

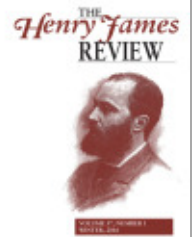


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The Men Who Knew Too Much ed. by Susan M. Griffin, Alan Nadel (review)

Will McMorran

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(Review)



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Book Reviews

Susan M. Griffin and Alan Nadel, eds.
The Men Who Knew Too Much.
Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012. 288 pp.
\$31.95 (paperback).

By Will McMorran, *Queen Mary*
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On the face of it *The Men Who Knew Too Much* should not work as wonderfully as it does. Though Hitchcock was a serial adaptor of fiction, as the editors point out in their introduction, he never adapted any of James's works. If it might at first seem peculiar—Hitchcockian even—to bring these two strangers together, it is only because the approach taken here is rather different to the one we have been used to in recent years. For the last two decades, comparative studies of literature and film have been dominated by the increasingly popular field of adaptation studies, and this context only adds to one's sense of the originality of this volume. Rather than getting bogged down in questions of influence or fidelity, the scholars here embrace the freedom they have been allowed by the editors to pair texts and films in interesting and often surprising ways. Fortunately for the coherence of the volume, this freedom does not produce disparity. Like the works of James and Hitchcock, the essays here resonate with each other, and shared themes soon emerge.

Susan Griffin's opening chapter explores the complex public personae of the two imposing figures of Hitchcock and James and subtly traces their "national loyalties, isolations and alliances" on the "physical contours" of their (portly) bodies (34). The following two chapters develop the theme of nationality, with Brenda Austin-Smith finding striking parallels between James's ambassadors and Hitchcock's spies in *The 39 Steps* and Brian T. Edwards juxtaposing the "cinematic perspective" of James's travels in a Pullman car in *The American Scene* with Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (53). The theme of knowledge—intimate, hidden, forbidden—then comes to the fore in chapters 4 to 9. Alan Nadel grounds a witty exploration of the relationship between

interpretation and perception in the use of homophones, while Mary Ann O'Farrell uncovers primal scenes in a range of works by James and Hitchcock—scenes in which sex and knowledge collide to produce “concussive knowledge.”

Patrick O'Donnell's “James's Birdcage/Hitchcock's Birds” is a stimulating essay about the reading of signs, dense with insights but also rather densely expressed (we learn, for example, that James and Hitchcock “employ a specificity that intensifies relative to the degree of reflexivity signifying consignment of the real to the realm of the utterly indeterminate, marked above all by endless simulations of the factual, the reduplicative” [85]). The chapters by Donatella Izzo and Judith Roof further develop the theme of hidden and dangerous knowledge, and the pairing of “The Figure in the Carpet” and *Marnie* in the latter of these is particularly compelling. The remaining chapters include a thoughtful exploration of “scenic topography” (143) in James's later fiction and Hitchcock's *Vertigo* by Eric Savoy and an incisive study of paternal substitutions in *What Maisie Knew* and *Shadow of a Doubt* by Thomas B. Myers. Occasionally the binary emphasis of the volume means that other pertinent inter-texts are conspicuous by their absence: there is no room, for example, for Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* in Aviva Briefel's discussion of *The Turn of the Screw* and *Psycho*. Overall, however, the pairing of texts and films works very effectively.

Special mention must be made of two outstanding essays that for me were the highlights of a very fine volume: Jonathan Freedman's study of “Hands, Objects, and Love” in *The Golden Bowl* and *Notorious*, in which touch becomes a metonym for the power of word and image to transcend their limitations and “engage the reader or viewer in a space beyond language or screen” (141); and John Carlos Rowe's “Caged Heat,” a comparative analysis of *In the Cage* and *Rear Window* that subtly reveals the subversive nature of these two representations of female rebellion. Rowe persuasively presents these two works as “phantasmatic revolutions” (188) that ultimately paved the way for the telling of subsequent stories of feminine agency.

The Men Who Knew Too Much will no doubt become required reading for scholars of both James and Hitchcock, but the originality and imagination with which literature and film are brought together here mean it deserves the attention of a much broader readership.