

‘You Know Where I Am If You Want Me’: Authorial Control and Ontological Ambiguity in the Ghost Stories of M. R. James

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Reticence conduces to effect, blatancy ruins it, and there is a lot of blatancy in recent stories. They drag in sex too, which is a fatal mistake; sex is tiresome in the novels; in a ghost story, or as the backbone of a ghost story, I have no patience with it.

Montague Rhodes James¹

‘Those who are familiar with University life’, declares the narrator of ‘The Mezzotint’, one of M. R. James’s best-known ghost stories, ‘can picture for themselves the wide and delightful range of subjects’ with which College Fellows entertain each other at Sunday breakfast.² To read one of these narratives by the distinguished medievalist, antiquarian, and bibliophile is, on the face of it, to enter a world that is hermetically sealed, politically, socially, and aesthetically. James’s biographer, Richard William Pfaff, records that his subject ‘had little interest in politics’, and modelled his life on that of Henry Bradshaw, Cambridge University’s Librarian (1867-1886): that is, on an academic and confirmed bachelor living in the quads of Cambridge — and later, in James’s case, Eton College.³

The social milieu presented by James’s protagonists is certainly a narrow one. They are professional or amateur scholars, usually Oxbridge-based or educated, and exclusively male. By admitting that his interpretation of the ghost-story form is ‘somewhat old-fashioned’, a ‘nineteenth (and not a twentieth) century concept’, for which a ‘quasi-scientific plane’ is too elevated, the author is also being deliberately anachronistic.⁴ Moreover, James’s terse, deliberately anti-theoretical writings on his own art eschew overt cultural commentary in favour of technique. The compositions ‘do not make any exalted claims’, he states in the preface to the first anthology, *Ghost Stories of An Antiquary* (1904), ‘beyond causing their reader to feel pleasantly uncomfortable when walking alone at night’ (p. viii). Instead, James

¹ M. R. James, ‘Some Remarks on Ghost Stories’, *The Bookman* (December 1929), 169-72 (p. 171).

² James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (London: Edward Arnold, 1904), p. 67. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

³ Richard William Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James* (London: Scolar Press, 1980), pp. 6, 57.

⁴ James, Prologue to Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, *Madam Crowl’s Ghost and Other Tales of Mystery* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1923), pp. vii-viii (p. vii); and Author’s Preface, in *More Ghost Stories of An Antiquary* (London: Edward Arnold, 1911), pp. v-vi (p. v).

places a high premium upon evocation of time and place; plain diction, or ‘plenty of clear-cut and matter-of-fact detail’; a gradual incursion of the supernatural ‘ominous thing’ into the ‘placid’, quotidian lives of what he calls his ‘actors’, and upon ‘atmosphere and the nicely-managed crescendo’.⁵

Critics have been divided about the aesthetic value of this highly schematic approach, in particular its preoccupation with form at the apparent expense of ideological content or psychological depth. For H. P. Lovecraft, James has ‘an almost diabolical power of calling horrors by gentle steps from the midst of prosaic daily life’.⁶ Conversely, for David Punter, the writer’s tone is ‘shockingly bland’, and the stories represent a ‘falling away of originality’ within the gothic mode — indeed, its ‘final decay into formalism’.⁷ James has ‘no interest’ in characters’ thought processes, Punter asserts, only in producing a repetitious narrative ‘model’ that induces ‘fear in the mind of the *reader*’.⁸ Julia Briggs goes even further, claiming that ‘psychology is totally and defiantly excluded from his writings’.⁹

In this article, however, I will argue that James’s narratives, although not consistent in quality, ultimately present a more substantial achievement than his detractors allow for, and afford rather more complex readings than his own meta-critical writings might suggest. Analysing his stories, primarily two works from James’s first collection, ““O Whistle, And I’ll Come To You, My Lad”” and ‘The Ash-tree’, discloses not ‘blandness’, but rather what Andrew Smith, for example, recognises as a ‘critique’ of it, a sophisticated use of the prosaic, to which urbanity and understatement are central.¹⁰ As I argue here, James’s stories display a careful, conscious mediation of gothic and folkloric tropes, a mediation infused not by insularity but by an awareness of, and engagement with, a diverse range of discourses drawn from folklore and other sources. Further, despite James’s own stated distaste, as indicated above, for the explicit and for the depiction of sex, his stories present a distinctively *unpleasant* interpretation of the supernatural, and it is notable how many of them end in the most private spaces occupied by the hero, usually the bedroom. This article suggests that the stratagems used for evoking fear actually serve to disclose a degree of unconscious ambiguity

⁵ James, ‘Some Remarks’, p. 169; and Introduction, M. R. James and others, *Ghosts and Marvels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924) <<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/j/james/mr/collect/complete.html>> [accessed 8 April 2013].

