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Nobody Here Does Anything For Nothing: Reciprocity and Gender in The Wings of the Dove

By

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The first part of the title of this paper refers to a comment Lord Mark makes to Milly Theale, the heroine of Henry James' novel, The Wings of the Dove. Lord Mark's remark aptly summarizes one of the central themes of the story: exchange. Rather than purely economic transactions, exchanges occur within the context of (personal) relationships. Nobody performs a good deed without the expectation of receiving a benefit. The characters act out of self-interest instead of mutual friendship. The notable exception is Milly, who willingly shares her fortune and herself. Although Milly knows that exchange predominates among her acquaintances as a method of establishing and of maintaining relationships—indeed, *as* relationships—she refuses to behave similarly. Her refusal to join in this tactic becomes a powerful form of resistance. Ultimately, the mercenary tendencies of Merton Densher yield to the unselfishness he sees in Milly. This lesson prevents the pairing of Kate and Densher from succeeding.

I

With the exception of Alfred Habegger's study of the Jamesian concept of

“reciprocity,” the topic of exchange remains largely unexplored in James criticism. When critics have considered exchange, it is taken either as a material concept or as a contributing factor in James’ own morality and the ways the stories reflect it. In this regard, Habegger’s work focuses on the “moral sense of Henry James” as much as it does the novels (455). The preoccupation with morality typifies James scholarship of the time. Michael Moon explains that James’ moral “‘Vision’ in the more honorific sense of the term was a central concern of the pervasive New Critical interpretation of James as an idealist moralist” (442). More recently, critics such as Moon have offered psychoanalytic accounts of James’ novels, while others have considered the impact of James’ homosexuality, the role of women in the books and various combinations of both.^[i] Considering exchange as a method of social relations—that is, in terms of social psychology—rather than as a metaphor for social relations places the line of enquiry between the formal and the psychoanalytic strands of James criticism. Said another way, a social psychological approach based on the distinction between exchange and communal relationships provides a reading of The Wings of the Dove which expounds upon James’ vision of morality while remaining mindful of the importance of gender.^[ii] Further, such an approach affords an analysis of the internal workings of the relationships themselves as opposed to fitting these machinations within the over-arching rubric of moral codes.

Psychologically speaking, social exchange is a “perspective that views people as motivated to maximize benefits and minimize costs in their relationships with others” (Brehm and Kassin 248). Brehm and Kassin allow that “the language of social exchange comes straight from a certified public accountant” (249). Admittedly, this offers a reduced account of human interactions insofar as this account assumes equal (access to) power. Richard Emerson’s more nuanced theory of social exchange, commonly called “power dependence theory,” predicts that the conventions of social exchange depend on the level of the actors’ dependence on each other. Linda Molm explains that the theory’s scope is restricted to four conditions:

(1) actors who seek to increase outcomes they positively value and decrease outcomes they negatively value, (2) outcomes that obey a principle of satiation or declining marginal utility, (3) relations of mutual dependence in which the rewards obtained from others are contingent on rewards given in exchange, and (4) recurring exchanges over time between the same actors or [between] sets of actors. (114)

However, even a theory of social exchange such as Emerson's cannot account for all types of relationship. More recently, Margaret Clark and her colleagues have proposed two basic types of relationships in response Emerson's theory. Clark reformulates the concept of exchange by drawing a distinction between what she calls communal and exchange relationships:

In communal relationships, often exemplified by friendships and romantic relationships, people feel a special responsibility for one another's welfare. In exchange relationships, often exemplified by acquaintances and business relationships, people feel no special responsibility for the other's welfare. They give benefits with the expectation of receiving comparable benefits in return, or, in response to benefits previously received ("Manipulations" 414).
[iii]

The distinction between communal and exchange relationships is also important when considering the nature of the interactions between characters in The Wings of the Dove. Henry James' own belief in the importance of reciprocity as stated in his preface, informs and emphasizes this difference. While James uses the language of economics to describe and portray the relationships in the novel, his treatment of Milly Theale anticipates the theories of Emerson, Mills, and Clark. That is to say, Aunt Maud, Kate Croy, Merton Densher, and Lord Mark desire, and demand, tangible and comparable benefits as constitutive of their relationships, Milly merely wishes to live life.

