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RECOVERING "COVERING END": WHAT QUEER THEORY CAN DO FOR *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

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THE TURN OF THE SCREW was published in five authorized forms during Henry James's life: as a serial in *Collier's Weekly* early in 1898, as one of two tales in a "duplex" edition published simultaneously in America and England in October 1898; as the second of four works in a volume of the New York Edition in 1908, and as the first volume of *The Uniform Tales of Henry James*, edited by Martin Secker in 1915. The first version, in addition to the frame narrative and twenty-four chapters, was divided into twelve installments and five "Parts." The version published in the duplex edition under the title *The Two Magics* was altered to suppress these "Parts," delete the ending of one chapter, raise Flora's age, and place "more focus . . . on the governess," among other minor alterations (James, *The Turn of the Screw* 87). The New York Edition underwent even more substantial alterations.[1]

While critics have painstakingly studied these revisions – as well as James's notebooks and letters, historical sources, and cultural background, even William James's and Alice James's writings – for clues to James's intentions in this enigmatic novella, the story that accompanied "The Turn of the Screw" in the double edition published as *The Two Magics* has received scant attention. The reason for this lack of interest appears obvious – the "sister" story, a romantic comedy of manners, could hardly seem more different from the notorious tale of horror. Where "The Turn of the Screw" is psychological, elusive, and morbid, "Covering End" consists mainly of witty dialogue and satirical puns.[2] In fact, it is a prose version of a one-act play James wrote for his friend Ellen Terry, who was to play the lead. When nothing came of this, James "salvaged" the play by writing it up as a short story and publishing it with "The Turn of the Screw," which he feared was too short to stand on its own. "Covering End" was never published again in James's lifetime.[3] James refers to the piece to accompany "The Turn of the Screw" in *The Two Magics* as being "of a rather distinctly different type" in a letter to an American publisher (though this letter predates the publication of *The Two Magics* by nearly a year and does not refer to "Covering End" explicitly, which may mean that James had not yet selected the story to accompany "The Turn of the Screw").[4] In short, "Covering End" appears to be *so much* a distinctly different type of work that no critic has, to my knowledge, considered it as offering any insight or as standing in any meaningful relation to *The Turn of the Screw* whatsoever. I would like to challenge this assumption.

Recent work in James scholarship, especially under the aegis of "queer theory," offers new possibilities for reconsidering this forgotten twin. One reason that "Covering End" may have appeared to permit no intercourse with "The Turn of the Screw" is because of confusion about its genre classification. It was rarely reprinted even after James's death because critics viewed it as "basically a play in disguise."[5] This is the reason Percy Lubbock did not include it in the major posthumous collection *The Novels and Stories of Henry James* (1922). The tale had to wait until 1964 to be republished in Leon Edel's *The Complete Tales of Henry James* vol. 10 (1898–1899), where Leon Edel's introduction creates yet another misconception about how to classify, or group, the story. Edel links it to a theme he claims James had written out in many forms: "in the political part of *The Tragic Muse*, in *Guy Domville* and recently in 'Owen Wingrave'" (12). This theme, according to Edel, is "that of the young man dedicated to a cause who finds himself much against his will, and under pressure of family and tradition, driven to follow another" (12). Edel's first mistake is in assuming the story to be "about" a character, and the second is in taking the charming but gormless Clement Yule to be that protagonist. If any character should be considered the main protagonist, it would be Mrs. Gracedew, the rich American woman at the center of the story's intrigues and transactions. As already mentioned, the story had been written in play form expressly for the actress Ellen Terry to play this part, clearly indicating that James saw the play as a vehicle for this specific role.

But "Covering End" is not "about" any one character at all. In a sense, it is about the Gothic mansion, Covering End, from which it takes its title. It is tempting to link it in this superficial way to *The Turn of the Screw*: as mirror opposites – tragic and comic variations – of the theme of the haunted house. Both are centuries-old family mansions with rich histories and imposing presences. While Bly looks a bit like a castle, with turrets and battlements added during a nineteenth-century Gothic revival, Covering End is the "real thing," dating from the fifteenth or sixteenth century, with a feudal hall, a Gothic roof, and a Jacobean fireplace.