⁶ H. P. Lovecraft, ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’, in *The H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus 2: Dagon and Other Macabre Tales* (London: Grafton Books, 1985), pp. 421-512 (p. 508).

⁷ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: Volume 2: The Modern Gothic*, 2nd edn (Harlow: Longman, 1996), pp. 67, 90.

⁸ Punter, *Literature of Terror*, p. 86, emphasis in original.

⁹ Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber, 1977), p. 135.

¹⁰ Andrew Smith, *Gothic Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 124.

and anxiety about the textual strategies deployed. There is, thus, both an accomplished metatextuality and a complex sense of confessional autobiography at work in these texts.

“Whistle” and ‘The Ash-tree’ are among the most frequently anthologised, and also adapted, of all James’s works. The narrative of “Whistle” concerns an academic who happens upon a strange whistle while exploring a Knights Templar site on the East Anglian coast, and who unwittingly summons a malevolent spirit upon blowing it. ‘The Ash Tree’ relates the effects of a curse upon several generations of a family of landed gentry, following their condemnation of a local woman for witchcraft. The continuing popularity of these and other tales suggests a comfort in familiarity with the fictional world created by their author, especially that wrought by re-reading. This process has some affinity with the idea of the ‘uncanny’ as described by Sigmund Freud, which he describes as occurring ‘when primitive belief systems which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed’, and as characterised by a ‘compulsion to repeat’.¹¹ The ‘uncanny’ is, of course, a complex term, and a full analysis would be outside the scope of the present article; the point here is to note the carefully crafted irruption of Otherness into depicted routines that are quotidian and apparently prosaic. Indeed, professedly anachronistic as he is, James is nonetheless praised by Lovecraft for his grasp of ‘psychology’ and ‘an intelligent and scientific knowledge of human nerves and feelings’.¹²

Criticism that finds fault in James’s work for an alleged lack of originality underrates the propensity of the gothic mode for innovation — that is, its amenability to add to and present new versions of tropes and imagery already known. Punter is correct to cite an audience’s prior acquaintance with gothic motifs like country houses, churches, and manuscripts as central to their reading and understanding of James, but here they are joined by new uncanny objects, such as a whistle or an ash tree.¹³ Earlier, recognisable tropes from the mode do certainly reappear here. To give one example, in “Whistle”, the anti-Catholic stance of works like Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) is echoed in the bluff Colonel Wilson’s prejudiced ‘views of a pronouncedly Protestant type’ (p. 90) — a belief system the contradictions of which are addressed later in this article. The trope of anti-Catholicism is manifested more prevalently in ‘The Ash-tree’, with its equation of aesthetic taste for the Italianate with ‘infection’, and references to ‘Popish plots’ and ‘emissaries’ as

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and others, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press/Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), XVII (1917-1919), pp. 219-52 (pp. 249, 230).

¹² Lovecraft, ‘Supernatural Horror’, pp. 493, 508.

¹³ Punter, p. 89.

possible scapegoats for the deaths (pp. 98, 94, 108). Incidentally, but ingeniously, the late eighteenth-century timeframe and setting (1754) of much of ‘The Ash-tree’ pre-dates the official ‘birth’ of gothic literature in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* by a decade. James’s story can thus be interpreted as a clever dramatisation, or encapsulation in short-story form, of the very usurpation or denial of eighteenth-century neo-classical sensibilities that gothic itself represented and arguably sought to effect.