Henry James adopts the word “reciprocity” to describe his vision of an appropriate relationship. Reciprocity implies a mutual dependence, or a mutual exchange of benefits between people or groups of people. This definition corresponds with Mills and Clark’s concept of exchange: the very definition of the word contingency. For Mills and Clark, “an exchange occurs when the parties involved understand that one benefit is given in return for another benefit” (“Difference” 687). In James’ text, Maud Lowder provides the earliest example of the use of exchange relationships. In reference to her aunt’s behaviour, Kate Croy gives Maud the title, “Britannia of the Market Place” (22). This fitting moniker applies not only to Maud herself, but also to the world in which she chooses to live—the “market place” of marriage and society. Britannia also implies the relationship between an empire and its colonies, or possessions. In Maud’s world, every relationship is an exercise in bartering. Her “florid philistinism” is actually described as militaristic:

She carried on, in short, behind her aggressive and defensive front, operations determined by her wisdom. It was, in front, as a besieger, we have hinted, that our young lady, in the provisioned citadel, had for the present most to think of her, and what made her formidable in this character was that she was unscrupulous and immoral. (22)

This Britannia, with a “pen on her ear” and a “ledger” for keeping track of her accounts, stands as a synecdoche for the very literal marketplace she inhabits (22). She is a colonizer, an immoral schemer, and a manipulator. Maud manipulates society through corrupt bargains and pacts, and other clandestine operations. It is into Maud’s world that Milly is thrust. Here, Lancaster Gate offers a microcosm of London society, for as James explains, “Mrs. Lowder *was* London, *was* life—the roar of the siege and the thick of the fray” (23). James’ condemnation of Maud’s behaviour extends metaphorically to the whole of the culture she so wonderfully typifies. Mrs. Lowder and others commit the wrong of treating human beings as items in a trade or as a form of currency, a currency whose base is marriage.

James draws the distinction between communal and exchange relationships by juxtaposing Maud and her money with Milly and her fortune. The distinction is important because the benefits occurring in a communal relationship need not be anything given voluntarily, or given under coercion. This would be unthinkable for Aunt Maud, who

sat somehow in the midst of her money, founded on it and surrounded by it. [. . .] Milly, about hers, had no manner at all—which was possibly, from a point of view, a fault, she was at any rate far away on the edge of it, and you hadn't, as might be said, in order to get at her nature, to traverse, by whatever avenue, any piece of her property. It was clear, on the other hand, that Mrs. Lowder was keeping her wealth as for purposes, imaginations, ambitions, that would figure as large, as honourably unselfish, on the day they should take effect. She would impose her will, but her will would only be that a person or two shouldn't lose a benefit by not submitting if they could be made to submit. (140)

James uses a favourite technique, the long dash, to emphasize the separation of Milly from her money, and therefore, Milly from the concept of trade as it pertains to human relations. No form of tender is necessary to gain Milly's favour. Mrs. Lowder and her behaviour, "on the other hand," separated from Milly by a timely use of cliché, as well as in practice, read like a definition of an exchange relationship. Maud uses what Linda Molm calls "reward power"—the threat of withholding benefits—to manipulate and coerce her conquests (130). Molm explains that generally, "a structural advantage on either reward power or coercion power reduces losses from retaliation by parties holding that same base of power. Thus actors with greater coercive power face less risk of loss from another's punitive retaliation and actors with greater reward power face less risk from the other's reward withholding" (130). Quite obviously, Maud holds coercive power over the others. Since it is not an absolute power, she acts to minimize her own risk. In terms of risk minimizing, Mills and Clark explain that "receipt of a benefit obligates the other to

give a comparable benefit. If the other minimizes the benefits received from the person, then that may be seen as unfairly reducing the other's debt to the person. [. . .] Exaggerating the person's benefits may be seen as unfairly increasing the size of the person's debt to the other" ("Exploitation" 229). In other words, the perceived value of the benefit decreases Aunt Maud's risk while increasing the others' debts to her. If reciprocation is not forthcoming, further benefits will be curtailed. Mrs. Lowder wields this power remorselessly. It should be remembered that Kate's assumption of a similar manipulative role is a response to, and a result of, her fear of Aunt Maud.

