

British Art Talks podcast

Season 1, Episode 2:

Jessica Barker, "What will survive of us is love": Memory and Emotion in Late-Medieval England

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Anna Reid: *British Art Talks* from the Paul Mellon Centre, championing new ways of understanding British art, history, and culture.

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Anna Reid: Welcome to episode two of *British Art Talks*. I'm Anna Reid, Head of Research at the PMC. In this episode, I'm joined by Dr. Jessica Barker, lecturer at the Courtauld Institute of Art and author of *Stone Fidelity: Marriage and Emotion in Medieval Tomb Sculpture*.

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In 1956, the poet, Philip Larkin, visited Chichester Cathedral with his love Monica Jones. In the north aisle of the cathedral lies a 14th-century monument, portraying the Earl and Countess of Arundel lying side by side, holding hands. It was the unexpected form of this enigmatic memorial which moved Larkin to write one of his best-known works, *An Arundel Tomb*. In this episode, Jessica explores the Arundel Tomb and the complex symbolism of life, death, and love, which it embodies.

[music]

Philip Larkin: Time has transfigured them into untruth. The stone fidelity They hardly meant has come to be. Their final blazon and to prove, our almost-instinct almost true. What will survive of us is love.

Jessica Barker: So ends *An Arundel Tomb*, one of the most famous poems from Phillip Larkin's 1964 Anthology, *The Whitsun Weddings*. It opens with the narrator

chancing upon a medieval tomb to an unidentified Earl and Countess of Arundel. At first, the monument appears rather uninteresting. The poet says, "Such plainness of the pre-baroque hardly involves the eye," until he notices with a sharp tender shock that the two effigies are holding hands.

This gesture and the affection it seems to embody propels the narrator to ruminate on the six long centuries since the monument was erected. Evoking the passing of time from the perspective of the sculpted effigies themselves, Larkin conjures two parallel and competing processes. On the one hand, the monuments material persistence, and on the other, the progressive erosion of the identities it was intended to convey. The endless altered people who look upon the tomb have become blind to the heraldic blazon and Latin inscriptions that were once its *raison d'être*.

As society is remade by changes more profound than the Earl and Countess could ever have imagined, so the messages they sought to convey through their monument become unintelligible to its viewers, or in Larkin's words, "How soon succeeding eyes begin to look, not read." Love lies at the heart of this meditation on the historical contingency of the monument. After all, it's the effigies clasped hands that first attract the eye of the narrator prompting his interest in that tomb.

It's tempting to read this gesture as a sign of love's triumph over death, and it's bridging of historical distance. Yet, while Larkin is susceptible to this interpretation, he also resists it. Significant here is the repetition of almost in the poem's penultimate line as a counterbalance to its finale, "Our almost-instinct almost true. What will survive of us is love." These finely crafted verses challenge us to pay attention to the artificiality of the monument just as we need to be sensitive to the constructiveness of the poem itself.

We're warned not to be seduced into seeing the joined hands as an expression of pure feeling abstracted from historical processes, but rather to attend to the significance or lack thereof, that the gesture embodied within its own time and culture. Indeed, the almost instinct that compels us to read the monument as a symbol of love is itself a product of historical forces, an aspect of the long shadow cast by romanticism.

It is the particularities of their own time, its hierarchies, values, beliefs, literacies, and artistic practices that shaped the way in which the Earl and Countess chose to express affection on their tomb and would later come to determine how their monument was interpreted by subsequent generations of viewers. To point to the historical locatedness of the monument is not to deny the existence of an emotional landscape that is unassimilable to historical discourse, operating out of language, and therefore, out of time.

Indeed, the creative tension that propels Larkin's poem and my own research is the riddling enigma of this realm of feeling and its entanglement with tomb sculpture. A shadow cast by the monument whose contours we might sketch but never delineate.