Indeed, in an extension of this treatment of Catholicism, both ““Whistle”” and ‘The Ash-tree’ present the archaic past and pre-Christian belief systems more generally as threats, as is evident in the additional gothic themes in ‘The Ash-tree’ of decayed ancestry and thwarted inheritance. James’s use of the surname ‘Fell’ echoes both the Biblical ‘Fall’ and title of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ (1839). As in Poe’s tale, the doomed protagonist is the last of the line. Equally notable is the challenge to both patriarchy and Christianity represented by Mothersole, the witch — a rare significant female presence, or ‘actor’, to use the author’s own term, in James’s fictions. Furthermore, the central characters in these two stories commit two traditional gothic transgressions: engaging in what Briggs describes vividly as ‘the dreadful itch of curiosity’ in ““Whistle””; and, in the case of the Fells, committing injustices over two generations against a supernaturally empowered Other.¹⁴ Omens are also incorporated, and well signposted for the reader, though not for the protagonists. In ““Whistle””, Professor Parkins fails to recognise the warnings signified by repeated gusts of wind and his being followed by the mysterious ‘belated wanderer’ (p. 198). Similarly, in ‘The Ash-tree’, both generations of the Fell family misinterpret, in their cases fatally, a barely-glimpsed ‘creature’ and a ‘scratching noise’ on the bedroom windowsill (pp. 90, 108).

In addition to these familiar gothic conventions, James’ stories also display a particular degree of literary self-consciousness, exemplifying gothic’s status as an explicitly intertextual mode. There is, for example, a playful allusiveness at work in the ill-fated professor’s walk home from the beach in ““Whistle””:

‘What should I do now’, he [Parkins] thought, ‘if I looked back and caught sight of a black figure sharply defined against the yellow sky, and saw that it had horns and wings? I wonder whether I should stand or run for it. Luckily, the gentleman behind is not of that sort, and he seems to be about as far off now as when I saw him first.’ (pp. 196-97)

¹⁴ Briggs, *Night Visitors*, p. 136.

Parkins's speculation is, of course, an instance of dramatic irony. It combines foreboding and a final diffusion into an urbane self-comfort, a refuge which James's reader knows, with hindsight, is ironically misplaced. James is, however, also being densely allusive. The professor's 'last look behind' clearly echoes the famous passage in Part Six of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798):

Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round, walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, that close behind
A frightful fiend doth tread¹⁵

There is another indirect allusion here, to Christian's espying of the 'foul Fiend coming over the field to meet him' in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678).¹⁶ This is, again, typical of both the style and the sense of *knowingness* that characterise this author's work. In a similarly sophisticated manner, James's other story, 'The Ash-tree', contains the device of an interpolated document, in the form of the transcription of the coroner's report. Featuring Biblical quotation and vivid, stylised references to 'Pope Borgia and other known Specimens of the Horrid Art of the Italian Poysoners of the last Age' (p. 94), the text displays James's talent for gothic, particularly anti-Catholic gothic, literary pastiche. This is combined with a gift for conveying gruesome events economically and elliptically: Sir Matthew, we are informed, 'expir'd in great Pain and Agony' (p. 92). Such concision is indicative of what appears to be, at one level, an absolute control by the author over his narrative.

The stories are in fact prescriptively narrated — that is, designed with a particular effect or control over the reader in mind, and with the reader's 'auditory imagination', to appropriate T. S. Eliot's term, very much to the fore.¹⁷ If this is not achieved through an omniscient authorial persona, then it is done through protagonists who, like Parkins in "Whistle", have a habit of voicing their thoughts aloud, and thus to us. 'Since he merely appears in this prologue', the narrator of "Whistle" states, dismissively and casually, 'there is no need to give his entitlements' (p. 184). From the outset, these texts foreground the

¹⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: Complete Authoritative Texts of the 1798 and 1817 Versions with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Paul. H. Fry (Boston, Massachusetts: Bedford, St. Martin's, 1999), p. 62, ll. 461-66.

¹⁶ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. by N. H. Keeble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 46.

¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, 'Matthew Arnold', in *The Uses of Poetry and the Uses of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), pp. 103-119 (p. 118).

action of the plot, with the imagined listener, positioned as an attendee at one of James's readings, prioritised over the characters themselves. For example, compared to Lovecraft's elaborate description of Exham Priory's 'composite architecture' of 'Anglo-Saxon', 'Romanesque', 'Druidic or native Cymric' origins in his story, 'The Rats in the Walls' (1924), the gothic site of the Templars' preceptory in "Whistle" is simply sketched, as a mundane 'patch of somewhat broken ground covered with small depressions and mounds' (p. 192), which the hero literally stumbles upon. James here, as elsewhere, wears his immense degree of antiquarian expertise seemingly casually. This economy is in keeping with his stated desire merely to entertain, and to replicate the distinctly oral tradition of the Christmas fireside 'tale'.¹⁸

In the telling of such 'tales', these narratives display an awareness of their own artificiality, an intense self-reflexivity. In "Whistle", the ghost-story tradition itself is prefigured in the early teasing from Parkins's colleague that some company 'would do nicely to keep the ghosts off' (p. 187). The singularly sardonic narrator of 'The Ash-tree' first credits the reader well acquainted with ghost stories for anticipating Sir Matthew Fell's grisly fate: 'next morning they found their master dead and black. So much you have guessed' (p. 91). Then, startlingly, Sir Richard Fell, in examining the 'Chronicles', objectifies the whole text as a 'tale' and ironises both its use of portent as a motif and, indeed, its 'retribution' or 'revenge' plot:

H'm! What have we here? 'Thou shalt see me in the morning and I shall not be.' Well, well! Your grandfather would have made a fine omen of that, hey? No more prophets for me! They are all in a tale. (p. 104)

There is tonal and ideological dissonance in 'The Ash-tree' between such an acknowledgement by a character, drawing attention to the purely fictional status of the text, and an earlier insistence by the tale's narrator that 'the present narrative gives me pause. I cannot altogether sweep it away as mere invention. The reader must judge for himself' (p. 85). Furthermore, the description of and reflection on the witch trials, like the citation of the real-life *Gentleman's Magazine* as the source of a 1792 letter presenting a 'statistical account' of livestock fatalities, 'drawn from the Baronet's own papers' (p. 96), exemplify textual self-validation, achieved through a skilled and careful mimesis. James's text seems to

¹⁸ For further discussion of oral storytelling traditions in general, see, for example, *Oral Tradition in Literature: Interpretation in Context*, ed. by John Miles Foley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986). The practice became both fashionable and commercialised in the Victorian era during which James, of course, grew up. Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), provides an astute study.

be having it both ways, presenting the tale as mere entertainment demonstrating ‘no exalted claims’, while exhibiting a concern with plausibility and thus offering an attempted valediction of the supernatural events it describes.

This imitative form and concern with authenticity extends to the incorporation of historical (including contemporary) discourses, as much as of historical events. James’s texts blend and transmute English, Irish, and Scandinavian folklore. The author, being an antiquarian, always prioritised a fidelity to the ‘rules of folklore’ in his stories.¹⁹ As Jacqueline Simpson shows, James was clearly much influenced by Scandinavian lore, the consequences of whistling, for example, being a mainstay in Jutland legends.²⁰ In ““Whistle””, the Colonel articulates both domestic terms of reference — ‘[i]n my old home, we would have said someone had been whistling for it’ — and a broader, panoramic perspective:

They believe in it all over Denmark and Norway as well as on the Yorkshire coast; and my experience is, mind you, that there’s generally something at the bottom of what these country-folk hold to, and have held to for generations. (pp. 208-09)

This consensus-building, the creation of wisdom, is an instance of the text’s justification of its own fictional mythological landscape. The reality of the supernatural is asserted through citation of the breadth and persistence of belief in it. It enacts in literary form what Stacy McDowell describes as the ‘uncanny familiarity’ of folklore — its capacity to imbue ‘the sense of having been here before, without the listener’s ever knowing quite when’.²¹

Implicit in James’s depiction of ‘folklore’ is a somewhat double-edged belief in the wisdom of the common ‘folk’. As a contemporary reviewer pointed out, the author displays ‘an eye for rather than a preoccupation with character’, particularly in his ‘representation of dialect’.²² Dialect in James’ stories is consistently identified with the lower social strata. Equally consistently, and in stark contrast to that of the educated protagonists, the perceptions of the populace are shown to be accurate: ‘it warn’t a right thing’ (p. 214), as the traumatised youth in ““Whistle”” puts it. The superstition shared by the common ‘folk’ is generally

¹⁹ James, Author’s Preface, in *The Penguin Complete Ghost Stories of M. R. James* (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 5-7 (p. 5). This is essentially a reprinting of *The Collected Ghost Stories of M. R. James* (London: Edward Arnold, 1931).

