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Pamela Thurschwell

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Theory to Die for: Lunging at the Arras in Wilde's *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* and James's "The Figure in the Carpet"

By Pamela Thurschwell,
University of Sussex

> "To die for one's theological opinions is the worst use a man can make of his life; but to die for a literary theory! It seemed impossible."
>
> —Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*

> "He called it letters, he called it life—it was all one thing."
>
> —Henry James, "The Figure in the Carpet"

Consider this plotline: After being told a story and provided with some evidence (a sixteenth-century portrait/the author's word), a nameless protagonist becomes obsessed with finding the key to a great author's works. He devotes his life to figuring out the author's secret, hoping to write an irrefutable work of literary criticism that will lay bare the truth for the world to see. He involves himself in a chain of intense relationships with others, talking long into the night in bedrooms and gentlemen's clubs about the possible contours of the theory. Everyone he tells gets caught up in the schema and repeatedly re-reads the works of the author, trying to solve the puzzle. Those he involves catch the desire to uncover the secret of the author's work, almost as if literary interpretation itself were a transmissible disease, the symptoms of which wax and wane. The narrator goes through stages where he loses interest in the theory, but he inevitably returns to his obsession. A time comes when it seems as if a solution

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is within reach, but then the evidence slips away. The answer to the riddle, the key to the author's works, is never discovered, and the story ends ambiguously, on a satiric note, as if the narrator is unsure about how seriously to take his quest. Nonetheless, it is implied that the attempt to decipher the mystery will continue, both for the narrator and for others, perhaps indefinitely.

As a keen reader of the title of this article, you may have already guessed that I'm describing here the plot of not one but two late-nineteenth-century works, Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889) and Henry James's "The Figure in the Carpet" (1896).[1] My purpose here, initially, is to draw attention to their remarkable structural similarities and ask whether James's story can be read as an oblique response to Wilde's *Portrait*. Tempted as I was to forge a portrait of James actually reading *Portrait*, I restrained myself. Instead, I will tell you I have no actual proof that James was responding consciously to *Portrait* when he wrote "Figure," although the prominent placement of Wilde's story in *Blackwood's Magazine* and James's documented interest in Wilde make it highly likely that he would have read it.[2] But even without my establishing a direct connection of influence, the two works are uncannily thematically resonant as well as structurally similar, both posing questions about how we read that became centrally important to twentieth-century literary theory. Although both works have often been read as parodies of literary critics, they both also toy with the serious possibility that the pursuit of a literary theory might resemble an erotic obsession and might result in, not the death of the author, but the death of the critic who follows his (usually his) literary object to his (usually his) eventual extinction.

To better understand the ways in which Wilde and James approach literary criticism in *Portrait* and "Figure"—as a potentially erotic or deadly enterprise; as a trivial pursuit or as a life's calling—I will consider their shared investment in Shakespeare. Shakespeare appears in the works of both authors as a larger-than-life exemplar of exquisite authorial mastery, but his work simultaneously functions as a textual corpus unmoored, or extractable, from its author, a space that opens up creative possibilities for the critic. James's late works on Shakespeare (his short story, "The Birthplace" [1903] and his preface to *The Tempest* [1907]), especially, reveal a central conflict between his devotion to an autonomous artwork and his desire for an all-masterful artist. Reading these writings of James's in conjunction with the ways his stories about literary criticism prefigure one strand of New Criticism—the critics William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's positing of the intentional fallacy—can help us understand the apparent paradoxes in James's relationship to Shakespeare. It also might help us see the lingering desire for authorial mastery in Wimsatt and Beardsley and the ways in which New Criticism, like James, cannot entirely disentangle itself from the lure of an oracular author.[3]

I'll conclude by asking how the intense desire of a literary critic to *know* a text's, or an author's, secrets relates to the violence that appears, surprisingly, in James's preface to *The Tempest* as well as in "Figure" and *Portrait*'s numerous deaths. The body count in both stories seems inordinately high for works that are ostensibly about literary criticism. The deaths that take place in the works are not, as one might expect if the stories were focused on authors rather than critics, Oedipal, *Anxiety of Influence*-type murders, in which a writer struggles to surpass or replace a colossal, intimidating artistic precursor.[4] Rather, the numerous deaths of literary critics in these works appear simultaneously melodramatic and insignificant. Carriage crashes and

