Jamesian Parody, *Jane Eyre*, and "The Turn of the Screw"

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Ever since it was first published in 1898, Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" has received a phenomenal amount of critical attention and popular acclaim; and no small portion of this perennial interest is due to the fact that there are basically two ways in which to read the story: (1) that the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel really do appear to the governess (and that, consequently, she is indeed a reliable narrator); or (2) that the ghosts do not exist, and the governess is deluded—perhaps insane.¹ I happen to agree with the second interpretation, with the important qualification that I do not believe the governess is insane. Rather, I would argue that the governess, a basically normal albeit sensitive and impressionistic young lady, has been unduly influenced by her reading of one of the most popular books of the nineteenth century, *Jane Eyre;* more specifically, that the tragic events which occur at Bly are the direct result of her perceptions of herself, her employer, her situation, and of Bly itself having been hopelessly distorted by her pathetic attempt to emulate Charlotte Brontë's famous heroine. In support of this interpretation, I would further argue that James borrowed heavily from Brontë's novel; the similarities in plot, characterization, narrative technique, and even phraseology are so striking that it is impossible to believe that they are purely fortuitous. In fact, I would argue that these similarities are intentional and conscious; that James expected his readers to perceive parallels between Brontë's novel and his tale; and that, in the final analysis, James is utilizing, exploiting, indeed undermining the literary tradition of the plucky English governess: that in "The Turn of the Screw" he is, in fact, writing a parody of *Jane Eyre*.

It is a matter of common knowledge that James was well aware of the work of Charlotte Brontë and her siblings, and in particular of *Jane Eyre*, for he refers to the book several times in his reviews and in his autobiographical writings. In *A Small Boy and Others*, he recalls Anne King, "young and frail, but not less firm, under stress, than the others of her blood," who reminded him of "a little Brontë heroine... though more indeed a Lucy Snowe than a Jane Eyre, and with no shade of a Brontë hero within sight."² In an 1866 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, he praises the "very good poetry" of the Moor House chapters in *Jane Eyre*, and a year later, in a review of Mrs. R. H. Davis's "Waiting for the Verdict," he notes that Mrs. Davis had "evidently read" Brontë's novel, one of the "great authorities" for Mrs. Davis's type of fiction.³ But his references to *Jane Eyre* are not altogether laudatory; indeed, in 1905 he speaks, less wistfully than cut-tingly, of the "lucky box" in which the Brontë sisters found themselves, viz, "a case of popularity... , a beguiled infatuation, a sentimentalized vision, determined largely by the accidents and circumstances originally surrounding the manifestation of the genius—..." In fine, the reading
public’s blurring of the distinction between the Brontë’s own remarkable private lives and the equally remarkable lives of the characters they created was generating “the most complete intellectual muddle, if the term be not too invidious, ever achieved . . . by our wonderful public.”

That the readers of Brontë’s durable novel were somehow blurring the distinction between reality and fiction seems to have struck James’s fancy: and what better way to develop this bizarre notion than to write a parody in which the heroine confuses her own life with that of Brontë’s heroine and becomes, as it were, a flesh-and-blood parody of Jane—with horrible consequences?

That James was familiar with Jane Eyre is, then, a matter of common knowledge; and indeed, several commentators have noted similarities between Brontë’s book and “The Turn of the Screw.” Oscar Cargill and Robert Kimbrough have pointed out that there is a blatant reference to Jane Eyre in the passage “Was there a ‘secret’ at Bly—. . . an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?” (179). Walter de la Mare points out that James’s governess, “with her queer little hands,” her impassioned self-dedication, faintly recalls no less delightful a prototype than Jane Eyre.” Krishna Vaid-notes that James may have been drawing upon “the fictional convention of the English governess,” and Leon Edel, in his preface to his edition of Stories of the Supernatural (formerly the Ghostly Tales) remarks that “The Turn of the Screw” in the Brontë tradition; much of its atmosphere and even language represents James’s attempt to enshrine that tradition in his story. It is to the Brontës, rather than to the modern psychological movement in its nascent state in Vienna, that this story must be referred . . .” But none of these critics—not even Edna Kenton, who reminds us that the story was designed to “catch” us—has perceived that James was not simply drawing upon the literary tradition of the English governess popularized by Brontë, but rather was brilliantly parodying it; and not merely, I must emphasize, for the sake of comedy.

I believe that the process of parodying Jane Eyre begins with the general story line of the two works: a young woman goes to a remote country estate to serve as governess. In each case, her immediate confidante and associate at the estate is a widow who functions as the housekeeper: Mrs. Fairfax and Mrs. Grose. The children involved do have notable similarities: both Adèle Varens and Flora are eight-year-old girls, and although there is no boy corresponding to Miles in Jane Eyre, all the children share an unfortunate double situation: they have no parents, and their guardians have little interest in them. Céline Varens had abandoned the illegitimate Adèle; as Rochester makes clear, although “she was left on my hands,” she is not his daughter (“Pilot [his dog] is more like me than she” [chaps. 17, 15]), and his relationship with her is chilled at best (“I am not fond of the prattle of children” [chap. 14]). Likewise, the bachelor at Harley Street acquired Flora and Miles upon the death of their parents in India, and although “he immensely pitied the poor chicks,” James makes it clear that they weighed “very heavy on his hands. It had all been a great worry and, on his own part doubtless, a series of blunders . . .” (153-54). Each guardian is a man in early middle age who is understandably
resentful about being forced into the role of surrogate father, in part apparently because each is something of a ladies' man: Rochester has left a string of sexual conquests on the Continent (chap. 27), and the Harley Street bachelor has, according to Mrs. Grose, "carried away" numerous damsels (162). In fine, the two men are both essentially sociable urbanites, so they keep their wards at their country estates which, presumably, are sound environments for growing children: Bly is said to be "healthy and secure" (154), and Adèle lives at Thornfield, which Rochester declares is healthier than his other home, Ferndean Manor (chap. 27). Finally, both men are posited as eligible: everyone at Thornfield—even Rochester himself—calls him a bachelor (e.g., chap. 14), even though he is very much married to Bertha Mason Rochester; and the employer at Harley Street is repeatedly referred to as a bachelor (e.g., 153). Likewise, each man is repeatedly spoken of as "the master."