²⁰ Jacqueline Simpson, ““The Rules of Folklore” in the Ghost Stories of M. R. James’, *Folklore*, 108 (1997), 9-18 (p. 13).

²¹ Stacy McDowell, ““Folklore”, in *Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, ed. by William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith, 2 vols (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), I, pp. 252-54 (p. 253).

²² Peter Fleming, ‘Review of *The Collected Ghost Stories*’, *The Spectator*, 18 April 1931, p. 633, quoted in Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, p. 413.

validated, as with Bishop Kilmore's all-too-prophetic caution to Sir Richard in 'The Ash-tree' that 'our Irish peasantry will always have it that it brings the worst of luck to sleep near an ash tree' (pp. 105-06). Yet for all James's dexterity in reproducing dialects and the stories' apparent championing of folk wisdom, there is a deeply non-democratic ambivalence here — signified in the patronising use of 'our'. Colonel Wilson's reference to 'these country-folk' in "Whistle" further exemplifies a dialectic of class-consciousness which permeates James's stories. The 'folk' remain 'these': undifferentiated and objectified. To adopt James's own idiom, they remain supporting players in the stories, never chief 'actors'. This tension — the simultaneous validation and repudiation of lower-class beliefs and perceptions — is indicative of the troubled relationship that these texts have with their own cultural context.

The contradictions identified here as central to James's ghost stories, which rely for their effects on both the pleasure of antiquarian pursuit and the presentation of historic forces as mortal threat, reflect the anxieties of the period, between Victorianism and the modern age, in which these texts were produced. As Samuel Hynes comments, later nineteenth-century scientific developments had brought 'a new conception of the nature of change' and 'the promise of human progress'.²³ Yet, paradoxically, they had also wrought, spiritually, 'a growing feeling of restriction and loss'.²⁴ It is significant for understanding James's stories that emergent sciences such as psychology, and their attendant investigations into sexuality, multiple personality disorder, and hysteria, co-existed with a plethora of pseudo-sciences like spiritualism, incarnated in the Society for Psychical Research (founded in 1882). Here was a body governed by people of the author's own education and social class, and with a similar interest in scholarly methodology. Scientific enquiry thus flourished alongside a desire to recover, post-Darwin, a sense of 'meaning' in the universe, and to 'restore the consolation of religion that Victorian science had denied'.²⁵

Whilst James himself had no time for the Society of Psychical Research, rejecting any 'scheme of "psychical" theory' as elevating the 'mere ghost story' to a 'quasi-scientific plane' to which he felt it unsuited, his own stories strongly reflect the uneasy dichotomy represented by the Society's work.²⁶ Professor Parkins in "Whistle" is one of the author's most fully developed rationalists, a sceptical 'disbeliever in what is called the supernatural', who takes an aggressive position against anything 'appearing to sanction the current belief in

²³ Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 132-33.

²⁴ Hynes, p. 133.

²⁵ Hynes, pp. 139, 145.

²⁶ James, Author's Preface, *More Ghost Stories*, pp. v-vi (p. v).

such subjects' (pp. 209, 188). Such 'belief' is voiced by his friend, the Colonel. Subsequent events, in which the professor learns the limits of rationality through chastening experience, endorse Wilson's warning that 'I expect that with you it's a case of live and learn' (p. 209). For Briggs, these narratives repeatedly 'assert a total acceptance of the supernatural which scepticism apparently denies'.²⁷ However, Helen Conrad-O'Briain is more accurate in referring to a conflict, a wider malaise of 'spiritual blindness', which she sees as displayed in James's stories.²⁸ In "Whistle", the Colonel's position on the reality of supernaturalism may be endorsed, but his final, bigoted attribution of the phenomena to 'the Church of Rome' (p. 225) shows that neither he nor the rationalist Parkins has understood its inassimilable nature as Other. Indeed, Parkins's 'views on certain points are less clear cut than they used to be' (p. 225) at the story's end, while the Colonel, despite his belief in the whistle's deleterious qualities, liberates the uncanny object by casting it into the sea, thereby facilitating its possible return to haunt another victim. What is therefore significant in the narrative of "Whistle" is not acceptance of the supernatural, but the story's depiction of conflict between two interpretations of reality: that is, between the values of Enlightenment rationality with the attendant comfort of ideological closure, and a belief in supernaturalism, marked by the absence of any such assurance. "Whistle", with its hapless rationalist protagonist and representative of blinkered religiosity, exemplifies a crisis of belief that is being played out in these ghost stories. James's characters elsewhere in his first collection may variously 'grasp blindly' at silver crucifixes ('Canon Alberic's Scrap-book', p. 25) or lock their doors and 'pray to God' ('Count Magnus', p. 177), but there is no privileging of consolatory Christian ideology — and no guarantee of deliverance. Coming from a clergyman's son, this is a strikingly grim prognosis.