suicide are treated ironically, as semi-comic events. These deaths serve to make the affective stakes of literary speculation uncertain. A tone of ironic bemusement points toward the deaths of critics as finally unimportant for the artistic world; critics may die and worms may eat them, but great art will march impassively on. On the other hand, the ways in which criticism is imagined as a kind of passion, equivalent to an erotic one, suggests a different valence to the act of literary interpretation. Because literary criticism as an activity is clearly parallel to sex in both works, it also enables intimate relations between men (and once, between a man and woman), establishing a kind of community of readers or believers. James's "Figure," written in 1896, the year after Wilde's trials, flirts with the erotic intensities of reading that appear more starkly in Wilde's *Portrait*, even as it also distances itself from the critical-sexual stakes of Wilde's story. Yet both works engender a future for literary criticism through their wry imagining of theory as passed on, like a sexually transmitted disease but also, like a legacy, a promise of more reading to come.[5]

Before we enter more fully into these arguments, we should recall the vexed publication history of *Portrait*, as well as its complex plot. It was originally published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1889 as a story of 12,000 words and three sections. Wilde later expanded the piece to 26,000 words, adding two lengthy sections on Neo-platonic male friendship and art criticism as well as a much expanded reading of the sonnets in relation to the name Willie Hughes. Although frequently advertised as about to appear in the *Yellow Book* in 1893 and 1894, the publication of the expanded version of *Portrait* was indefinitely delayed. Wilde's trials intervened in 1895, and, unsurprisingly, the longer version of the story, offering a blatant defense of Shakespeare's love for a boy actor, did not see the light of day at the time.[6] If James read any version, it would have been the 1889 one.

Although *Portrait* has been read as a critical essay, offering an at least semi-serious interpretation of the sonnets, it also contains a melodramatic storyline about relations between men, in which theory itself becomes an object of affective exchange and transmission.[7] In the beginning of the story, the nameless narrator is told by his friend Erskine the tragic tale of Erskine's old school friend Cyril Graham and his devotion to the theory that "Mr. W. H.," to whom the sonnets were dedicated, was Willie Hughes, a boy player in Shakespeare's company. To convince Erskine of the truth of this theory, Graham forged a painting of Willie Hughes and pretended to discover it at a stately home. Erskine was won over until he discovered that the painting was a fake and renounced the theory. Graham then killed himself, claiming in his suicide note to Erskine that his death would prove his unwavering belief in the theory. Upon hearing this story from Erskine, the narrator too becomes obsessed with the truth of the Willie Hughes theory and begins his own mission to ratify it, despite Erskine's insistence on its falsity. Much of *Portrait* is a critical exegesis of the theory and of other tenets of aestheticism, including Wilde's defenses of homoerotic love. The narrator's impassioned letter detailing his own reading of the sonnets eventually re-convinces Erskine of the reality of Willie Hughes, although, subsequent to writing down and sending the letter to Erskine the narrator himself loses faith in the theory. Erskine, dismayed by the narrator's loss of faith just as he has regained his own, goes abroad and writes to the narrator saying that, like Cyril Graham, he plans to take his own life to prove the theory. The narrator rushes to his side, only to discover that Erskine has died, but, in a final twist, his death was not suicide. Rather, he suc-

cumbed to a fatal disease that he knew he had. The narrator winds up in possession of the forged portrait.

Critics have read the story in a variety of ways: as a parody of literary criticism, as an assertion of Wilde's homosexuality, as serious Shakespeare criticism. *Portrait*'s tone is equivocal throughout, alternately passionately invested in a serious interpretation of the sonnets that highlights Shakespeare's love for a man and, simultaneously, in a characteristic Wildean move, dispassionately disavowing all seriousness.[8] James's "Figure," written in 1896, the year after Wilde's trials, also flirts with the erotic intensities of reading in ways that seem to respond to the erotic intensities of *Portrait*. How might James, as he worked on his short stories about literary criticism and critics in the 1890s, have absorbed *Portrait*'s paradoxical adoption—and repudiation—of a theory of the homoerotic source of Shakespeare's sonnets? One compelling way to read the two works together is to see "Figure" as a disavowal of *Portrait*'s explicit investment in the homoerotic energies of literature and of literary theorizing. Both "Figure" and *Portrait* portray literary theorizing as a largely homosocial activity, something that happens intensely, between men, often late at night in gentlemen's clubs or other Sedgwickian spaces.[9] The narrator's obsession in *Portrait* begins for him after dining with Erskine "in his pretty little house in Birdcage Walk," "sitting in the library over our coffee and cigarettes, when the question of literary forgeries happened to turn up in conversation" (Wilde 302). The nameless narrator in "Figure" is hooked into the chase when the author Vereker pulls him aside in the corridor outside his bedroom at a house party after discovering that the narrator had written an anonymous review of Vereker's latest work, which Vereker had unknowingly disparaged earlier in the evening. The narrator protests that