What we have, in essence, is this: two broad story lines and a series of characters which are so similar that it is doubtful that they could be attributed to anything other than conscious artifice on James's part. But what of the specific story line of the corrupting governess and the immoral love affair between servants, and what of the governesses themselves? Various scholars have attempted to pin down the origins of these elements: James himself attributed his story to an anecdote told to him by Edward White Benson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, although Benson's sons were dubious of the veracity of the account. 11 Robert Lee Wolff has suggested that James may have seen the painting "The Haunted House," by Tom Griffiths, in the 1891 Christmas issue of the London review Black and White. 12 Oscar Cargill has suggested that James may have been drawing upon the case study of "Miss Lucy R." in Freud's Studien über Hysterie (a matter to be considered at some length below), and Francis X. Roellinger, Jr., offers several other case studies which may have inspired James. 13 But to the best of my knowledge, no one has recognized another possible source for the specific story line of "The Turn of the Screw": the account given by Rochester's supposed fiancée, Blanche Ingram, of the love affair between her brother Tedo's tutor (Mr. Vining) and her own governess (Miss Wilson): "we surprised sundry tender glances and sighs which we interpreted as tokens of "la belle passion"... Dear Mama, there, as soon as she got an inkling of the business, found out that it was of an immoral tendency." As Blanche points out, with such a liaison there is the "danger of bad example to innocence of childhood." So much is made of this extended account in Jane Eyre that eventually an unidentified character declares "... no more need be said: change the subject" (chap. 17). Granted, both Vining and Wilson are very much alive, but the fact remains that they are teachers whose questionable relationship (indeed, a relationship which may have been "immoral" only in the minds of the children and Mrs. Ingram) may be corrupting the innocence of their students—and Peter Quint, as Mrs. Grose emphasizes, behaved as if he were Miles' "tutor—and a very grand one" (213).

Even if one cares not to entertain the possibility that Blanche's anecdote might have inspired James (either by itself, or interacting with Archbishop Benson's story, Griffiths' painting, or whatever), I think one
still must acknowledge that the similarities between his and Brontë's
governess are really quite remarkable: in background, personality, and
behavior they are strikingly alike—so much so that I believe James
expected his readers to perceive his governess as modeling herself upon
Brontë's heroine, and with lamentable consequences.

What little background information we have of James's governess
squares nicely with what we know of Jane Eyre. Jane is 18 when she leaves
Lowood School for Thornfield (chap. 10), and James's governess is 20
when she arrives at Bly (152-53). The father of Brontë's heroine was "a
poor clergyman" (chap. 3), and James's governess is the daughter of "a
poor country parson" (152). Jane Eyre is from "—shire" (chap. 10); 
James's governess is from Hampshire (153). Finally, each woman comes
from an unhappy family situation: Jane's unfortunate childhood at Gates-
head with the Reeds and at Lowood constitutes the first ten chapters of
Brontë's novel, and although James reveals little of life at the Hampshire
vicarage, he does note that the governess had been receiving "disturbing
letters from home, where things were not going well" (183).

However much one might argue that these common background
elements are rather superficial or inconclusive, one must at least acknowl-
edge the possibility that James was drawing upon Jane Eyre in writing
"The Turn of the Screw"—or, more to the point, that he wishes us to
realize that his governess perceived her situation as similar to that of Jane
Eyre, and began to ape her: even to the point of locating—or creating—a
horrible mystery at Bly with which she could heroically deal.

That James's governess perceived herself as a Jane Eyre figure is
supported by the blunt fact (mentioned above) that her immediate reac-
tion to Quint's appearance on the tower is to draw upon her reading
experience: "Was there a 'secret' at Bly—a mystery of Udolpho or an
insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement? I
can't say how long I turned it over . . ." (179). Through her reading of Anne
Radcliffe and Charlotte Brontë, James's governess is familiar with
heroines caught in harrowing circumstances, and she (not James) auto-
matically applies this vicarious experience to her own situation at Bly. In
effect, I believe James's heroine is a flesh-and-blood governess attempt-
ing to act out the part of a fictional one, Jane Eyre; and she succeeds (up to
an optimal point) so well that it is impossible for the reader to determine
how much of her character (including her personality and behavior) is
"real" and how much of it is simply an uncanny imitation of Brontë's
governess. At some point, in other words, James's governess crosses the
line between consciously emulating a positive role model whose back-
ground superficially resembles hers, and subconsciously imitating her in
circumstances far more mundane than those found at Thornfield. And at
the moment she crosses that line she becomes, as it were, mentally
unstable: she hallucinates ghosts.