Nowhere are these crises of confidence and of faith expressed more overtly than in the depictions of the ghosts themselves. James's supernatural eruptions are not a comforting 'demonstration of the existence of the human soul', as Mackenzie Bartlett describes apparitions, but, deliberately on James's part, 'malevolent or odious'.²⁹ As Clive Bloom notes, rather than being just 'the returned dead', they are 'demonic hobgoblins'.³⁰ The entities are protean representations of contemporary societal and metaphysical anxieties. These

²⁷ Briggs, *Night Visitors*, p. 125.

²⁸ Helen Conrad O'Briain, "'The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail Against It': Laudian Ecclesia and Victorian Culture Wars in the Ghost Stories of M. R. James", in *The Ghost Story from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), ed. by Conrad O'Briain and Julie Anne Stevens, pp. 47-60 (p. 48).

²⁹ James, Preface, *More Ghost Stories*, p. v; and Mackenzie Bartlett, 'Apparition', in *Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, I, pp. 35-38 (p. 35).

³⁰ Clive Bloom, 'M. R. James and his Fiction', in *Creepers: British Horror and Fantasy in the Twentieth Century* (London: Pluto Press, 1993), pp. 64-71 (pp. 66, 67).

‘ghosts’ are not merely a physical threat but an ontological one, with the disturbing implication of a lack of differentiation between human and other species, and what Smith describes as ‘an existence characterised by moral emptiness’.³¹ The bodiless spirit in “‘Whistle’” appears to represent such an ‘emptiness’. ‘There seemed to be absolutely nothing material about it’, records the narrator, ‘save the bedclothes of which it had made itself a body’ (p. 225).

Amongst the numerous aggressively violent, bestial, and skeletally thin visions that haunt his narratives, the spiders in ‘The Ash-tree’ exemplify James’s use of a well-known gothicised image in order to create this sense of existential dread. The spider had already suffered negative depictions in later Victorian texts. Phillip Henry Goss’s *Life in its Lower, Intermediate, and Higher Forms* (1857) describes the arachnid as ‘vindictive’ and ‘highly venomous’.³² Even J. G. Woods’s more sympathetic *Petland Revisited* (1884) concedes that it had become an antithesis of domesticity: ‘repulsive’, and, quaintly, ‘out of place in our rooms’.³³ James’s story continues the tendency in texts like Bertram Mitford’s *The Sign of The Spider* (1896) to demonise this familiar creature. In ‘The Ash-tree’, spiders have become monstrous: ‘terrible bodies’, ‘brutes’, ‘covered with greyish hair’, and ‘enormous’ — the ‘size of a man’s head’ (p. 111). The references to ‘hair’ and ‘a man’s head’ suggest an unsettling anthropomorphism. It is not just the fact that the witch Mothersole’s ‘poysonous Rage’ (p. 88) takes the form of unnaturally large spiders that renders the animals uncanny. James’s decision to keep them only half glimpsed until the climax heightens a sense of the grotesque, which is particularly evident in the mischievous and disorientating comparison to a ‘squirrel’ and a ‘kitten’ — the latter an epitome of cuddly domesticity — and in the ‘horrible illusion’ of Sir Richard having ‘several heads’ (pp. 90, 108). Indeed, if one accepts a definition of horror fiction as containing ‘violence, terror and bodily harm’, as Gina Wisker, for example, defines it, then this text is certainly more of a horror narrative than a ghost story.³⁴

In any case, it is a reaction from the character and the reader, one of ‘pleasant discomfort’, but ‘discomfort’ all the same, and *not* the creation of particularly authentic or original spectral figures, that is most important for James. The gardener who espies the

³¹ Smith, *Gothic Literature*, p. 125.