> no bones were broken, . . . but he moved with me to my own door, his hand upon my shoulder, kindly feeling for a fracture; and on hearing that I had come up to bed he asked leave to cross my threshold and just tell me in three words what his qualification of my remarks had represented. (*FC* 279)

Literary theories are represented as part of an intimate exchange network between men, involving a giving or withholding of knowledge, sometimes even lying. Critical pursuit and close reading—the relationship between author and literary critic and between critic and critic—is represented as a kind of flirtation.

Flirtation and disavowal are two words that have also been used to describe the relationship of mutual influence and rivalry between James and Wilde.[10] Recent criticism has drawn out the multiple thematic and biographical threads that conjoin James's and Wilde's works and careers: their relations to the late-nineteenth-century literary marketplace and their involvement with late-nineteenth-century theater, their overlapping social circles, and their dealings with aestheticism and consumer culture (Freedman, Gagnier, Mendelssohn). However, as critics have also pointed out, the two writers' contrasting relationships to homosexuality have become especially central to critical readings of them together (Mendelssohn 813). A great deal of critical work on Wilde and James, early on (in Edel's biography) and, more recently, stemming from Foucauldian queer theoretical readings of the 1980s and '90s (following in the wake of Sedgwick on homosexual panic in *Epistemology of the Closet* and Sinfield, Bris-

tow, and Ed Cohen on Wilde's trials), has concentrated on their arguably shared, but very differently inhabited, sexuality.[11] The critical consensus is that Wilde is blatant, James, latent. Wilde flaunts what James hides. In their writing they both manipulate language, finding ways to speak about sex and sexuality obliquely in a code for the initiated (imagine, for a moment, Fanny Assingham and Bunbury meeting up), but in real life, Wilde trafficked in bodies, while James's eroticism, it is usually assumed, remained theoretical.

The division I posit here between James as disembodied (critically excited by "figures") and Wilde as embodied (critically excited by "portraits") is obviously unsustainable. James's most famous novel was *The Portrait of a Lady*, and his writing is almost always about sex, unless it is about having missed your chance to have it.[12] Similarly, Wilde revels in language and the forgeries and fakes that language makes possible. His aestheticism (Pater's but also Huysman's) values the fake over the real, the representation over the thing itself. Since the portrait in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* is a forgery, it functions as a figure for the power of *imagining* Shakespeare's homoerotic desire rather than tangible proof of the truth that a love object named Willie Hughes existed. The painting of Willie Hughes is more allegorical than indexical, more creative than biographical. Aestheticism's focus on the forgery, the fake, the artificial, the unnatural appealed to queer artists trying simultaneously to hide and construct a nascent queer identity. But while these similarities and convergences in their writing around aestheticism have also been noted, James and Wilde are usually parsed, biographically, as the sexually active, embodied, flagrant Wilde and the sexually inactive, disembodied, bachelor James, who, after Wilde's trials in 1895, retreats from Wilde's negative example. Can seeing "Figure" as in dialogue with *Portrait* help open up other interpretations without totally discarding this admittedly useful, if somewhat simplified, paradigm? Could James be, at least in his writings on literary critics, laughing with, as well as recoiling from, Wilde?

William A. Cohen is one of the few critics to have noted the similarities between "Figure" and *Portrait*. Cohen suggests that James's stories about literary critics, "The Aspern Papers" and "Figure," featuring single-minded narrators who reject heterosexuality in pursuit of male authors and the meaning of their texts, may function as a kind of container for the fears released by Wilde's trials about the relationship between reading Wilde's ambiguous texts and his dissident sexuality. The trials served to dismantle Wilde's ambiguous coding and signaling: "The balance struck in Wilde's work between the literary and the sexual was eventually upset by the eruption of scandal: in the trials, the Crown insisted on deciphering the connotativeness that Wilde argued was formative of literature" (Cohen 193). The newspaper reports of Wilde's trials, as critics such as Alan Sinfield and Ed Cohen have also argued, focused not just on Wilde's actions but also on his writings and his visual image to hang a definitive (criminal, homosexual) meaning on him. The arguments for Wilde's "posing as a so[m]domite" were prosecuted by Edward Carson through his own critical readings of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and, briefly, *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.:* Pursuing the meaning of a passage from *Dorian Gray* the prosecuting attorney, Edward Carson, read out Basil Hallward's declaration to Dorian Gray, "I quite admit that I adored you madly," prompting Wilde's refutation, "I have never given adoration to anybody except myself." Carson continued, "Then you have never had that feeling?" "No. The whole idea was borrowed from Shakespeare. I regret to say—yes, from Shakespeare's sonnets" (Hyde 112–13).