Now, as noted above, there are simple facts of background which
Jane Eyre and James's heroine have in common. But their personal
characters are also strikingly alike. Each woman is a voracious reader. As a
child, Jane Eyre reads Bewick's History of British Birds, "some Arabian
tales," and Gulliver's Travels, which she perceives as "a narrative of facts,"

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and in her adulthood continues to indulge her passion for literature with Sir Walter Scott's *Marmion* (chaps. 1, 4, 3, 33). As I have pointed out earlier, James's governess has read Radcliffe and Brontë, and what she finds particularly attractive about Bly is the availability of books: books which were denied her in her youth, and which she reads when fatigued, overwrought, and, presumably, particularly receptive to the ideas encountered in her reading. The following passage tells of the circumstances immediately preceding her third encounter with Peter Quint, on the staircase at Bly:

I had not gone to bed; I sat reading by a couple of candles. There was a roomful of old books at Bly—last-century fiction some of it, which, to the extent of a distinctly depreciated renown, but never to so much as that of a stray specimen, had reached the sequestered home and appealed to the unavowed curiosity of my youth. I remember that the book I had in my hand was Fielding's "Amelia"; also that I was wholly awake. I recall further both a general conviction that it was horribly late and a particular objection to looking at my watch. (221)

As Oscar Cargill has pointed out, Fielding's novel is especially appropriate for James's tale inasmuch as it focuses upon a pursued woman who cares for a little girl and boy, but I would like to take this one step further and say that both governesses tend to prefer rather sensationalistic reading matter. Indeed, Jane Eyre's initial interest in Johnson's "Rasselas" (a title "that struck me as strange, and consequently attractive") is cooled significantly when she finds that it contains "nothing about fairies, nothing about genii" (chap. 5). What this suggests is that Jane, as well as James's governess, have an unusual interest in the supernatural, parapsychology, and the dead—an interest which owes much to their reading and which significantly affects their way of perceiving and dealing with the world. Jane, for example, has an apparently genuine interest and belief in ghosts. Locked in the "red room" at Gateshead when a child, she fancies she is visited by the spirit of her uncle Reed (chap. 2), and one of the first things she asks of Mrs. Fairfax is if there are any ghosts—or even "traditions," "legends or . . . stories" of them—at Thornfield (chap. 11); her disappointment that there are none is palpable. Indeed, Jane's personality is such that Rochester consistently associates her with the netherworld, not only of the moon (e.g., chap. 24), but of the dead:

[Jane:] "I have been with my aunt, sir, who is dead."

[Rochester:] "A true Janian reply! . . . She comes from the other world—from the abode of people who are dead; and tells me so when she meets me alone here in the gloaming! If I dared I'd touch you to see if you are substance or shadow, you elf! . . ." (chap. 22)

Jane has, as it were, a preoccupation with spirits—a striking personality trait which could very well have been absorbed by a young, impressionistic governess whose background is similar to that of Brontë's heroine.

Part and parcel with both governesses' sensitivity to other-worldly phenomena is that other people tend to perceive these two women as
unusual—even abnormal. The servant Bessie Lee (one of Jane’s few friends at Gateshead) regards Jane as “queer,” and even her fiancé Rochester terms her “strange,” “almost unearthly” (chaps. 4, 23). Indeed, many characters in Brontë’s novel perceive Jane as evil or insane. The dying Mrs. Reed asserts that once Jane spoke to her “like something mad, or like a fiend” (chap. 21); Rochester terms her a “witch,” “sorceress” (chap. 15); and Jane, attempting to fathom her relationship with the master of Thornfield, notes that “… the evil—if evil existent or prospective there was—seemed to lie with me only; …” (chap. 23). That those around her perceive Jane as queer, demonic, or mentally unstable does not seem to bother her; indeed, she seems only mildly annoyed that her confidante Mrs. Fairfax, who was so “glad” to see her arrive at Thornfield (chap. 11), occasionally avoids her: “The answer was evasive…. but Mrs. Fairfax either could not, or would not, give me more explicit information” about Rochester’s “trials” (chap. 13). A strikingly similar—albeit horribly magnified—situation exists at Bly. Throughout “The Turn of the Screw,” there are various questionings of the governess’s normalcy, both by herself and others. She instinctively infers that Mrs. Grose (who also, significantly, was “glad” to see her arrive at Bly [160]) perceives her as “mad” and remarks “That’s charming news to be sent [to the Harley Street bachelor] by a person enjoying his confidence and whose prime undertaking was to give him no worry” (239); and, intensifying Brontë’s technique of reflecting her heroine in the eyes of those around her, James shows not only the children’s reactions to the governess (“I think you’re cruel. I don’t like you! … oh take me away from her!” [281]), but also those of the anonymous servants: “… I could see in the aspect of others a confused reflexion of the crisis. What had happened naturally caused them all to stare; …” (293). But there is an important distinction between Jane Eyre’s personality and that of James’s governess. Whereas in Jane Eyre the implication that Jane is evil or insane comes from the antagonistic Reed family, and that she is a “witch” stems from Rochester’s affection and admiration for her, in “The Turn of the Screw” the negative reactions of others seem grounded in a genuine belief on the part of non-prejudiced individuals that the governess is unstable. Since Jane perceives her relationship with Rochester as wholesome and equal, she is being rhetorical in her assertion that if there were any “evil” in their relationship, it “seemed to lie with me only.” Similarly, she does not really doubt her sanity when, upholding “laws and principles,” she declares that she is “insane—quite insane” if she doubts their worth (chap. 27). But James’s governess genuinely questions her propensity for evil (“if he were innocent what then on earth was I?” [307]) and does have real doubts about her sanity: Miss Jessel “was there, so I was justified; she was there, so I was neither cruel nor mad” (278). And Mrs. Grose’s avoidance of her, established early in the tale (168), is a recurrent pattern rather than an isolated incident grounded in the housekeeper’s disinclination to reveal information about the master to a new servant. In fine, Jane’s and others’ perceptions of her do seem to be reflected in James’s governess; but Jane is adequately stable, and has a sufficiently accurate self-image, to know when she is not to take seriously the questionings of her sanity and her “evilness.” As a
result, she is able to maintain her emotional health and deal with the world in a constructive way, her supernaturalism notwithstanding. In contrast, James's governess seems to embody in reality the most extreme negative aspects of Jane (viz, the impression she sometimes gives that she is abnormal) without Jane's stability and accurate self-image. In other words, that James's governess might truly be evil, insane, or strange seems grounded in fact, rather than in prejudice or rhetoric. If "The Turn of the Screw" is indeed a parody of Jane Eyre—if, in fact, James's governess is acting the part of Brontë's heroine—then her failure to react normally to the decidedly negative feedback which she receives from Mrs. Grose, the children, and the servants, may be due to her erroneous belief that, like Jane Eyre, she is supposed to have people perceive her as odd: in fact, the odder (read "the more Janian") the better.