At Milly's first entrance into wider society, the dinner at Matcham, Mrs. Lowder literally is "driving a bargain." In this instance, Milly becomes the commodity being exchanged. Maud uses Milly and her "thumping bank-account" to gain an invitation to the dinner (253). In his clumsy way, Lord Mark attempts to explain this transaction to Milly: "To be seen you must recognize, *is* for you, to be jumped at; and, if it's a question of being shown, here you are again. Only it has now been taken out of your friend's hands; it's Mrs. Lowder already who's getting the benefit. Look round the table, and you'll make out, I think, that you're being, from top to bottom, jumped at" (110). Milly is the item up for bids on the social table. Lord Mark attempts to reassure Milly that this is a normal mode of behaviour and she should not be concerned because Mrs. Lowder definitely will recoup her money, for "Nobody here, you know, does anything for nothing" (114). As mentioned earlier, Maud's deployment of her power is not without some risk. Lord Mark acknowledges this fact in his comment to Milly. Although he also recognizes the limit of Mrs. Lowder's power, Michael Moon considers it to be phallic in nature: "Maud Lowder is the preeminent embodiment in The Wings of the Dove of the woman who is considered 'potent' by virtue of the fetishization by her society of her economic and social power: she presides over the phallicized world of the novel. [. . .] which entitles her to command a large, although by no means limitless amount of power" (430). It is curious that Moon includes the proviso that Aunt Maud's power is "by no means limitless." Phallic power generally translates into absolute, even arbitrary, authority.

The difference is that there is an inherent risk value in Aunt Maud's transactions. The risk exists because "Each actor is *dependent* on the other to the extent that the outcomes valued by one actor are contingent on exchange with the other" (Molm 114). Thus, Maud's power is not absolute because of the reward contingency. In her research, Linda Molm finds that "because the incentive to use coercion comes not from the power to coerce, but from dependence on another for rewards, coercion is still risky, even for actors who are advantaged in coercive power" (130). In spite of the assertion of her coercive power Maud is still dependent on Merton, Kate, and Milly. By acceding to it, they in fact reinforce Mrs. Lowder's power. This extreme perversion of an exchange relationship displays James' own very strong views in this regard. James is particularly hard on American tourists in Art of the Novel, whom he accuses of treating Europe as a vast painted and gilded holiday toy, serving up its purpose on the spot and for the time, but to be relinquished, sacrificed, broken, and cast away, at the dawn of any other convenience. It [Americans] seemed to figure this [Europe] not only as a gorgeous dressed doll, the most expensive plaything, no doubt, in the world, but as a *living* doll, precisely, who would speak and act and perform, all for a "charge"—which was the reason both of the amusement and of the cost. Only there was no more *responsibility* to a living doll than to a dead—so that, in fine, what seemed most absent from the frolic intercourse was the note of anything like reciprocity. (189)

In this passage, James draws a perfect distinction between a communal and an exchange relationship, between consumptive and consensual relationships. Alfred Habegger calls it the difference "between contracts and reciprocity. The American tourists pay the 'charge' and 'cost' of their amusement and thus fulfill their part of the bargain. Yet they fail to reciprocate in the sense that they treat Europeans not as people but dolls, using them as things and neglecting to respond to them as equals" (471). While this may be a somewhat idealistic view of Europeans and a correspondingly negative view of Americans, the distinction is clear. This is not merely the difference between manners and morals, as G.H. Bantock would have us believe.^[iv] James deplores relationships based merely and entirely on a trade of

goods or currency, but implores that people engage in communal relationships based on mutual concern and the recognition that the other is a human being. The effect of such a one-sided exchange relationship, James cautions, is the reduction, reification, and even fetishization of the other person, society, or nation. Thus, it is little surprise when this pattern maps onto a character such as Milly.

II

One of the great ironies in this text is that Kate Croy is the only character who is able to note—and use to her advantage—the distinction between communal and exchange relationships. Picking up where Lord Mark left off, Kate continues Milly's education, as the account from Lord Mark and the others “professed [it] frankly imperfect” (127). In order to rectify this situation, Kate did explain, for her listening friend; every one who had anything to give—it was true they were the fewest—made the sharpest possible bargain for it, got at least its value in return. [. . .] The worker in one connexion was the worked in another; it was as broad as it was long—with the wheels of the system, as might be seen, wonderfully oiled. (127-8)

As described, market exchanges form the foundation of this society and create a system of mutual exploitation. In this regard, Kate's previously mentioned attraction to Aunt Maud's wealth and society made her a willing inductee into this system. Predictably, Kate's acceptance rests upon Aunt Maud's conditions. Kate enumerates the consequences of these conditions to her father: “I shall have absolutely nothing to do with you; never see you, nor speak nor write to you, never go near you nor make you a sign, nor hold any sort of communication with you. What she requires is that you shall cease to exist for me” (11). Clearly, this is not much of a bargain. Kate has to sacrifice entirely her relationship with her father in return for the mere hope that Aunt Maud will find her a husband. As well, James' metaphor of the exchange system as a “wonderfully oiled” machine emphasizes its opposition to (his vision of) human nature. The system is automatic and thoughtless, in every way. However, the system depends on each part to act routinely. It would fail if someone simply refuses

to participate. To extend the metaphor, the gears would jam. Although Kate is able to understand the mechanics of the system, she confesses to Milly that she does not understand its logic:

“You may ask,” Kate said, “what in the world would *I* have to give; and that indeed is just what I’m trying to learn. There must be something, for her to think she can get it out of me. She *will* get it—trust her; and then I shall see what it is; which I beg you to believe I should never have found out for myself.” She declined to treat any question of Milly’s own “paying” power as discussable; that Milly would pay a hundred percent—and even to the end, doubtless through the nose—was just the beautiful basis on which they found themselves. (128)

This scene is an important crossroads, as it were, for both young women. At this point, their knowledge of the system relates only to its operations. Neither Kate, nor Milly, is aware of how either of them is to be used by the machine. Kate, having entered the arrangement voluntarily, assumes that Milly has done the same. That both of them will pay or be employed as payment is a foregone conclusion. Kate, however, desires further knowledge. Although both women will ultimately choose the future nature of their relationships, Milly chooses first. James informs us of her decision when he recounts Milly’s thoughts about Aunt Maud and Lord Mark, at dinner:

Those hours at Matcham [. . .] with humbugging old Lord Mark as a backer, were vain as ground for hopes and calculations. Lord Mark was very well, but he wasn’t *the* cleverest creature in England, and even if he had been he still wouldn’t have been the most obliging. He weighed it out in ounces, and indeed each of the pair [Lord Mark and Aunt Maud] was really waiting for what the others would put down. (198-9)

Thus, Kate confirms that what Milly had thought of as her high point—her *entrée* to society—is actually her *entrée* to the world of exchange. The scene becomes a parody

of a poker game, with human lives as wagers, and Milly as Maud's ante. Milly then decides she will never be a player in the game. She will do for others, expecting nothing in return, except that she might be allowed to live. Milly tries to explain her unique attitude to the oafish Lord Mark:

“No, I mustn't listen to you—that's just what I mustn't do. The reason is, please, that it simply kills me. I must be as attached to you as you will [. . .] I give you in return the fullest possible belief in what it would be [. . .] I give and give and give—there you are; stuck to me close as you like and see if I don't. Only I can't listen to or receive or accept—I can't *agree*. I can't make a bargain. I can't really.” (333)

To enter into a bargain is antithetical to Milly's being. The repetition of “give” recalls her earlier encounter with the Bronzino painting and Milly's comment that “she was dead, dead, dead” (157). This emphasizes Milly's altruistic behaviour and contrasts with Kate's duplicitous displays, in which greed and ambition are covered by her seeming altruism. Any good intentions that might be present are completely overwhelmed by predatory self-interest.

Here, the distinction between exchange and communal relationships delves more deeply into the moral play of the novel. In this regard, Frederick C. Crews, in *The Tragedy of Manners: Moral Drama in the Later Novels of Henry James*, states that in “purifying the motives of his characters James has reached a stage at which personal enmity is not only unnecessary to evil-doing, it is regarded as an element of moral redundancy” (59). Indeed, personal enmity is not at all a condition or a prerequisite for the exchange-based behaviours. Instead, these are centred entirely on self-interest. Thus, James portrays a situation in which good will becomes a means of exploiting rather than benefitting others. This is something more pernicious than the “moral redundancy” Crews describes. Milly's statement highlights the status of altruism in the relationships. In terms of the potential manipulation of altruism, Mills

and Clark explain, "Simply knowing one has a mutual communal relationship with another person in which each person is concerned with the other's welfare can be highly satisfying" ("Difference" 687). For those actually acting altruistically, the relationship offers its own reward as does the act of giving of oneself for the benefit of others. Lord Mark is incapable of drawing this distinction, as is Aunt Maud (Mrs. Lowder, in fact, wishes to exchange Milly for Kate in order to keep Densher in his place). However, it is Milly's preference for communal relationships which becomes, in many ways, the wings of the dove. These wings eventually spread to cover Merton Densher.