> This answer immediately put Carson on to another line of questioning. "I believe you have written an article to show that Shakespeare's sonnets were suggestive of unnatural vice?"
>
> "On the contrary I have written an article to show that they are not. I objected to such a perversion being put on Shakespeare." This reply appeared to satisfy Carson, as he returned to his reading of *Dorian Gray*. (113)

Wilde's characteristic use of paradox to assert that Shakespeare's love for Willie Hughes in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* reveals Shakespeare's *lack* of perversion in the sonnets can be read in at least three ways. Our first reaction might be that, for very good reasons, Wilde is simply lying to defend himself and his work from criminal charges. A second interpretation is to see him as equivocating, based on the fact that within the framework of the story, the theory is shown to be false. *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, the theory, is a fake, because the portrait of Mr. W. H. in the story is a fake. The story shows that the Willie Hughes theory is not true, even if it may appeal to perverse readers.[13] Finally, there is the queer-positive reading of Wilde's statements, which is that homosexuality is being trickily defended here by Wilde. It is not an unnatural vice but rather a proud legacy from the Greeks and Shakespeare himself, a legacy that should be celebrated as it has continued to be practiced. One can imagine James reading the newspaper reports of Wilde's pirouetting around his own writing and taking in the consequences for the representation of male-male relations, even in the apparently radically disembodied arena of a literary theory. Perhaps it was safer to desire a text than it was to desire a man. But perhaps desiring an author, that elusive, now embodied, now disembodied, creator of texts, might fall somewhere between the two. Cohen argues that if for Wilde, "sexuality is encoded in and as the literary," for James "the affect and the form of sexual unspeakability are transferred directly onto literature itself . . . and literary secrets are invested with an energy ordinarily reserved for sexual objects" (William Cohen 226–27). If *Portrait* reads largely to us, in our contemporary queer theoretical moment, as a love letter to Shakespeare's artistically productive desire for another man, the nameless protagonist of "Figure," in his unsatisfied search for the uniting thread of the novelist Vereker's texts, may appear, conversely, as a kind of disguise, a timid failure. Wracked by desire they may not be fully cognizant of, James's literary critics turn that desire back toward texts.[14] The erotics of literary criticism that Wilde expresses openly in *Portrait* finds a negative corollary in the obsessions of the literary critics who narrate "The Aspern Papers" and "The Figure in the Carpet," who seem to desire abundantly the texts they work on while also, more obliquely, the male authors who create the revered objects of their literary quests.

It is not just men with men, however, who substitute theory for sex in "The Figure in the Carpet." Literary criticism is not solely a homosocial exchange in James's story. More explicit heterosexual dynamics are implicated as well. When the narrator confesses to Vereker that he has told his friend George Corvick about the existence of his secret and Corvick has told his fiancée, Gwendolen Erme (also a writer and critic), Vereker reacts by saying, "A woman will never find out!" (*FC* 288) but then goes on to suggest that the fact that the couple are to be married "may help them" (289), setting up an arch equation between literary criticism and sexual intimacy. In the

next chapter the narrator finds himself jealous of the "joy" that the couple is deriving from the literary chase, while he finds only "chagrin." He notes that "poor Vereker's secret gave them endless occasion to put their young heads together." Gwendolen and Corvick's honeymoon is seen by the narrator as a moment when Gwendolen will be initiated into the secret that Corvick has deciphered.[15] When Corvick dies on his honeymoon, dispatched swiftly by a carriage overturning, the narrator, rather than mourning his best friend, is instead desperate to know what kind of consummation took place. Does Gwendolen "know" or not know? And what does it indicate about the narrator that he seems to be solely invested in one kind of knowledge (textual) while avoiding another (sexual)?[16]