³² Phillip Henry Goss, *Life in its Lower, Intermediate, and Higher Forms* (London: James Nisbet, 1857), pp. 184-85, quoted in Claire Charlotte McKechnie, ‘Spiders, Horror, and Animal Others in Late Victorian Empire Fiction’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17:4 (December 2012), 505-16 (p. 507).

³³ J. G. Wood, *Petland Revisited* (London: Longman, Green & Co., 1884), p. 287, quoted in McKechnie, ‘Spiders’, p. 505.

³⁴ Gina Wisker, ‘Horror Fiction’, in *Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, I, pp. 328-33 (p. 329).

monsters in the ash tree is struck with ‘incredulous terror and loathing’ (p. 110). Instinctive responses of fear, revulsion, and recoil unite all James’s characters when confronted with the incarnations of the Other. Parkins in “‘Whistle’” utters ‘a cry of disgust’ (p. 223) at a touch of the creature’s adopted draperies. Such repetition and the strength of characters’ reactions highlight these stories’ investment in evoking a particular kind of response from the reader.

However, in the construction of overall meaning, the texts disclose as well as affect. Arguably, a scholarly engagement with his writing cannot avoid James’s emotional autobiography altogether, especially when examining moments of confrontation with the feared and ‘loathed’ object. Nick Freeman, amongst others, has alluded to the ‘queer atmosphere’ and sense of ‘homosexual transgression’ in these narratives.³⁵ James’s protagonists, as indicated above, move largely in homosocial environments. This is a world where men meet in college rooms, play golf, and engage in solitary travel, as opposed to being incorporated in heterosexual family units. The sense of a ‘queer atmosphere’ and of sexual transgression is strongest in *Ghost Stories of An Antiquary* with ‘Number 13’, ‘Count Magnus’, and, especially, “‘Whistle’”, with its prissy, feminised hero, ‘something of an old woman — rather henlike, perhaps, in his little ways’ (p. 189). Lovecraft writes of James’s ghosts typically being ‘touched before they are seen [sic]’.³⁶ In “‘Whistle’”, though, it is actually first the entity’s movement, then its proximity and, above all, the fear of physical contact with it, that so disturbs Parkins:

Somehow, the idea of getting past it and escaping through the door was intolerable to him; he could not have borne — he didn’t know why — to touch it, and as for its touching him, he would sooner dash himself through the window than have that happen. (p. 222)

The creature feeling the pillows of his bed then makes Parkins ‘shudder as he had never in his life thought it possible’ (p. 222). This is clearly meant to convey revulsion at the invasion of personal space. However, it is difficult to avoid considering a different interpretation — that of a repressed virginal frisson, if not of orgasm, then certainly of desire.

In discussing Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), James Holt McGrath considers the concept of ‘homosexual panic’, or ‘the fear and loathing that sets in whenever a man suspects either himself or another man of feeling homosexual desire’.³⁷ This description is

³⁵ Nick Freeman, ‘Ghost Stories’, in *Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, I, pp. 277-81 (p. 270).

³⁶ Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror*, p. 508, emphasis in original.

³⁷ James Holt McGavran, “‘Insurmountable Barriers to our Union’: Homosocial Male Bonding, Homosexual Panic, and Death on the Ice in *Frankenstein*”, *European Romantic Review*, 11.1 (Winter 2000), 46-67 (p. 48) <