Yet "Covering End" is not actually about the house itself so much as it is about the characters' desire for the house, and in this triangulated form, their desire for one another. For example, Mrs. Gracedew exclaims at one point, "To look, in this place, is to love!" (285). While she means that looking at *the house* amounts to loving *it*, one of her listeners understands her to mean looking at another *person* and demurs, "It depends on who you look at!" (285). This kind of playful double entendre is paradigmatic of the story's rhetorical style. The triangulation operates on a more concrete level as well: it is Mrs. Gracedew's love for the house that kindles Yule Clement's love for it, and incidentally, for *her*, which in turn makes her love *him* and buy *both* (as I shall explain presently). According to Shoshana Felman's influential reading in "Turning the Screw of Interpretation" (1977), *The Turn of the Screw* is itself paradigmatic of triangulated love relationships, on both the level of the narration and the frame narrative (130). Felman observes how the governess's manuscript becomes an object of "transference" between a series of couples: the governess and Douglas, Douglas and the first-person narrator. The story thus becomes a form of mediation, but also of seduction, between the series of partners. The transmission of the story constitutes the relationship between the two as both discreetly erotic and primarily discursive. This dynamic itself mirrors the mysterious "crime" which structures the children's ambivalent relationship to innocence and sexual knowledge, namely, Miles's saying "things" to boys he liked, who in turn repeated them to boys *they* liked, etc. The point Felman underscores is that love is always triangulated and mediated in *The Turn of the Screw*.

This triangulation, like the preoccupation with naming, knowledge, and sexual secrets, links both stories to the larger cluster of texts James wrote in this period that share a preoccupation with what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the "epistemology of the closet," and more specifically, "queer performativity" (*Epistemology of the Closet* 6). This latter term, defined as "a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma," allows "queer" writing to allude not only to homosexuality, but to any sexual transaction defined as transgressive and subject to shame (Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity" 11). The important point is that queerness in this sense refers to a preoccupation with the investigation and elusiveness of sexually-inflected knowledge. In both *The Turn of the Screw* and "Covering End," the "queerness" of the stories can be located in either a homosexual or a heterosexual register. As mentioned earlier, at the heart of *The Turn of the Screw* lies the "unmentionable" thing that Miles did at his boarding school, the implicitly homosexual transmission of words that remain unspecified in the text. On the other hand, the crimes of Miss Jessel and Quint, also unmentionable and unspecified, are heterosexual insofar as they were with each other, but the possibility of homosexual pedophilia between the servants and the children is not entirely excluded by the text. In "Covering End," the shameful heterosexual transgression is a form of prostitution, while the homosexual register is activated by Clement Yule's confirmed "bachelorhood" and radical politics. Both stories are constructed around shameful secrets and unmentionable activities.

They also share a striking playfulness and rhetorical mastery of the naughty double entendre. In both, entire conversations circle around an unspecified referent which turns out to be different for each interlocutor, creating ironic and humorous effects. In "The Turn of the Screw," the governess and Mrs. Gross sometimes misunderstand each other in elaborately sustained dialogues where each leaves sentences half-finished and powerfully suggestive, though the unspecified referent in this story is often something sinister or frightening. In "Covering End," James employs the same technique, but for comic effect. Like Oscar Wilde in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, James deploys ambiguous references and double meanings in "Covering End" in order to create witty innuendoes for an initiated audience.

This plot can be summarized as follows: Clement Yule has just inherited his family's traditional seat, the historical Gothic mansion, Covering End. Yule, whose indifference to this house has caused him to never lay eyes on it, has been summoned to meet Mr. Prodmore on its premises as the play begins. Mr. Prodmore happens to hold the mortgage for the entire value of the house, which he is willing to relinquish on two conditions: that Yule renounce his radical politics and represent the neighboring county as a Tory, and that he marry Prodmore's daughter, Cora. Prodmore wants Cora to bear the venerable family name of Yule, and he assumes that Clement Yule wants Covering End enough to agree. Thus, at the heart of the heterosexual humor of the play lies the crassly patriarchal practice of trafficking in women as a form of business between men. Prodmore is selling his daughter for the value of the house. The comic transgressiveness in this transaction is heightened by the father's insistence on speaking of his daughter in pecuniary terms, for example, his investment in her "good manner" and his desire to "get his money back" for her education (256). Thus, as mentioned before, the "queerness" of this text can be read in a heterosexual register, since this "condition" of Yule's possession of the house becomes a source of circumlocution, euphemism, and shameful indirection for the rest of the story. Prodmore's plan is complicated by Cora's unwillingness to marry Yule due to a previous attachment to a Mr. Hall Pegg, whose great wealth and devotion apparently are not enough to outweigh the stigma of his comically