The narrator also assumes that Gwendolen will be the carrier of the theory from one man she marries to another. Desire in "Figure," it seems, can only be aimed at the text, even if heterosexual coupling is needed to transmit it. William Cohen suggests that James might be mocking the kind of "literary riddling in which Wilde's story engages, a search for information that appears to confuse the text for the person of the author" (233n41).[17] In Cohen's interpretation, James's story uses the opacity of literary texts, and the passions they inspire, to defend against the kinds of passions that Wilde's story makes explicit. Secrets in James are textual, in Wilde sexual, and for James's narrators a heterosexual exchange is what must be avoided at all costs. In "The Aspern Papers" a woman withholds a literary secret from a man who recoils from the possibility of intimacy with her in order to get what he wants, and something very similar transpires in "Figure" after Corvick dies on his honeymoon. The narrator begins to wonder whether he will need to marry Gwendolen himself to find out the truth:

> Corvick had kept his information from his young friend till after the removal of the last barrier to their intimacy—then only had he let the cat out of the bag. Was it Gwendolen's idea, taking a hint from him, to liberate this animal only on the basis of the renewal of such a relation? Was the figure in the carpet traceable or describable only for husbands and wives—for lovers supremely united? It came back to me in a mystifying manner that in Kensington Square, when I mentioned that Corvick would have told the girl he loved, some word had dropped from Vereker that gave color to this possibility. There might be little in it, but there was enough to make me wonder if I should have to marry Mrs. Corvick to get what I wanted. Was I prepared to offer her this price for the blessing of her knowledge? Ah that way madness lay!—so I at least said to myself in bewildered hours. (*FC* 306)

James's narrator implies that he prefers metaphor to the flesh and blood, sexual animals that might be liberated. For James's text-loving, but not women-loving, narrators, it is better that some cats (impossible not to think of slang for female anatomy here) remain in their bags. Wooing Gwendolen himself would lead to madness. William Cohen suggests that, in contrast to Wilde's promoting the canonical centrality of male homosexual desire via a literary theory, James's use of the "inscrutability of the literary object" is defensive. "The literary may be deeply intertwined with the sexual, he seems to say, but that relationship is unfathomable, and one had best avoid looking

into it too deeply" (234). James's approach to that intertwining here is clearly ironic and parodic: texts may be full of depth and deeply desired, but intimate relations with a woman must be avoided for a certain kind of Jamesian critic-narrator, even if it is the only route to a text or to a male author.

Theory is therefore inseparable from erotic desire in both Wilde and James. The pleasures and frustrations offered by the Willie Hughes theory at first glance resemble the satisfyingly unsatisfying ending of "Figure," in which it also seems that a definitive knowledge of the unifying theory will never be found (because of the deaths of all the characters presumed to know). The ending of "Figure" suggests that the search through Vereker's texts, like the belief in Willie Hughes, will continue. However, these two structures are not identical. Cohen suggests that for James, in "Figure," confirmation of the theory—an answer to the question "What is the figure in the carpet?"—requires proof, albeit proof that may never come. By contrast Wilde's Willie Hughes theory demands belief. That is why it can survive and grow stronger after Cyril Graham's forgery. What is at stake in writing Willie Hughes into history is a proleptic queer possibility for a future in which Willie Hughes himself might—or might not—be proven to have existed but in which we can admit and indeed celebrate Shakespeare's desire for another man as integral to the Sonnets, an insistence that this world should exist, and will exist one day.[18]

Both stories channel their questions of desire through emerging literary critical debates about the importance of the author vs. the importance of the text as aesthetic object. "Figure" and *Portrait*, in representing their obsessed, occasionally ridiculous critics, are also engaged in considering how we read and interpret and what we read *for*. If in "Figure" there seems to be nothing at stake in the central conceit of the story—no actual figure to uncover—in *Portrait* there was too much at stake, as became evident in Wilde's trials. The question of how to categorize *Portrait*, as fiction or as literary criticism, has dogged it since its inception, making the work inseparable from Wilde's real beliefs about Shakespeare's sonnets.[19] James's story, by contrast, relies on its meta-fictionality: there can be no actual pattern discernible in the fictional author Vereker's work because the work does not actually exist. There is no figure in this carpet, because there is no carpet.[20]

There are further differences between the works that point toward divergent conceptions of the task of the critic. James's Vereker is unlike Shakespeare, not only in being alive when the literary critical pursuit for the meaning of his texts takes place but also in that his canonical position is uncertain. Like James himself in the 1890s, he hovers somewhere between high cultural clout and low sales figures: "He wasn't of course, popular, but I judged one of the sources of his good humour to be precisely that his success was independent of that. He had none the less become in a manner the fashion; the critics at least had put him on a spurt and caught up with him" (*FC* 276). One way to read the figure that runs through Vereker's work is as a building block of his artistic reputation. He describes his pattern as only accessible to the most discerning critic:

> It stretches, this little trick of mine, from book to book, and everything else comparatively, plays over the surface of it. The order, the form, the texture of my books will perhaps some day constitute for the initiated a complete representation of it. So it's naturally the thing for the critic to look for. (282)

It may be that the figure, whether or not it exists, by putting critics in pursuit of it, actually makes the author rise above the literary marketplace into the realm of high art and move closer to Shakespeare.

If James's Master-Author Vereker insists that the good-enough critic is one who will recognize his embedded design, Wilde's claims to provide an accurate interpretation of Shakespeare's sonnets relies instead on historical evidence about the life of the author. This form of reading rests on the assumption that knowing something about an author's life—the man he loved, for instance, or the fact that he loved men—gives us crucial insight into the meaning of an author's work. Even the forging of the portrait in the story reasserts the need for this kind of external, contextual evidence to mount a correct reading. Cyril Graham assumes that readers such as Erskine will want more evidence for the existence of Willie Hughes before believing that his theory is valid. Unlike the pursuers of Mr. W. H., the critics in James's story are trying to unearth what we are led to believe is primarily a textual pattern. The evidence for the figure appears to be wholly contained within the works themselves.[21] Although Vereker the author sets them on the chase, he insists that the truth should be discoverable to the discerning reader without his input:

> My whole lucid effort gives him the clue—every page and line and letter. The thing's as concrete there as a bird in cage, a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap. It's stuck into every volume as your foot is stuck into your shoe. It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma. (283–84)

The kind of evidence described here is tantalizingly unclear, but it seems formal or thematic. It might emerge from the biography of the author, but discovering it is not tied to knowing that biography—it's in the commas. When the narrator observes Corvick and Gwendolen attempt to solve the puzzle, he wonders if they too might not like to meet Vereker to get some more hints:

> I asked them at an early stage of the business if it mightn't contribute to their success to have some closer communication with him. . . . Corvick immediately replied that he had no wish to approach the altar before he had prepared the sacrifice. He quite agreed with our friend both as to the sport and as to the honour—he would bring down the animal with his own rifle. (293)

The highly charged (or perhaps more accurately, parodically charged) language here makes literary pursuit into a sacred cult ("initiation," "altar," "sacrifice"). This language that sanctifies both the work and the author suffuses the imagination of literary criticism in "Figure" at the same time that the story also works to establish Vereker's work as autonomous, to be judged and understood apart from any extraneous input from or about the author. In this image, literary criticism is also a surprisingly violent pursuit—a blood sport—prompting the question, who or what is the animal? Is it the author or the work that needs to be bagged?

The sacred language used here to describe a text and its interpretation foreshadows a tendency in some works of New Criticism to portray textual interpretation as

a kind of revelation and the text as a sacred object.[22] Further, the specific dynamic of a quasi-religious rhetoric around the work, combined with a refusal to consult the author, prefigures one of New Criticism's most famous statements about the relationship between the author's intentions and a work's meaning. In the final lines of their New Critical manifesto, "The Intentional Fallacy," Wimsatt and Beardsley expressly warn against the activity that the narrator suggests to Corvick in "Figure": enlisting the author's help to interpret his text. Writing in the 1940s, they imagine a curious critic who takes

> advantage of the fact that Eliot is still alive, and in the spirit of a man who would settle a bet . . . writes to Eliot and asks what he meant. . . . We shall not here weigh the probabilities—whether Eliot would answer that he meant nothing at all, had nothing at all in mind—a sufficiently good answer to such a question—or in an unguarded moment might furnish a clear and, within its limits, irrefutable answer. Our point is that such an answer to such an inquiry would have nothing to do with the poem "Prufrock": it would not be a critical inquiry. Critical inquiries, unlike bets, are not settled in this way. Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle. (1245–46)

This language of consulting the oracle resonates with the rhetoric of "initiation" that comes up repeatedly in "Figure." I would argue, ironically, contra Wimsatt and Beardsley's explicit intentions, that invoking the author *as* oracle, as powerful prophetic figure able to see into the future, in their final lines betrays a residue of desire for mastery, for an interpretation grounded in one true vision, even for the body of the author, the man who might answer you back.