[music]

Anna Reid: *An Arundel Tomb* was inspired by the late 14th-century tomb standing in the north aisle at Chichester Cathedral. Two life-size effigies, an armored knight and a veiled woman lie side by side on a tomb chest adorned with heraldic shields. Now scrubbed bare of that gaudy medieval paintwork, the chalky contours of the carved limestone figures softly absorb the sunlight from the windows nearby. The knight, his coat armor emblazoned with a lion rampant, rests his head on his helm and his feet upon a sleeping lion.

He holds a gauntlet in his left hand, placing his uncovered right hand on the belly of the woman beside him. Its palm faces upwards to receive her hand placed delicately within his. In contrast to the armored rigidity of her partner, the female effigy is draped in voluminous folds. The contours of her body concealed beneath a long dress, mantle, veil, and barb. Whereas the knight lies flat on his back, she draws her right leg over her left, rotating her hips so as to incline her body towards him. The sleeping dog at her feet attests to her wifely fidelity.

[music]

Jessica Barker: Whereas Larkin envisioned a supine stationary voyage for the Arundel Tomb, in reality, this monument's journey to the present day involved numerous relocations and material interventions. It was probably one of a group of memorials relocated to Chichester Cathedral from Louis Priory after the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536. At some point thereafter, the couple were separated. Their tomb chest was divided longitudinally into two halves and their joined hands removed. An 18th-century drawing shows the effigies lying in one line, the woman's head to the knight's feet. Her pillows jutting awkwardly against the line.

The figures have been amputated. The knight's right arm has been severed below the shoulder. The woman rests her forearm against her belly, its wrist and hand missing. Husband and wife were reunited in 1843 by the sculptor Edward Richardson. He made a new tomb chest so that the effigies could once again lay side by side and repurposed 29 pieces of stone from the old tomb chest to restore the sculpted figures.

One of these fragments must have been used to carve a new pair of clasped hands. An abrupt break at the wrist of the woman and the upper arm of the man marks the join where this new piece has been attached to the effigies. Rather than merely being reinterpreted by subsequent generations, the Arundel Tomb has quite literally

been refashioned. Yet it's still possible to recover something of the ideas, attitudes, and artistry that shaped the original moment of the monument's making.

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Beginning in the 13th century and gathering pace into the 14th and 15th centuries, a seismic shift occurred in the funerary culture of Western Europe. Whereas earlier monuments always showed the deceased alone, it now became increasingly common for tombs to feature two effigies side by side either resting on the same stone plinth or, in the case of brasses and low relief memorials, placed within the same frame. A small group of these memorials, almost all of which were made between 1370 and 1440, portray the effigies holding one another by the hand. Hand joining monuments were a peculiarly English phenomenon. Aside from one example in Styria, modern-day Austria, one in Silesia, modern-day Poland, and three in Portugal, all the monuments which display this gesture are found in England.

Within this geographic and chronological cluster, there's much variety and material and technique. Joined hands were cut into monumental brasses, incised into stone slabs, carved onto alabaster and freestone effigies, and even cast in copper alloy for the monument to Richard II, King of England and Anne of Bohemia in Westminster Abbey. The gesture was never the preserve of a single workshop but instead associated with a range of craftsmen encompassing architect masons of national prestige such as Henry Yevele, as well as anonymous local sculptors.

This reflects the wide range of individuals who chose to be commemorated by hand joining monuments, from royalty down to the emerging middle-classes, merchants, lawyers, doctors, and administrators. The Arundel Tomb doubtless belonged to this group. The joined hands may be 19th-century restorations, but the position of the amputated arms as shown in the earlier drawing confirms that this gesture was original to the monument's design.

Although the identities of the effigies have been the subject of debate, the most likely candidates are Richard Fitzalan, Earl of Arundel, and his second wife, Eleanor of Lancaster. One of the wealthiest couples in England, Richard and Eleanor belong to a small group of courtiers around King Edward III for whom the hand joining gesture seems to have particular appeal.