Once she understands how the exchange system works, Kate Croy sets about using it to her advantage: she follows the example presented to her by Aunt Maud. Like Mrs. Lowder, Kate employs Milly in her scheme. She also drags Densher unwittingly into this method of relating. There are two scenes which illuminate the nature of Kate and Merton's relationship. The first occurs before they enact the plan involving Milly. James tells us that Densher had always felt, however, that the more he asked of [Kate] the more he found her prepared, as he imaged it, to hand out. He said to her more than once before his absence: "You keep the key of the cupboard, and I foresee that when we're married you'll dole me out my sugar by lumps." She had replied that she rejoiced in his assumption that sugar would be his diet, and the domestic arrangement so prefigured might have seemed already to prevail. The supply from the cupboard at this hour was doubtless, of a truth, not altogether cloyingly sweet; but it met in a manner his immediate requirements. (227)

Here James uses sugar as a symbol for love, and more specifically, for sexual love. This allusion to Milly's sweetness contrasts further the attitudes of Kate and Milly towards relationships. Kate and Densher are in a simple mode of exchange. The sugar doled out is not cloyingly sweet because it merely reflects the returned benefit. In terms of the morality, Dorothea Krook comments in *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* that what is "so difficult and puzzling (and profoundly deceptive) is that

the exploitation is perfectly compatible, it seems, with the most genuine devotion to Milly herself" (204–5). Within the moral paradigm, the situation seems paradoxical. Yet, this is the very contingency of Kate's manipulation of the relationships through her growing and consuming knowledge of the workings of exchange and communal relationships. As Mills and Clark state, "an exchange occurs when the partner understands the one benefit is given in return for another benefit" ("Difference" 686). In James' text, Kate only gives Densher what is required to keep him interested. The second scene that illuminates Densher and Kate's relationship occurs when Densher returns to Kate, after being with Milly. Enjoying the spoils of colonialism, tea served from a silver kettle, they discuss the outcome of their endeavours:

"Ah," said Kate, with a gleam of gaiety, "you've done it to please *me*" But she was already, with her gleam reverting, reverting a little. "What I don't understand is—won't you have any sugar?"

[Densher replies] "Yes please."

"What I don't understand," she [Kate] went on when she had helped him, "is what it was that had occurred to bring her round again. If she gave you up for days, what brought her back to you?" (455)

Kate wants to know why Densher stayed with Milly, and vice-versa. Previously, she had asked, "You went only to oblige her?" (452). Kate is unable to comprehend why anyone would act for any reason other than one of constant exchange: there must be something tangible in return. James cleverly, perhaps heavy handedly, uses the tea and sugar image to recall the earlier scene. James again uses the long dash, but this time to directly connect Kate, and her inability to understand communal relationships, with Milly. He also writes of the "ironic oddity of their going into it over the tea-table" (455). Curiously, Densher is the one who recognizes this irony. In this case, Kate gives up the sugar too easily, as she did earlier in Venice. The two scenes just described speak to the important difference between Densher and Kate as the story develops. Kate is able to recognize the distinction between an exchange relationship and a communal relationship, but she is, by her own admission, unable

to understand the difference. The latter scene demonstrates how Densher recognizes the two modes of relationship. Kate reveals her knowledge of the difference between exchange relationships and communal relationships to Densher when she persuades him to go to Milly. She wants him to ask Mrs. Stringham to lie on his behalf. Kate immediately remarks, "Well then to please Milly . . . Don't you feel by this time that there's nothing Susan Shepherd won't do for you?" (377). Kate realizes that Susan will act out of a need to make Milly happy. Making Densher happy will make Milly happy by extrapolation. The apparent logic of this strategy elicits Densher's acquiescence. As James relates, Densher had verily after an instant to take it in, so sharply it corresponded with the good lady's recent reception of him. It was queerer than anything again, the way they all came together round him. But that was an old story, and Kate's multiplied lights led him on and on. It was with a reserve, however, that he confessed this. "She's ever so kind. Only her view of the right thing may not be the same as yours." (377) Densher, as usual, fails to grasp the meaning of what Kate tells him. This is in part due to Kate leading him "on and on" by carefully doling out the sugar. Kate further explains, "How can it be anything different if it's the view of serving you" (377).

It is important to note that Milly is referred to as "sweet" in at least two instances (185, 204). The first instance occurs after Milly tells Kate, "Nothing to worry about. I shall need a little watching, but I shan't have to do anything dreadful, or even in the least inconvenient. I can do in fact as I like" (185). When Milly suggests that she will not be a burden to anyone Kate responds, "My love, you're too sweet! It's too dear" (185). The irony, of course, is that Kate also means that Milly gives of herself too freely and for little in return. The second mention of Milly's sweetness occurs when Milly acknowledges being "sweetly secretive" when she decided to keep quiet (204). More important, however, is the indirect reference to Milly's sweetness on the previous page. After Kate tells her, "you're a dove," Milly learns the "measure of success she could have as a dove" (203-4). Milly's consciously "dovelike" behaviour disarms Mrs. Lowder. Once again, James invokes images of sweetness to emphasize