For James the Author (capitalized) as oracle is also a compelling and charismatic figure, even as James also frequently dismisses his importance. In James we might see the Author as a kind of middle man, existing somewhere between the mundanities of everyday life and the idealized, aesthetic autonomy of the text. The Author in James often reaches for an ideal autonomous work, but because he is just an author (a man, with, perhaps, a wife, children, economic needs, and fears about his own reputation) he usually falls short. James's short stories about writers, such as "The Middle Years," "The Author of Beltraffio," and "The Lesson of the Master," portray the failings of authors held hostage by the marketplace, but they simultaneously indicate a continued desire for the oracular Master-Author, the man wholly dedicated to creating great works that might survive and displace the contingent authorial self. "Figure" indicates that even though the author fascinates, the text as sacred object must also be detachable *from* the author. It must hold its own secrets. When news of Vereker's death in Rome reaches London, the narrator notes Gwendolen's fundamental "detachment" in the face of the news:

> That independence rested on her knowledge, the knowledge which nothing now could destroy and which nothing could make different. . . . The writer might go down to his grave: she was the person in the world to whom—as if she had been his favoured heir—his continued existence was least of a need. (*FC* 309)

On the one hand, Gwendolen, holding the knowledge of the text, is perfectly happy for the author to die. She has already inherited. On the other hand, it's clear that the characters in "Figure" *never* fully disavow the oracle. Rather, it seems, the ideal oracle/Author is the one who most successfully creates (and, paradoxically, controls) an apparently autonomous artwork. His words survive his death but exactly in the way he wants them to. The religious language attached to art, adopted at once ironically and non-ironically by the New Critics, suffuses "Figure." When the story's most successful critic, Corvick, has deciphered Vereker's code, he has "prepared the sacrifice." When he travels to India to confirm with Vereker that his solution is correct, he is both consulting the oracle and denying the need for oracles. The final paragraph of Wimsatt and Beardsley's "Intentional Fallacy," tantalizing readers with its image of the oracular author (T. S. Eliot answering your questions), mirrors the oscillation between idolizing the text and idolizing the intentions of the author we find in James's versions of the critical enterprise and, to a lesser extent, in Wilde's (where the intentions of Shakespeare—his aims toward a specific, named, real boy actor—seem initially central to the theory; however, by the end of the piece, we realize that the theory may work just as well as a theory, despite the fact that Willie Hughes is a fabrication). James may flirt with the autonomous artwork, but he is nothing if not supremely invested in the intentions of authors, especially his own. Just consider the enormous critical genuflection to the importance of the author's intentions his prefaces to the New York Edition represent.

This shifting importance for James between the autonomous work and an idealizing of a Master-Author comes to the foreground in his writings about Shakespeare in his later years. Shakespeare is a key reference point for these kinds of arguments because of the contrasting images his myth perpetuates. Shakespeare the author is both "everything"—the unique Master-Author who invents modern character—and "nothing"—the perfect negatively capable exemplar of the way in which the author can most successfully disappear into his work.[23] James's Shakespeare oscillates between these poles, even as James, writing about Shakespeare, oscillates between taking the position of critic and taking the position of Master-Author, identified with the Bard.

One reason to assume that James might have read *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* with interest when it initially came out in 1889 is that James was clearly intrigued by then current debates about whether or not Shakespeare was in fact the author of Shakespeare's plays (Shapiro 141–49).[24] Theories of the "cryptic character" of Shakespeare's work make a brief appearance in "Figure," but James grapples in more detail with the question of Shakespeare's authorship at other points in his late work in his story "The Birthplace" (1903), which is about a doubting caretaker of Shakespeare's legacy at Stratford, and in his preface to *The Tempest* (1907), in which an aging James longs to understand why his imagined Prospero-like Shakespeare, at the height of his powers, would have stopped writing. In this, James repeatedly turns to an embodied thematics of touching, or, more alarmingly, of stabbing, Shakespeare to express a transferential desire for intimate knowledge of his motives and abilities.