What I am trying to suggest is that James's governess is a quite pale copy of Jane Eyre. The paleness is most assuredly not a reflection of James's inadequacy as a writer, but rather his deliberate attempt to convey his governess's horrible mistake in emulating Brontë's fictional heroine. It is impossible to act as a fictional character in the real world; but James's governess—whose only experience of the world has been the vicarious experience of reading—fails to realize this until, I would surmise, many years after the events at Bly, when she writes her story for Douglas. Be this as it may, her emulation of Brontë's heroine is seen in more than just such elements as their background, love of reading, preoccupation with the supernatural, and the ways in which they are perceived. I believe that James's governess's behavior, attitude, and motivations also are strikingly similar to those of Brontë's heroine—so much so that at times it is impossible not to believe that she is acting the part of "Jane Eyre, governess."

The most noticeable similarity in the two women's behavior is that they thrive on adversity. Both women, although initially more or less beset by doubts, take up challenging responsibilities as governesses in remote locales; are faced with feeling romantic inclinations towards employers who are substantially their superiors; and find themselves, unsupported by family or friends, dealing with rather knotty problems, real or imagined—an insane woman in the attic, and two evil ghosts. Lesser women would crumble under the stress of even a fraction of these challenges, but Jane is—and, I would argue, James's governess fancies herself to be—made of the sort of stuff which allows some people to meet such adversity and emerge shining. As Rochester points out to Jane, "not three in three thousand!" governesses could deal with him as she does (chap. 14), and James's governess, whose tone of self-congratulation (which I feel reflects retrospective irony) permeates "The Turn of the Screw," notes that ". . . I could succeed where many another girl might have failed. . . . I confess I rather applaud myself as I look back! . . ." (199). Indeed, both governesses positively welcome challenges, not only as an opportunity to show their strength of character, but also because they derive a sort of excitement from potential danger. When Rochester threatens Jane with "violence" if she does not become his mistress, she notes:
. . . I was not afraid: not in the least. I felt an inward power; a sense of influence, which supported me. The crisis was perilous; but not without its charm: such as the Indian, perhaps, feels when he slips over the rapid in his canoe. (chap. 27)

Compare the initial reaction of James’s governess to the evil ghosts: “. . . I was in these days literally able to find a joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me” (198-99). These two passages are so similar in content, tone, and style that, were they taken out of context, one could not readily determine which passage was written by which governess; indeed, the technical similarities of Jane Eyre and “The Turn of the Screw” are so pronounced that I will deal with them at length somewhat later. For now, let enough be said that the two women welcome adversity and, to an extent, thrive on it.

I say “to an extent” because the two goveresses also share a distinctive habit: when a given situation becomes too intense, they have what are charitably referred to as “fits.” As was indicated above, one of the earliest traumas of Jane Eyre’s life was being locked in the “red room” of Gateshead where she was (apparently) visited by the ghost of her uncle Reed, who had died there. Having screamed for help, she is rescued (temporarily) by servants, but her aunt “abruptly thrust me back and locked me in . . . soon after she was gone, I suppose I had a species of fit: unconsciousness closed the scene.” Chapter 3 begins immediately thereafter: “The next thing I remember is, waking up with a feeling as if I had had a frightful nightmare” (chaps. 2, 3). A very similar fit occurs in the transition from chapters 26 to 27, wherein the troubled Jane resolves to leave Thornfield. Now, James’s governess reacts in the same way to the trauma of Flora’s demand that Mrs. Grose take her away:

Of what first happened when I was left alone I had no subsequent memory. I only knew that at the end of, I suppose, a quarter of an hour, an odorous dampness and roughness, chilling and piercing my trouble, had made me understand that I must have thrown myself, on my face, to the ground and given way to a wildness of grief. I must have lain there long and cried and wailed, for when I raised my head the day was almost gone. (282)

The similarities between the quoted passages—similarities not only in content, but also in phraseology—are simply too pronounced to have been fortuitous. Likewise, the two goveresses, when “fits” are not feasible, decide to run away. Jane, having forgiven Rochester for attempting to enter into a bigamous marriage with her, but newly distressed over his efforts to make her his mistress, flees Thornfield at the insistence of a light which proves to be “not a moon, but a white human form” (chap. 27), travels to Whitcross, and enters into a tenuous relationship with St. John Rivers, a relationship which serves only to confirm her love for Rochester. James’s governess, too, in an opportune moment decides to run away from Bly, but there are certain distinctions between her escape and Jane’s: Jane leaves at the suggestion of a spirit, whereas James’s governess wants to flee out of a self-originating sense of helplessness; Jane’s compulsion to
leave is so powerful that she escapes at night, giving no thought to practical matters, whereas James’s governess is overwhelmed rather easily: “. . . the question of a conveyance was the great one to settle. Tormented, in the hall, with difficulties and obstacles, I remember sinking down at the foot of the staircase . . .” (256). Finally, James’s governess never does escape Bly: encountering Miss Jessel in the schoolroom causes an abrupt change of plans. One might question whether the governess’s decision to stay at Bly is the result of the triumph, once again, of the thrill of adversity, or simply a paradoxical expression of weakness: a matter of immature inertia rather than mature determination.