the difference between the characters through the difference between exchange and altruism. The result is that the “luscious innuendo of it, almost startling, lingered in the room, after the visitors had gone, like an oversweet fragrance. But left alone with Mrs. Stringham Milly continued to breathe it: so that she studied again the dovelike and so set her companion to more rich reporting that she averted all enquiry into her own case” (203). Thus, Milly’s sweetness becomes a method defense or resistance against the methods of those around her. In *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James*, Dorothea Krook suggests that “Milly knows nothing of these material pressures that lie beneath the gracious surface, and therefore knows nothing of their demoralising effects upon the human spirit” (204). However, this is precisely the source of Milly’s power, a power far greater than that offered by her wealth. Perhaps this is the reason Michael Moon is unable to account decisively for Milly in his Lacanian reading of the novel. After Milly’s momentous meeting with Sir Luke Strett, Moon maintains, “The range of grotesque possibilities here includes Milly’s having been either castrated or circumcised, but probably more than either of these what is going on here at the psychosexual level is the bestowal of a (redundant) phallus on the rich American girl whose fortune has already phallicized her in most other people’s eyes” (432). Moon rightly recognizes that the other characters attribute Milly’s power to her wealth, but he shares in their misrecognition. This occurs in spite of the insight that Aunt Maud is uncertain about Milly’s status: “Maud Lowder, as one might expect, is less anxious although curious enough about Milly’s phallic status” (432). However, the emphasis on Milly’s wealth, both for the characters and for the critic, is misplaced, particularly in light of Milly’s effect on Merton Densher.

Though Densher finally realizes that Susan’s love for Milly prevents her from allowing Milly to be hurt, he still assumes an exchange must occur for all parties because he then asks Kate how this benefits her. Naturally, Kate has already accounted for this angle; as she concludes, “it helps you—put it then [. . .] serving her. In this way, she keeps him in line. Later she reminds him, “I’m taking a trouble for you I never dreamed I should take for any human creature” (377). Kate recalls the

sacrifice she is making, allowing her lover to go to another woman, and the sacrifices that she has already made, especially giving up her father and giving herself to Densher. This binds Densher, temporarily, in an exchange relationship. Mills and Clark again inform us that “The orderly trading of costly benefits that forms the basis of a [modern] market economy depends on the exchange norm that the receipt of a benefit incurs an obligation to return the comparable benefit” (“Difference” 685). Kate recognizes the distinction but never acts on it, except to use her knowledge to her own advantage. For example, she trusts Milly’s powerful communal spirit in order to subject Densher. Kate knows that Densher will consider the exchange value of the relationship. Predictably, Densher remarks to Kate that Milly has “treated me as if *I* were somebody. [. . .] I do see that it’s quite court life” (368). By “court life,” Densher means a relationship of pure exchange. In stark contrast to Kate, Merton is unable to grasp Milly’s true intentions. Kate encourages this misconception because she sees that Milly’s wings have “spread themselves for protection. Hadn’t they, for that matter, lately taken an inordinate reach [such that] everyone else was nestling under them to great increase of immediate ease?” (373). Thus, Kate clearly chooses not only to act in a trading fashion but to subvert Milly’s spreading community of fellow feeling. Therefore, Densher’s ultimate repudiation of Kate and her method of transacting emphasizes the fact that she has made the wrong choice. At the same time, it reveals the power of Milly’s resistance through her altruism.

III

As the first sugar scene suggests, Densher buys into the economic view of relationships quite readily. This is easily explained by the rewards Kate offers him in return for his compliance. Although the majority of exchange relationships in this novel are of a negative or exploitative nature, they need not be that way. Densher was originally quite happy with the sugar analogy, as he indicates. However, as Kate requests more of him, so he requests more of her, and this culminates in the episode in Venice. Densher complains “What I want is to be loved. How can I feel at this rate that I *am*? [. . .] I can go on with help. But I can’t go on without” (359). So desperate is

Densher for “payback” that he promises Kate, “I’ll tell any lie you want, any your idea requires, if you’ll only come to me” (360). This move reverses their situations, so that when Kate submits to Densher’s request he becomes the exploiter. Mills and Clark explain a “type of communication perceived as exploitative in exchange relationships involves the other’s minimizing his or her ability to benefit the person *after* the person has benefited the other” (“Exploitation” 229). That is to say, Densher reduces his ability to benefit Kate after he receives a reward from her. Once Kate provides for Merton in advance, his need for further benefits diminishes. Indeed, “such a communication would reduce the other’s [Densher’s] obligation to fulfill the debt” (“Exploitation” 229). Eventually the relationship with Milly takes precedence. Densher begins to feel a responsibility for Milly because he cares for her—more than he cares for Kate.