also applicable to Parkins's descent into hysteria, and the story itself can be interpreted accordingly. From its very title, taken from a 1793 poem by a man (the male author Robert Burns) impersonating a women wooing another man in a story of an illicit relationship, James's ““Whistle”” is a flirtatious, self-reflexive text. It propounds what it recoils from. ““Whistle”” is, on one level, a story about masculine loneliness and an interrogation of sexual identity. Although fiercely independent, the professor does not ‘quite fancy having an empty bed’ and would ‘welcome’ a companion, provided it is one of his choice (pp. 185, 196). When he blows the fateful whistle to summon a companion, it is notable that he wishes for this companion to be male: noting that the whistle's Latin legend seems to suggest that an unspecified someone is coming, he assumes that blowing into the whistle is the best way to call ‘for him’ (p. 200). The Colonel's assurance, ‘[y]ou know where I am if you want me during the night’ (p. 218), is both an affirmation of homosocial bonding and a double entendre which echoes the title. This double meaning is also significant because, like *Frankenstein* and other gothic works, ““Whistle”” is concerned with ‘doubles’ and thus with the construction of self. James's story goes further than Shelley's text does in *Frankenstein*'s bedroom encounter with his creation. Victor recalls that ‘one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped and rushed downstairs’.³⁸ As Mair Rigby argues, *Frankenstein* cannot help but read the monster's gaze and reach as ‘a sexual threat’, which turns the bedchamber into what she calls ‘a potentially sodomitical space’.³⁹ By contrast, in James's tale, Parkins finds his personal, corporeal space invaded, the linen face ‘thrust close into his own’ (p. 223).

This can clearly be read as sexual metaphor, at least at the level of foreplay if not penetration. However, there is possible duality in play, in that the homosexual image can *itself* be read as metaphor. If the bedclothes-creature is seen as a double of Parkins, its ‘lonely figure’ (p. 200) a manifestation of his own restlessness and isolation, then there is the implication that he has been confronted, face to face as it were, not just with desire, but with his own lack of ‘materiality’ or spiritual emptiness. In other words, the ‘intensely horrible face’ which ‘went nigh to maddening him’ (p. 222-23) is so disturbing for the professor because it functions, arguably, as a mirror of his own. Thus, as with George E. Haggerty's

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10509580008570098?journalCode=gerr20> [accessed 23 September 2016].

³⁸ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Text*, ed. by Marilyn Butler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 39-40.

³⁹ Mair Rigby, ““Do You Share My Madness?”: *Frankenstein*'s Queer Gothic”, in *Queering the Gothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), ed. by William Hughes and Andrew Smith, pp. 36-54 (p. 44).

reading of Frankenstein and his monster, the confrontation that Parkins has with the spirit in his bedroom can be interpreted as being ‘with the horror that is oneself’.⁴⁰

Not all of James’s stories are as fully formed as to afford such multi-layered readings as this. Judging from the attention of biographers and critics, his first collection is the ‘strongest’ and most accomplished in terms of ‘ingenuity and artistic accomplishment’.⁴¹ Of the later works, only a few pieces, especially ‘Casting the Runes’ from James’s second collection, *More Ghost Stories* (1911), have attained anything like a similar level of attention and adaptation into other media. Nevertheless, it is difficult to accept Michael Cox’s assessment that it is a mistake to judge the ghost stories as ‘examples of the highest artistic and literary endeavour’, and to ‘impose on them a weight of critical analysis and speculation that they can hardly bear’.⁴² Such a reading rather underestimates the skill of economy and the subtle intellectual and thematic complexities presented by the short story as both a discipline and as a literary genre.⁴³ Nor is it possible to accept Bloom’s argument that James’s texts present an aesthetic based on ‘the pleasure’ of an avoidance of deeper symbolic meaning through ‘a refusal to be read as sexual, psychological or social allegories’ — an advance on the view that that they are fundamentally arid and ‘meaningless’ though this is.⁴⁴ The most successful stories are far more complex, and more haunted, than just conscious exercises in technique written by what Bloom calls a ‘psychic entertainer’.⁴⁵ James is accomplished in mediating historical and other discourses, deftly, slyly, and with the lightest of touches. Nevertheless, his choices are themselves revealing — and laden with meanings beyond what the author seems consciously to have intended.

⁴⁰ George E. Haggerty, *Queer Gothic* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 53.

⁴¹ Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, p. 152; and Michael Cox, *M. R. James: An Informal Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 142.

⁴² Cox, *M. R. James*, p. 149.

⁴³ Although this article has focused on James’s fictions, see, for example, Florence Goyet, *The Classic Short Story, 1870-1925: Theory of a Genre* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2014) amongst the many studies according critical weight to the form.

⁴⁴ Bloom, ‘M. R. James’, pp. 67, 70.

⁴⁵ Bloom, p. 70.