflect our professional identity back to us in any familiar way (when we are taken into the cathedral library, for example, or shown around by a guide who recognizes our expertise). Far

Nevertheless, it is still possible to see how some of the structures and systems that reify the manuscript start to contaminate the treatment of the copy. The Rare Books librarian in my university library, for example, uses white cotton gloves to handle our copy of the facsimile, as a measure of its rarity and value.
from regretting this impurity, though, I suggest that it is indicative of the more general post-modern condition in which we conduct all our research. Whether we like it or not, there is no ‘pure’ medieval; there is only medievalism.  

University of Melbourne

My thanks to Helen Hickey for research assistance; to Valerie Krips and Kim Phillips for valuable discussion; and to Elizabeth Allen and Tom Prendergast for their astute comments on an earlier draft of this essay.
Author/s:
TRIGG, SJ

Title:
Walking through Cathedrals: Scholars, Pilgrims, and Medieval Tourists

Date:
2005

Citation:

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/31059

File Description:
Walking through Cathedrals: Scholars, Pilgrims, and Medieval Tourists