banal name in the eyes of Mr. Prodmore. Being too timid to openly defy her father and inform him of her secret lover, Cora asks Mrs. Gracedew to negotiate with Prodmore in her stead. Mrs. Gracedew is an American tourist who has come to visit Covering End because she is building a mansion like it at home. Queer jokes and puns around the theme of "authenticity" and its simulacra permeate Mrs. Gracedew's dialogues as she enthuses over the family servant – whom she calls "the old Family Servant," capitalizing him into a camp version of himself – and describes the house as so "fatally right" and so "deadly complete" that it "springs" at her like a "royal salute, a hundred guns" (273, 272).

However, the real wit and power of the play lie in the puns and ambiguities surrounding Clement Yule's unexpected objections to the arrangement, objections that arise from a combination of radical political views and confirmed bachelorhood, which an initiated Victorian audience would read to mean that he is gay.[6] The fact that Yule's politics can also be read as "queer" is implied through the fact that Prodmore requires him to abandon his radical views in order to marry his daughter – a turn-around that Yule calls a "conversion" but that the father suggests might be simply a change of "position" (265). This troping of Yule's politics as a code for homosexuality proliferates throughout this dialogue. For example, the father warns Yule about the "dangerous company" he keeps in public, and suggests that his radicalism is simply "one of the early complaints we all pass through" (261). When Mr. Prodmore suggests that there is a simple "remedy" (i.e., marriage), Yule wonders aloud if the "remedy [is not] worse than the disease" (261). Mr. Prodmore replies sharply that there is "nothing worse" than Yule's "particular fix," and continues to explain that his "remedy" is "a heap of gold in the lap of a fine fresh lass" (265). Yule catches at the phrase "heap of gold," and an initiated Victorian reader would doubtless recognize the allusion to mining, which John Carlos Rowe has identified as one of the principal gay tropes of the period among certain writers (110). In short, one way to read this suggestive repartee is that while Yule appears to feel that his homosexuality is a permanent condition, or at least what he later calls a "fundamental view," the father seems to be saying that it is simply a common phase of youthful experimentation (265). The punning continues about his "views," which become more ambiguously figured in terms of "position" once again when Yule wants Mrs. Gracedew to see how he has "stood" during his period of radicalism. While Mr. Prodmore insists that his radicalism has been nothing more than a position he can change, Yule suggestively describes it as "doing justice to natural desires" (266).

Mrs. Gracedew's understanding of Yule's predicament appears to fall somewhere between Yule's and Mr. Prodmore's. While she initially does not see why Yule cannot change "attitudes," not being a "statue," he believes that she, in her "beautiful sympathy, [has] *guessed* [his] fix" (340). And indeed, Mrs. Gracedew may be read as a potentially initiated reader, since her own role in the story is surprisingly androgynous. It is she who negotiates with Mr. Prodmore and literally buys the house, thereby implicitly buying Clement Yule. If femininity in the story is defined in terms of Cora's supposed ignorance, being as "unconscious as a rose on the stem" of the machinations about her marriage as her father claims she is, then Mrs. Gracedew is deeply *in the know* not only about the details of the house, but also about the details of the transactions being conducted among all the other actors, including Cora, Mr. Hall Pegg, Mr. Prodmore, and Clement Yule, whom she finally acquires along with the house. Her androgynous quality is further underscored by her description of herself as having already been all over the house, which can be read as a kind of pun for sexual knowledge: "I've been upstairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber – I won't

answer for it even perhaps that I've not been in my lord's!" (277). It is the combination of her unconventionality and single-minded desire for the house that makes Yule Clement begin to think of her "as he has thought of no other woman!" (347). The discussion leading up to his unexpected proposal of marriage has included Mrs. Gracedew's avowal that she would "surrender" all "her rights" to the house (and presumably to Clement Yule himself). In short, the marriage that is promised at the end of the story appears to be an arrangement by which Mrs. Gracedew gets to keep Yule Clement, who in turn gets to keep Covering End. There is a kind of tacit possibility that the marriage will be purely formal, a "covering" of Yule's ends, and that Mrs. Gracedew will not require Mr. Clement to change his "position."