Whatever the case may be, what is especially noteworthy in this regard is not that both Jane Eyre and James’s governess occasionally have fits or feel the desire to run away, but that these highly dramatic ways of reacting to stress are so atypical of both women. The fact is that the two governesses are posited as being rational and remarkably self-analytical: each tends to probe and to test herself and others to a significant degree, and each recognizes from the outset that the immediate source of her motivation is her bachelor/employer.

Jane, for example, is particularly self-analytical as she ponders whether to stay at Thornfield after learning of Rochester’s wife. She decides she cannot leave, “But, then, a voice within me averred that I could do it; and foretold that I should do it. I wrestled with my own resolution: I wanted to be weak that I might avoid the awful passage of further suffering I saw laid out for me; and conscience, turned tyrant, held passion by the throat . . .” (chap. 27). However one chooses to react to the battle between the personified aspects of Jane’s mind, the fact remains that Jane analyzes herself to a striking degree: indeed, almost as much as James’s governess does:

[The Harley Street bachelor] never wrote to them—that may have been selfish, but it was a part of the flattery of his trust of myself; . . . So I held that I carried out the spirit of the pledge given not to appeal to him when I let our young friends understand that their own letters were but charming literary exercises. . . . There appears to me moreover as I look back no note in all this more extraordinary than the mere fact that, in spite of my tension and their triumph, I never lost patience with them. Adorable they must in truth have been, I now feel, since I did n’t in these days hate them! Would exasperation, however, if relief had longer been postponed, finally have betrayed me? (247)

In addition to their tendency to be highly self-analytical, both women are inclined to probe and test. Jane spends an inordinate amount of time in Jane Eyre observing, cross-examining, and asking others about Grace Poole, the village woman hired to guard the insane Bertha, and whom Jane (in her ignorance) believes to be responsible for setting fire to Rochester’s bed. Jane states explicitly that she will “put [Grace] to some test,” and she marvels at Poole’s ability not only to field her probing questions, but also—as Jane incorrectly perceives matters—to ascertain her lifestyle in order to attack the governess at night: “‘Fiend! she wants to know my habits, that she may lay her plans accordingly!’” (chap. 16).
Although Jane's appraisal of the behavior of Grace Poole is (significantly) incorrect, she nevertheless is accurate in recognizing that there is indeed "a mystery at Thornfield; and that from participation in that mystery, I was purposely excluded" (chap. 17). It is but a short step from Jane's recognition of a horrible "mystery" at Thornfield and her misguided attempt to fathom it, to James's governess's automatic, immediate assumption that the man on the tower is part of a "mystery" at Bly—goings-on which she attempts to unravel by cross-examining and observing the children and Mrs. Grose considerably more vehemently than Jane questioned Grace Poole or Mrs. Fairfax:

Lord, how I pressed her now! "So that you could see he knew what was between the two wretches?"

"I don't know—I don't know!" the poor woman wailed.

"You do know, you dear thing," I replied; . . . "But I shall get it out of you yet! . . ." (214)

Once again, James's governess emerges as a pale copy of Jane Eyre; but her paleness, paradoxically, seems to be the direct result of her exaggerating certain salient features of Jane: and exaggeration is a hallmark of parody. Perhaps the most notable instance of this is seen in the governess's relationships with their respective wards. Jane's relationship with Adèle Varens is not greatly developed in Brontë's story: the governess is a bit critical of Adèle's materialism and her precocious concern for her "toilette" ("there was something ludicrous as well as painful in the little Parisienne's earnest and innate devotion to matters of dress" [chap. 17]), but generally speaking the two seem to get along well: Jane is neither overly-lax nor overly-protective. The only time Jane does reveal more maternal impulses is in her dreams just prior to the aborted wedding. In the first dream, she is "burdened with the charge of a little child: a very small creature, too young and feeble to walk, and which shivered in my cold arms, and wailed piteously in my ear." In the subsequent dream, "the child rolled from my knee, I lost my balance, fell, and woke" (chap. 25). It is in her dreams, then, that Jane emerges as a heroine, protecting a child and suffering in the process. James's governess also is heroic in regard to children, but her inclination towards heroism is quite self-conscious: "I had an absolute certainty that I should see again what I had already seen [i.e., ghosts], but something within me said that by offering myself bravely as the sole subject of such experience, by accepting, by inviting, by surmounting it all, I should serve as an expiatory victim and guard the tranquillity of the rest of the household. The children in especial I should thus fence about and absolutely save" (195). This sense of a compulsion to save the children—whether or not there is anything to save them from—is the predominant note in "The Turn of the Screw," and one may attribute it to James's governess's attitude towards the children's uncle. From the beginning of the story, it is evident that she is in love with her employer, even though, as Douglas points out, she had seen him "only twice" (150, 156); and it is evident throughout the tale that her relationship with him—asesexual and unrequited as it is—is her primary source of motivation.
According to the governess, Mrs. Grose could not appreciate her refusal to enlist the uncle's aid because "She did n't know — no one knew — how proud I had been to serve him and to stick to our terms" (240); but her determination to deal with the ghosts herself was not simply a matter of principle, for she vividly imagined "his derision, his amusement, his contempt for the breakdown of my resignation at being left alone and for the fine machinery I had set in motion to attract his attention to my slighted charms" (239-40). The word "charms" is notable, for Jane Eyre feels secure in her relationship with Rochester because Blanche Ingram "could not charm him" (chap. 18, Brontë's emphasis), and each governess feels a special closeness and obligation to her bachelor/employer because of his warmly holding her hand in gratitude: in the case of Jane Eyre, for her saving Rochester from his burning bed (chap. 15), and in "The Turn of the Screw," for her agreeing to care for Flora and Miles (156).