For instance, Eleanor's eldest sister, Blanche of Lancaster, was commemorated holding hands with John of Gaunt on a magnificent alabaster tomb in St. Paul's Cathedral. Richard and Eleanor also followed a broader pattern for monuments celebrating marriages that have been contested or controversial thus producing an image of legitimacy in the face of opposition.

At the time of his wedding to Eleanor, on the 5th of February, 1345, Richard was already married to Isabel le Despenser whom had bore him a son, then aged 17, and two daughters. This meant that Richard had to enlist the support of the King and the Pope in order to uphold the legitimacy of his second marriage. Remarkably, Richard's rather implausible argument that the couple had been forced by blows to cohabit was accepted. In March 1345, his second marriage was declared valid and the children of his first marriage cast as bastards and disinherited.

Indeed, it's striking how often the gesture of joined hands was employed on tombs commemorating man or woman whose position depended, to an unusual extent, on lands, money, and privileges they had acquired through marriage, acquisitions that were in some cases actively contested by other claimants. In this sense, the gesture was closer to a modern handshake than the clasped hands of two lovers, a means of displaying and validating a legal contract between two parties.

Here we arrive at the issue of gesture itself, and its relationship to emotion. On the one hand, we might understand hand joining tombs in terms of a broader tendency towards expressivity in late medieval sculpture. Whereas the figures on Romanesque portals stare back at the viewer impressively, their Gothic counterparts, being with radiant smiles, wipe away bitter tears or grimace and gurney with uncontrolled rage.

The nature and significance of this shift has been much debated in recent years. In particular, the extent to which the heightened representation of emotion was designed to provoke an equivalent emotional response. We may recognise that a sculpture is more expressive, but what exactly it expresses, and how far this deferred according to the viewer and occasion, is much more difficult to discern. In his recent book, *Gothic Sculpture*, Paul Binski highlights the distorting effect of familiarity. We are drawn to what we value most and understand best, and so, from our modern standpoint, place great importance on the so-called emotional realism of Gothic art while underplaying its artificiality.

Often overlooked in this debate is the crucial distinction in medieval gestural theory between so-called natural and given signs as proposed by St. Augustine at the beginning of book two of the *De doctrina Christiana*. Augustine argued that there was a categorical distinction between gestures that are involuntary expressions of emotion, such as the countenance of an angry or sorrowful man, and those deliberate bodily signs communicating perception or thought to others, which he termed visible words or in Latin, *verba visibilia*.

Gestures such as the smile belong to the category of natural signs. They express, or at least purport to express, an emotional state. Hand joining, in contrast, was a given sign. It's a deliberate act intended to communicate the will and emotions of the performer to others. This meant that it could hold sacramental and legal status. Just

as some gestures were seen as embodiments of the will, so emotion itself was believed to involve the intellect.

For medieval thinkers, emotion was defined as psychosomatic movement towards or away from an object, modulated by that object's tempo or quality. So, desire was movement towards an object yet to be attained whereas joy was movement towards an object attained in the present. Emotions were not set in opposition to the intellect but were understood to involve their will, thought, and belief as well as their bodily effects.

Because emotions were defined as responses to objects, they had no inherent moral quality and were educable. One could learn to desire the good and fear evil, even love could be immoral. Thomas Aquinas, the 13th-century Dominican theologian distinguishes between friendly love, which seeks the good of its object, and covetous love, which seeks the object for one's own good. Aquinas is typical of medieval writers in that he seeks to differentiate between the many different shades of feeling that are subsumed into the English word love. Chief among the Latin terms are amor, love; caritas, charity; amicitia, friendship; and dilectio, also love but closer to fondness.

Marital love was almost always described as dilectio, a word derived from the Latin electio, meaning I choose, and related to the English word election. In direct contradiction to modern assumptions about the nature of romantic love, dilectio was believed to be the quality of love that resided fully in the will and rational nature. This association with choice granted dilectio a specificity that amor did not necessarily possess. The object of amor could be general while the object of dilectio must be selected.