This derives from the power Milly exerts by *not* acting coercively in her dealings with Densher. It might even be argued that Milly behaves as a passive-aggressive, but even so, the power derived is hardly phallic. Eventually, Densher tells Kate, “I stay [with Milly] because I’ve got to” (396). Whereas his relationship with Kate is a “bargain,” his relationship with Milly costs him nothing. Densher realizes that he “was mixed up in her fate, or her fate it was true, was mixed up in *him*, so that a single false motion might either way snap the coil. They helped him it was true, these considerations, to a degree of eventual peace, for what they luminously amounted to was that the girl’s leave [. . .] to the need again simply to be kind” (398). James again offers a mechanical metaphor, the coiled spring that powers a timepiece’s movement; in other words, its prime-mover. This is an interesting and appropriate extension of the mechanical metaphor, for two important provisos must be observed to ensure the proper operation of a timepiece: first, the spring needs to be wound, or maintained, on regular basis; second, too much winding of the spring can do irreparable harm to it. The metaphor of the spring serves an important structural role as well, beyond just linking the doubled heroines to Merton Densher through the theme of exchange. The fact that Densher responds differently, even contrarily, to Kate informs the symmetry of the tale. Northrop Frye observes that “The story

proceeds toward an end which echoes the beginning, but echoes it in a different world. The beginning is the demonic parody of the end, and the action takes place on two levels of experience" (49). The second level corresponds to what Frye calls the "recognition of the demonic and its separation from the progressive or surviving elements which would be the restoring of the broken of memory" (145). Clearly, the belief in the barter system represents the demonic level. Densher's recognition occurs when he realizes that as far as his relationship with Milly is concerned, "The greatest of his expenses really was to walk to the palace to dinner" (398). He also acknowledges that "being 'nice' [. . .] in its own form was the real law" (398). This realization not only signals the start of Densher's turn, it distinguishes him from Lord Mark, with whom he is paired in the narrative. This completes the process that began at Milly's party, at the end of Book Eight.

After Milly makes her appearance in old lace and a magnificent string of pearls, Densher realizes that he cannot enter the world of economic exchange. He cannot give Kate similar riches, but as Julie Olin-Ammentorp notes, he is, "for the first time, able to assess the power her plan gives him" (45). Densher sees that he has been manipulated by Kate. Olin-Ammentorp attributes this to "the shakiness of Densher's sense of gender identity" (46). However, in bargaining with each other, "Densher and Kate also realign their roles with normative gender roles" (45). This is not in any way inconsistent with the conventions of the novel. Frye explains that "the structural core [of a narrative] is the individual loss or confusion or break in the continuity of identity" (104). The story is resolved following the recognition of the lost or shaken identity. Frye finds that the "favorite device employed is what [he calls] a talisman of recognition, some emblem or object [. . .] which symbolizes the original identity" (145). In this case, the "long, priceless chain, wound twice round the neck," contributes to the talisman, which is the image of the dove. Olin-Ammentorp and Moon see gender and sexual identity confusion as (the root-cause of) Densher's difficulty, and these derive from James' own position. Yet, the confusion reflects James' professional as well as his personal tendencies. This is why Moon can observe that the "oddest thing" in the novel is "the sudden emergence—in a novel ostensibly

about how Merton's romantic passion for Kate becomes transmuted into his spiritual passion for Milly—of a homosexual thematic at this climactic point" (437).^[v] Thus, gender confusion and the moral of the novel are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Olin-Ammentorp observes that "For all its deconstruction of gender roles, however, the novel finally seems to revert to them. [...] The three principal players in the drama are all effectively punished for their divergences from the norm" (50). Indeed, Merton, Milly and Kate are effectively punished and they do diverge from the norm. However, it is as much a convention of the novel as a transcendence of convention. It is the divergence of Kate and Densher, in the form of their mercenary ways, that emphasizes their polar opposition to Milly's beneficence.