Each governess has, as it were, a quasi-romantic relationship with her bachelor/employer, but in the case of "The Turn of the Screw," the relationship does not seem to be rooted in reality; in fact, I would argue that it is grounded in the reading experience of James's governess, and in particular in her reading of Jane Eyre. Note, for example, how our knowledge of him is filtered through the governess's consciousness: "He struck her, inevitably, as gallant and splendid . . ." — whether or not he really was gallant and splendid; similarly, "She figured him as rich, but as fearfully extravagant — saw him all in a glow of high fashion, of good looks, of expensive habits, of charming ways with women" (153, emphasis mine). In fact, he was "a bachelor in the prime of life, such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage. One could easily fix his type . . ." (153). In fine, the bachelor at Harley Street is something out of fiction — out of Jane Eyre, perhaps, for he sounds more than a little like Edward Fairfax de Rochester (minus, of course, the gruff Orson Welles exterior). It is notable in this regard that James's governess seems almost disappointed at the cheery aspect of Bly: "I suppose I had expected, or had dreaded, something so dreary that what greeted me was a good surprise" (158). "Expected"? "Dreaded"? " Dreary"? Since there is absolutely nothing in James's all-important frame story to indicate that the Harley Street bachelor gave her any concrete indication of what to expect Bly to be like ("his country home, an old family place in Essex" [153]), then her distinctive reaction suggests that her preconceived notions of Bly may possibly have come from her reading of Jane Eyre. The only thing that Bly and Thornfield have in common (aside from being large and old) is the flocks of cawing rooks (JE, chap. 11; TS, 158); but to a woman whose background superficially is akin to that of Jane Eyre, and whose subjective impressions of her bachelor/employer are notably like something out of a novel, then the Bly/Thornfield connection is virtually cemented by the rather minor shared element of cawing crows. Under the circumstances, it should come as no surprise to find James's governess apparently expecting to hear odd sounds in the house: she listened "while in the fading dusk the first birds began to twitter, for the possible recurrence of a sound or two, less natural and not without but within, that I had fancied I heard. There
had been a moment when I believed I recognised, faint and far, the cry of a child; there had been another when I found myself just consciously starting as at the passage, before my door, of a light footstep” (160). Since these sounds never recur and are never explained, one may surmise that they reflect the governess’s expectation that she would confront and deal with a Bertha Mason-like mystery at Bly; indeed, it is a significant part of this self-fulfilling prophecy that for eleven nights (“they were all numbered now” [227]), she “sat up till I did n’t know when . . . stealing out” when Flora slept; “I even pushed as far as to where I had last met Quint,” and met Miss Jessel sitting on the stairs (226-27). In effect, she seems so determined to locate a mystery at Bly comparable to the mystery of Bertha Mason at Thornfield that it is entirely possible that she did indeed imagine the ghosts: a viable approach to the story which such critics as Edna Kenton and Edmund Wilson have offered,16 and which Jane Eyre herself would certainly appreciate: “It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it” (chap. 12).

That James’s governess perceives her employer as Rochester, Bly as Thornfield, and herself as Jane Eyre is further supported by other notable parallels between the two stories. As Robert Heilman has argued convincingly in his classic essay “The Turn of the Screw” as Poem,”17 James’s story is laced with imagery of pre- and post-lapsarian Eden; and Charlotte Brontë also presents the garden at Thornfield as Edenic:

... I went apart into the orchard. No nook in the grounds more sheltered and more Eden-like; it was full of trees, it bloomed with flowers: a very high wall shut it out from the court, on one side; on the other, a beech avenue screened it from the lawn. . . . Here one could wander unseen. While such honey-dew fell, such silence reigned, such gloaming gathered, I felt as if I could haunt such shade for ever: . . . (chap. 23)

What is especially notable in this regard is that both governesses take a special pleasure in walking in the Edenic gardens of their respective estates. But it is quite clear that James’s governess walks in the garden of Bly musing on the possibility of encountering her bachelor/employer there:

One of the thoughts that, as I don’t in the least shrink now from noting, used to be with me in these wanderings was that it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet some one. Some one would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve. I did n’t ask more than that—I only asked that he should know; and the only way to be sure he knew would be to see it, and the kind light of it, in his handsome face. (175, first emphasis mine)

Since there is nothing in the important frame story to indicate that the Harley Street bachelor could reasonably be expected to visit Bly, let alone seek out the governess in the garden, then the governess’s hope that he might be there is obviously founded upon something else—in fact, perhaps upon the knowledge of a bachelor/employer’s behavior which she

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acquired from reading *Jane Eyre*. After all, Rochester proposes to Jane in an unforgettable scene in the garden at Thornfield; indeed, perhaps sensing the proposal coming, Jane attempted to leave the garden when she realized that Rochester was nearby. To continue the passage cited above:

\[\ldots\] I felt as if I could haunt such shade for ever: but in threading the flower and fruit-parterres \ldots my step is stayed—not by sound, not by sight, but \ldots by a warning fragrance.