Indeed, writers in the Middle Ages argue that certain types and intensities of love were appropriate to marriage while others were not. It was possible to love your spouse excessively with an all-consuming passion that should be reserved for God alone. Here we've returned to the temptation to impose modern experiences of love and marriage on to the past to make the feeling between medieval spouses a reflection of or counterpoint for our own emotions.

When funerary monuments speak of the love between husband and wife, the emotion they refer to is distinct from medieval ideas of the love of God or the love of one's friend, and remote from the notion of romantic love assumed in modern culture.

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In April 2013, a story was picked up by blogs, broadsheets, and tabloids in Europe and the United States. A pair of skeletons have been discovered holding hands. Far

from a lone occurrence in the media landscape, a glance at Google reveals a cluster of news stories detailing the excavation of skeletons engaged in various forms of embrace, all seemingly inevitably compared to Shakespeare's tragic lovers, Romeo and Juliet. The fascination exerted by the skeleton sweethearts speaks to the same experience described by Philip Larkin in *An Arundel Tomb*. Just as the joined hands of the two effigies seemed to prove "Our almost instinct almost true, what was survival versus love," so the joined hands of the two skeletons are eagerly taken up as evidence of the possibility of enduring companionship in the grave and beyond.

When approaching hand joining tombs, our Larkin-esque almost instincts have tended to lead away from historical explanations involving broader artistic, political, economic, or religious trajectories and towards particular individual and emotional concerns. Part of the desire to read these memorials as a sign of love's ability to outlast death is to want them to be in some sense ahistorical, representations of emotion that transcend the moment of their making, allowing them to be immediately recognisable to modern-day viewers in a way that heraldry or Latin inscriptions are not.

My agenda is to reassert the strangeness of double tombs, the ways in which they speak to styles of thought and categories of experience that are radically different from our own.

None of this precludes the possibility, even probability, that in some cases the motivation for commissioning a hand joining team was an effective relationship of unusual force.

Phillip Larkin: Now, helpless in the hollow of an unarmorial age, a trough of smoke in slow suspended skeins above their scrap of history, only their attitude remains.

[music]

Anna Reid: Jessica, thank you for your talk which was so evocative of the rich strangeness and of emotion that is implicit in the *Arundel Tomb*. I'd like to ask you about the form of your work and also a bit about its context. You described how for medieval thinkers, emotions were not set in opposition to the intellect. Is this characteristic of your research?

Jessica Barker: I think this is very much the problem that my research is trying to pose. The fact that as writers of history, we tend towards the things that can be expressed in language and the things that tend to be documented about the past. There's this sort of tension in these romantic monuments between our instinctual response to them, which is to read them as these images of love and affection and then our historical response to them, which is to look at the documentary evidence,

to look at the economics of marriage in this period and the theology of marriage in this period.

I think, in a way, both misrepresent what these monuments are or what they might have to tell us about the past. Really, what I was interested in exploring in this piece of research is, how possible is it to hold both those things intention continually as an art historian and acknowledge the impossible gap that we're constantly dealing with without in any way diminishing it or trying to gloss over it?

Anna Reid: It strikes me so much that your art historical practice does something quite outstanding in that you declare that you're motivated by an instinct and as well as having this incredibly forensic mode that you work with. Would you be able to comment on that in relation to our historical practices?

Jessica Barker: Do you mean in terms of other art historians and their work?

Anna Reid: Yes.

Jessica Barker: Well, I'm interested in actually thinking across the long history of dealing with works of this kind, explicitly affective or emotional objects, which in a certain way, I think, because of the difficulties of dealing with them, often aren't as prominent in the art historical discourse as they could be. And I was really interested to read in a recent issue of *British Art Studies* about Harriet Hosmer's *Clasped Hands*. These are a 19th-century life cast of the clasped hands of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her husband, the poet, Robert Browning. The author Catherine Fine talks about how this live cast has been overlooked in Harriet Hosmer's art and the often museums don't show it, it's in storage.