Obviously, Densher realizes that his relationship with Milly could be tenuous because of her physical condition. Mills and Clark cite caring for an ill loved one as typical of communal relationships ("Difference" 687). Eventually, Merton adopts this mode of behaviour. He pays nothing, does nothing, and (still) receives the benefit of peace of mind. On its face, Densher's self-interest—after all, freely giving of oneself to care for another not only ingratiates, but makes one a "better person"—appears to contradict the spirit in which such a gesture should be intended. Yet, Mills and Clark also find that selfish behaviour can occur even in communal relationships, "in the sense that people may follow communal norms to achieve some other goal" ("Difference" 686). Densher's conversion further suggests the power of Milly's resistance—whether conscious or unconscious—to the strict exchange conventions of the social circle to which she belongs. While Densher's conversion proceeds from selfish origins, it is almost successful. Indeed, the abortive return to Kate makes the failure a more profound one and highlights the underlying cause. Densher offers Milly's money to Kate, as "a tribute for a sacrifice by which I can peculiarly recognize [...] the admirable nature of your own sacrifice. You were capable in Venice of an act of splendid generosity" (495). Sadly, Densher's (sarcastic) offer is ill-timed and insufficient and its failure forces him to fully realize the error he has made. Merton does repudiate Milly's money, causing Kate to acknowledge, "You'll marry me without the money; you won't marry me with it. If I don't consent *you* don't" (508).

Nonetheless, Kate continues to impose conditions of exchange on their relationship. Kate demands his “word of honour” that he is not in love with Milly; Densher asserts that he will marry Kate, “in an hour,” but as poor people (509). It is appropriate that Kate remarks that they will never be as they were. Densher is able to participate in a communal relationship with Milly, but not with Kate. Kate wishes to negotiate a new contract and is met with reciprocal demands rather than Densher’s love. Her inability to behave in a communal fashion determines all of her relationships.

In his preface, Henry James explains that this is the very heart of the story, “the gain recorded or the loss incurred” (xxx). James plays this game with his reader, as he admits, “It [the novel] stood there, with secrets and compartments, with possible treacheries and traps; it might have a great deal to give, but would probably ask for equal services in return, and would collect this debt to the last shilling” (xxx). James’ stance with regard to reciprocity does, however, make the distinction between a relationship involving a mere exchange of goods and a real exchange of human compassion.^[vi] Although James seeming crosses the lines of gender and sexual identities, he does so within the conventions of the genre. This emphasizes the transgression because the “normal” identity must be recovered; “spiritual passion” is the ideal state. In this regard, the difference between Milly and all the others is that she is the only one who gives without thinking of receiving and she alone gets what she wants: Densher’s love.

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Notes

^[i]Eric Savoy's essays "The Queer Subject of The Jolly Corner" (Henry James Review 20.1 (1999): 1-21), and "Embarrassments: Figure in the Closet." (HJR 20.3 (1999): 227-36.) as well as Kathleen McColley's paper, "Claiming Centre Stage: Speaking out for Homoerotic Empowerment in The Bostonians (HJR 21.2 (2000): 151-69) are two recent examples of the trend in James scholarship. Although his psychoanalytic study was ground-breaking in its own right, Moon cites Leon Edel's attention to James' homosexuality in Henry James: The Treacherous Years, 1895-1901 (New York:

Lippincott, 1969) as an important influences on subsequent criticism.

[ii] This approach also lends itself to a study of What Maisie Knew. Essentially, Maisie learns that the adult world is all about exchange and she tries to operate in that world. The relationship between Milly and Densher, in which the man seeks to marry for money, has many parallels with that of Isabel Archer and Gilbert Osmond in The Portrait of a Lady.

[iii] The distinction between exchange and communal relationships is particularly appropriate in an academic setting. In an ideal situation we would all freely share our thoughts and information with one another, out of the goodness of our hearts, expecting nothing in return. Our reward would be the knowledge that we had helped a colleague. Reality, however, suggests that this is not always the case.

[iv] "Morals and Civilization in Henry James." Cambridge Journal 7 (1953): 159-81.

[v] Moon offers his own uncertain take regarding Densher's uncertain identity. He suggests that a position such as Densher's can be "adopted by males as mystics, as certain types of homosexuals, and even as heterosexuals [. . .] the Merton Densher of the last part of the novel is an exalted composite of all three of these roles" (433).

[vi] Interestingly, in The Bostonians, the protagonist, Basil Ransom laments "The whole generation is womanized [. . .] The masculine tone is passing out of the world; it's a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age. [. . .] The masculine character [. . .] that is what I want to preserve, or rather, as I may say, to recover" (290). In this case, the lost identity which must be resolved is more clearly portrayed as that of "masculine character." Again, crossing the gender line is as socially unconventional as it is literarily conventional; the latter emphasizes the former.

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