Sweet briar and southernwood, jasmine, pink, and rose, have long been yielding their evening sacrifice of incense: this new scent is neither of shrub nor flower; it is—I know it well—it is Mr. Rochester’s cigar. (chap. 23)

Two elements of tremendous importance must be discussed at this juncture. First, Rochester is associated with a cigar. I do not care to belabor the point that a cigar is one of the most blatant symbols of male sexuality ever noted by clinical psychology; however, I do wish to note Oscar Cargill’s suggestion that James may have based “The Turn of the Screw” on the case of the governess “Miss Lucy R.,” one of the patients discussed in Freud’s classic *Studien über Hysterie*. As Cargill explains, Miss Lucy R. suffered from chronic purulent rhinitis; in particular, she was obsessed with the idea that she smelled burned pastry. After she confessed that she had fallen in love with her employer after a single interview, there came about “a strange symbolic substitution in her subjective sense of smell—that of the aroma of a cigar; \ldots”18 What Cargill fails to note is that both James’s and Brontë’s governesses have unusually acute senses of smell: James’s governess, for example, speaks of the “fragrant faces” of Flora and Miles (210). More to the point, one of Jane Eyre’s earliest impressions of Lowood School is the smell of burned porridge, “an odour far from inviting” (chap. 5). What I would suggest is that if indeed James were inspired by the story of Miss Lucy R., then the inspiration may have gone deeper than has previously been recognized—that, in fact, it went to his recollections of the burned porridge and cigar in *Jane Eyre*.

A second point. My previous remarks have indicated that I believe Jane’s governess was blurring the identities of her bachelor/employer and of Brontë’s Rochester. Now, several critics have surmised that she was blurring the identities of Peter Quint and the Harley Street bachelor,19 after all, Quint was his valet and wore his clothes, and most importantly, the governess saw Quint on the tower at the very moment she was brooding about meeting her employer in the garden—indeed, she mistook Quint for him (175). I would like to suggest that James’s governess was confusing Quint not only with her employer, but also with Rochester. It is noteworthy, for example, that both men are seriously injured while slipping on ice. Jane meets Rochester in a memorable scene wherein his horse Mesrour has lost its footing on icy Hay Lane (chap. 12); Peter Quint ostensibly dies after falling on a “steepish icy slope” (198). If indeed James’s governess is sensitive to similarities between herself and Jane Eyre, then the association of “ice” with “lover” would be instantaneous,
even if subconscious. Indeed, this Quint/Rochester association would explain why James's governess remarks rather illogically to Mrs. Grose that Quint looks like an "actor"—"I've never seen one, but so I suppose them" (191). After all, throughout Jane Eyre Rochester's talent as an actor is reiterated: he is the star of the charades at his house party, and fools even Jane in his portrayal of an old gypsy woman (chaps. 18, 19).  

If indeed James's governess is blurring the identities of her employer, Quint, and Rochester; if she reacts to Bly as if it were Thornfield and creates a "mystery" to complete the picture; if, in fine, she regards herself as a Jane Eyre figure and acts accordingly, then one can better comprehend the similarities in the two tales' narrative techniques. The underlying premise is identical: each story is posited as a first-person narration, written by the governess involved, and recorded several years after the events depicted. Each governess/author, whether or not she is reliable, tends to be intrusive, even chatty: for example, Jane Eyre declares happily, "Reader, I married him" (chap. 38), and James's heroine calls "the sisterhood [of governesses] to witness" how unusual it is to make "constant fresh discoveries" about one's pupils (181). And each governess/author, because she is writing retrospectively, apparently perceives her old self with the clarity granted to maturity. If she saw Bly today, James's heroine's "older and more informed eyes" would make it seem of "very reduced importance" (163), a phenomenon Jane Eyre would appreciate: "... what is so headstrong as youth? What so blind as inexperience?" (chap. 22). Indeed, I would surmise that, because of her maturity, James's governess is retrospectively able to perceive how pathetically she was emulating Jane Eyre during her sojourn at Bly—a situation which would explain why Douglas (who met her years after the events at Bly) saw her as "charming" and "agreeable" (149), whereas the impression she conveys in the story proper is that she is strange—perhaps insane.  

As noted earlier in this paper, both James's governess and Jane Eyre seem extraordinarily self-conscious, e.g., they are self-analytical and tend to question and test others. But this self-consciousness attains a special intensity in "The Turn of the Screw." Indeed, James's governess is so oddly self-conscious about her personality, behavior, and thoughts that she seems to be acting a part. She imagines that her actions "must have seemed magnificent had there been anyone to admire" them (221), and she even goes so far as to shut herself up "audibly to rehearse" the eventual show-down with Flora and Miles (245). What this theatricality suggests to me is that James's governess's highly dramatic imitation of Jane Eyre is so complete that it is not simply a matter of there being many passages in both stories which are so similar in content, style, diction, and even cadence that, if they were pulled out of context, it would be impossible to ascertain from which tale they were drawn; rather, it is a matter of James's governess being so imbued with the literary tradition of the plucky English governess popularized by Brontë's work that it extends even to the act of writing her story. James's governess is not simply drawing upon a fictional convention: she is living it, and so completely that both she and her employer are given generic rather than Christian names: "the gover-

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ness” and “the master” or “the bachelor.” She is, in fine, a flesh-and-blood parody of Jane Eyre.