Partly, it's because it seems to be this overtly effective symbol. In so far as it's written about, it's dismissed as a purely sentimental piece of work. She really interestingly kind of weaves this sculpture into the context of its time. Thinking about lifecasting, in the context of the development of photography but also, like I try to do in my own work, drawing attention to the artificiality of something that seems to be direct. So, she points out that these two cast hands have carefully curved cuffs at the end of them. These are also manipulated objects. They're not this direct witness to love that, in some sense, they seem to purport to be.

Anna Reid: Yes, I had this sense that you too are talking about quite apart from any short-circuiting of the sculptor's process by the need to document the hands. There is this myriad of processes and possibilities that play and materials and chemical processes, written processes, economic processes too. It's also interesting to hear you refer to that work. I think it's really interesting that you're so alert to and informed by works that are outside of the medieval, such as Larkin's poem and the

casting of the hands. This seems to speak of something of a timeless aspect of your research. Could you comment on that?

Jessica Barker: I suppose I see the problem that this piece of research is wrestling with us essentially timeless or in a way one of forced timelessness that every time reinterprets emotion and its expression differently. And perhaps one of the difficulties of writing a history of emotion is, in essence, is purported timelessness, which means that we don't situate it as much as we could do in the particularities of its time.

I was particularly interested with the medieval monuments I was dealing with, with the long history of the way in which these objects have been made and remade, both literally, immaterial processes, cut in half and put back together but also in terms of how they've been read and re-read. 18th and 19th-century writers were very interested in these monuments. Artists copied them, they became influential even in jewellery and fashion, and then in the 20th century, Philip Larkin's famous poem drew attention to them again and they became actually the basis of a short play that was written recently as well.

These are both endlessly fascinating but endlessly malleable objects in a certain way. I think it's the emotional content of them, it's the gestural content of them that makes them so slippery and seductive.

Anna Reid: You described in your talk being drawn by the riddling enigma of this realm of feeling, a shadow cast by the monuments whose contours we might sketch but never delineate. Is your's a devotional form of writing, Jessica?

Jessica Barker: It's interesting that you choose the word devotional. Of course, we more often think of devotional as a word used to describe religious experience but it comes from the Latin meaning, a solemn vow, in much the same way as the wedding vows might be thought of. I think that's a very appropriate word. I would say in terms of the way in which I try to write about these monuments, I think that as art historians, part of the craft, perhaps, that's distinctive to our historical writing is to think about how we might translate objects that exist fundamentally out of language into a language that in some way reflects or echoes their qualities.

I tried to mould the form and the texture of my writing to the form and texture of the sculptures that I'm writing about.

Anna Reid: Thank you to Dr. Jessica Barker for today's episode of *British Art Talks*. Jessica's book, *Stone Fidelity; Marriage and Emotion in Medieval Tombs Sculpture* is published by Boydell and Brewer. You can find a set of images relating to this episode and further information at the Paul Mellon Centre website and that's also

where you can listen to our first episode when Mary Beard and Cora Gilroy-Ware discuss William Etty's painting, *The Sirens and Ulysses*.

Join us, for our next episode, *The English Carthusians and the Art of Abstinence*, with Julian Luxford. Thank you for listening.

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An Arundel Tomb is used with permission of the estate of Philip Larkin. The recording of Philip Larkin's reading was used by kind permission of Smithsonian Folkways.

Catherine Fine's article, *The Sense of Nearness*, Harriet Hosmer's *Clasped Hands* and the materials and bodies of 19th-century life casting can be found online in issue 14 of *British Art Studies*.

What Will Survive of Us Is Love, is produced by Friar Heller. The system producer is Alexandria Quinn and it is a Loftus Media production.

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