Although the homosexual punning of this story would be obvious to a reader who is prepared to see it, there is enough heterosexual punning to keep the story straight for a straight audience. As Hugh Stevens demonstrates in "Queer Henry *In The Cage*," the political climate of the 1890s required James to keep his punning ambiguous enough never to be tainted with any real accusation of homosexuality (Stevens 131–32). This is why, although his stories of this period consistently work through the queer issues of strange triangles ("Altar of the Dead," "The Way it Came," "John Delavoy," etc.), secret knowledge and/or potentially scandalous exposure ("In the Cage," "The Figure in the Carpet," "The Beast in the Jungle," etc.), James manages never to name the unnamable, never to specify weakly or strongly, and never to get caught or un-"covered." Is it too much to suggest that the subject of both stories in *The Two Magics* is precisely his need, his desire, and his ability not to be "caught" and forced into the "monstrous uttering of names" (*The Turn of the Screw* 51)? Or, to make a somewhat vulgar pun, could not James be showing us how masterful he is at covering his own end in public?[7]

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NOTES

1. According to the editors of the Norton Critical Edition of the novel, the overwhelming tendency of the changes is to make the narrative more intimately the governess's by adding the pronoun "my" throughout and shifting the focus from the action to her reactions. James also carefully reworked a sentence that reveals that the governess's zeal is caused by some unnamed personal problems. The final version ("through nothing could I so like it [my work] as through feeling that to throw myself into it was to throw myself out of my trouble") is long but clearer than the original version ("nothing so made me like it as precisely to feel that I could throw myself into it in trouble")(James, *The Turn of the Screw* 91).
2. I put "Covering End" in quotation marks because it has never been published independently, and I put "Turn of the Screw" in quotation marks when I refer to the original version in *The Two Magics*. Otherwise, I underline *The Turn of the Screw* in recognition that this work has been published independently under its own title.
3. According to Adrian Dover's Henry James website, "The Ladder," James was later persuaded to turn the story back into a three-act play, *The High Bid* (produced in 1907). This text, along with the original one-act play, *Summersoft*, is available on Dover's website: http://www.henryjames.org.uk/cover/home.htm.
4. Letter to George P. Brett, 22 December 1897 (Leon Edel, *Henry James' Letters* 66).
5. Adrian Dover, "Critical Bibliography of *Covering End*," http://web.bham.ac.uk/doveral/james/cover/bibliog.htm. This page was consulted in 2003 and no longer exists.

6. Cf. Sedgwick's discussion of the Victorian invention of "the bachelor" as a gay stereotype in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (188–95). I use the terms "gay" and "homosexual" in the text, but obviously it is both anachronistic and reductive to apply them to characters from the 1890s as if these concepts were available to Victorian audiences the way they are now. The term "gay" was beginning to take on sexual meanings, but certainly did not exist as a noun yet. The term homosexual was used synonymously with "invert" and other pathologizing medical terms, and "queer" was, like "gay," only beginning to assume sexual and gender connotations in certain circles. There is no fully satisfying terminology for discussing non-heterosexual practices and proclivities in the late nineteenth-century, which is why I have opted, for simplicity's sake, to use these imprecise and freighted terms in addition to the word "queer." For a thoroughly developed discussion of the use and meaning of the word during this period, see Haralson's *Henry James and Queer Modernity* (1–10).
7. The potential for naughty puns on "end" were clear to even the earliest readers. Louis Umfreville Wilkinson, a friend of Oscar Wilde, published a parody of James in 1912, entitled "The Better End," purportedly taken from an unpublished novel *What Percy Knew* by a "H ∗ nr ∗ J ∗ m ∗ s" (Haralson 19). According to Haralson, the story makes it quite clear that the "better end" is a queer pun in a scene where an older man bends before a hearth, trousers down, while a younger man "rearward" "advance[s] to [the] target . . . bristl[ing], stiffly enough . . . to satisfy . . . their common intent" (19).

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