At this point, it would seem that nary a stone has been left unturned in this attempt to enumerate the relationships which exist between Jane Eyre and “The Turn of the Screw.” On the basis of the textual evidence alone, it seems clear that James was consciously utilizing and parodying the literary convention of the English governess, and more precisely Jane Eyre. But I do wish to make two more points in support of my thesis. First, it is entirely possible that, as Cargill suggests, James may have reviewed the work of the Brontës at approximately the time he began to formulate “The Turn of the Screw,” simply because Clement Shorter, editor of the Illustrated London News (for which James wrote The Other House) had just published Charlotte Brontë and Her Circle (1896). My second point is closely aligned with this. In an entry in his Notebooks, coming between 18 November 1894 and 12 January 1895, James apparently cast about for a surname for the character who came to be known as Mrs. Grose. In the process of doodling, he wrote several names which are of special significance: “Blanchett” may very well have originated in the name “Blanche Ingram”; “Shirley” is the title of Charlotte Brontë’s 1849 novel; “Nettlefield” and “Nettlefold” are remarkably similar to “Thornfield”; and “Glasspoole” strikingly echoes “Grace Poole.” If one may attribute anything to such jottings, at the very least it may be stated that James had Jane Eyre on his mind—subconsciously or otherwise—as he began to write “The Turn of the Screw.”

If “The Turn of the Screw” is indeed “a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an amusette to catch those not easily caught” (preface, xviii), then might James be referring not to the ghosts (real or imagined), and not to the mental state of the governess, but rather to the simple fact that he is writing a remarkably clever parody? Certainly parody—and the idea that a real person might behave as if he were a fictional character—was something in which James indulged. Consider, for example, the case of Mrs. Lavinia Sloper Penniman of Washington Square, whose efforts to unite her niece with Morris Townsend are highly melodramatic:

Mrs. Penniman started for church; but before she had arrived, she stopped and turned back, and before twenty minutes had elapsed she re-entered the house, . . . and knocked at Catherine’s door. She got no answer; . . . and Mrs. Penniman presently ascertained that she was not in the house. “She has gone to him, she had fled!” Lavinia cried, clasping her hands . . . But she soon perceived that Catherine had taken nothing with her . . . and then she jumped at the hypothesis that the girl had gone forth, not in tenderness, but in resentment. “She has followed him to his own door—she has burst upon him in his own apartment!” It was in these terms that Mrs. Penniman depicted to herself her niece’s errand, which, viewed in this light, gratified her sense of the picturesque only a shade less strongly than the idea of a clandestine marriage. To visit one’s lover,
with tears and reproaches, at his own residence, was an image so agreeable to Mrs. Penniman’s mind that she felt a sort of aesthetic disappointment at its lacking, in this case, the harmonious accompaniments of darkness and storm. A quiet Sunday afternoon appeared an inadequate setting for it; . . .

That Mrs. Penniman acts, feels, indeed thinks as if she were a character in a melodrama is, to my mind, the same as James’s governess acting, feeling, even thinking as if she were Jane Eyre. The difference is that Mrs. Penniman’s confusion of her reality and her reading is amusing (albeit occasionally annoying), and she apparently lacks the intelligence and the retrospective acuity to ever realize that she was a living parody of the duenna of melodrama. In the case of “The Turn of the Screw,” the governess’s confusion of her reality and the Jane Eyre model is ghastly—and it is all the more ghastly in that she comes to realize (and ultimately to write down) exactly what was happening to her at Bly.

If indeed “The Turn of the Screw” is a parody of Jane Eyre—and there seems little doubt that this is the case—then it is a remarkably clever one. Indeed, perhaps it is too clever, if it has not been noticed for nearly ninety years.

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NOTES


5. I follow the revised version of “The Turn of the Screw” published in The Aspern Papers/The Turn of the Screw/The Liar/The Two Faces (New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1908), pp. 145-309. All references to this text, volume 12 of The New York Edition, will be indicated parenthetically in the body of the paper.


9. The only little boy in Jane’s care in Brontë’s story is the son she has by Rochester (chap. 38). However, he is born at the end of novel and does not really function in the tale.

10. I follow the edition of *Jane Eyre* with an afterword by Arthur Zeiger (New York: New American Library, n. d.). References to this edition will be indicated parenthetically (by chapter number) in the body of the paper.


12. Griffiths’ painting is reproduced in Wolff’s article in *American Literature* (above, note 11).


15. Muriel G. Shine’s point is well taken that the governess in James’s tale is quite young: “. . . she is a notable, if heightened, portrait of an adolescent,” and, I would argue, as such she is particularly receptive to the types of role models she would encounter in her reading. Shine, *The Fictional Children of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 132.


18. Cargill (above, note 5), p. 244.

19. See, for example, Edmund Wilson (above, note 16): “One day when his face has been vividly in her mind, she comes out in sight of the house and sees the figure of a man on the tower . . .” (123).

20. It may be noted in passing that Miles bears certain resemblances to John Reed, Jane’s cousin in *Jane Eyre*: John typically calls his mother “old girl” (chap. 2), much as Miles addresses the governess rather precociously as “my dear” (249). Likewise, both boys are dismissed from school (JE, chap. 10; TS, 165) and both die young—although John Reed apparently commits suicide (chap. 21). Although the similarities exist, I do not think it would prove particularly fruitful to pursue the matter any further than to make note of them.

21. As Cargill writes of James and Shorter, “Since his editor was new to him, what would have been more natural to James than to read the biography . . . of the Brontë sisters in order to post himself on Shorter’s taste?” As a matter of fact, there is no question whatsoever that James read Shorter’s biography, for he mentions it at the end of an article datelined “London. January 15, 1897” in *Harper’s Weekly*, 41 (February 6, 1897), 134-35. James’s positive reaction to the biography was tempered by the fact that he apparently did not think Shorter had considered sufficiently the unfortunate situation of the Brontës: their personal unhappiness “was the making of their fame” (135)—
in other words, the public tended to blur the distinctions between the reality of the Brontës and the fiction they created.

I may note in passing that Cargill points out the common references in *Jane Eyre* and “The Turn of the Screw” to (1) sunk fences and (2) the David/Saul allusion (p. 243, note 24). However, Cargill does not pursue the implications of these shared elements.