Before we move on to these interesting texts, let us consider the one tantalizing reference to Shakespeare in "Figure." After the narrator tells Corvick what the novelist has told him about the existence of the figure, Corvick begins on his own obsessive quest to discover the pattern:

> I soon saw that without my stirring a finger his infatuation would have its bad hours. He would bound off on false scents as I had done—he would clap his hands over new lights and see them blown out by the wind of the turned page. He was like nothing, I told him, but the maniacs who embrace some bedlamitical theory of the cryptic character of Shakespeare. To this he replied that if we had had Shakespeare's own word for his being cryptic he would at once have accepted it. The case there was altogether different—we had nothing but the word of Mr. Snooks. I returned that I was stupefied to see him attach such importance even to the word of Mr. Vereker. He wanted thereupon to know if I treated Mr. Vereker's word as a lie. (*FC* 291–92)

This is another point where the ghosts of Wimsatt and Beardsley seem to proleptically haunt James's story; the word of Vereker might not secure the meaning of a text. An author can always lie, because language was built for lying. We might continue in a poststructuralist vein (even as it is clear that James's narrator does not): authors might also not know their own meaning because they may be unaware of their unconscious desires. Language can mislead even without the intentions of the author being deliberately deceptive or obscure. Meaning may not be able to be securely pinned down because the signifier has an arbitrary relation to the signified, etc. Of course, as I have just argued, in "Figure" the author's intentions *are* supremely important. Vereker maintains a kind of mastery over his text. Corvick may solve the cryptic nature of Vereker's novels through extended and intense close reading and meditation, but for confirmation he goes off to get the Author's word. In the previous exchange with Corvick, the narrator might look momentarily as if he were channeling late-twentieth-century poststructuralist theory, as well as that of the New Critics, recognizing that the word of the author may not be enough to securely anchor the meaning of the text. However, in "Figure" the narrator turns out to be a lesser critic than Corvick, incapable of the leaps of understanding necessary to decipher Vereker's meaning and destined at the end to remain in a state of permanent ignorance.

Shakespeare signifies in this exchange, then, in at least two ways: as a site of textual ambiguity and as the final authority on his own meaning. What happens, however, to that authority if Shakespeare did not write his own plays? The chief "Bedlamitical" theories about Shakespeare at the time were those disputing his authorship of the plays that bear his name. Although James never publicly spoke on the authorship controversy, he did express his doubts privately, in letters, that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare's works.[25] James's doubts mirror the classist ones prevalent at the time: the historical man from Stratford could not have been well-educated enough to have written his classically knowledgeable masterpieces, and the tacky evidence on display at Stratford made it impossible to imagine it as a cradle to genius. On 26 August 1903 James writes to his friend Violet Hunt, who defended Shakespeare's authorship: "I am 'a sort of' haunted by the conviction that the divine William is the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world. The more I turn him round and round the more he so affects me" (Shapiro 145). James's tentative "a sort of" expresses the equivocation apparent in his conflicting desires for Shakespeare on display elsewhere: he needs Shakespeare the Master-Author, even as he professes to prefer Shakespeare as a corpus of work—his desire for the texts to be the end-all

and be-all conflicts with his need for a version of the Author that he can believe in (one who looks, inevitably, more like James himself).

These conflicting urges are brought into relief in James's 1903 story "The Birthplace" about Morris Gedge, who takes over the running of the Shakespeare birthplace with his wife when they are in dire financial straits. The job seems like a gift from heaven for a couple of some education and status now fallen on hard times. But Gedge soon becomes disillusioned when he realizes that every fact he or his wife tells tourists is a fabrication based on the flimsiest of evidence.[26] Gedge's crisis of faith is eventually recuperated as a knack for putting himself into the part of the true believer in the hallowed nature of the Birthplace, where you can almost feel the presence of genius. He lays it on thick—he fears perhaps, too thickly—but in the end is rewarded with a raise.

What is at stake in this story about Shakespeare for James, and indeed, in the authorship controversy, is not simply that the sophistication of the works casts doubts on the author's identity but that, in order to create a viable myth of the Great Author, the evidence for the origins of the man has to be fabricated. Gedge points out to his wife their increasing and bewildering lack of knowledge about the man, a lack that must be ignored in order for them to do their jobs effectively, showing tourists around and bolstering the origin myth:

> "But, you know, we don't know anything about it." And then as she stared flushing: "About His having been born up there. About anything, really. Not the least little scrap that would weigh in any connection, as evidence. So don't rub it in so."
>
> "Rub it in how?"
>
> "That He *was* born—" But at sight of her face he only sighed, "Oh dear, oh dear!"
>
> "Don't you think," she replied cuttingly, "that He was born anywhere?"
>
> He hesitated—it was such an edifice to shake. "Well, we don't know. There's very little *to* know. He covered His tracks as no other human being has ever done." (*TB* 311)

Gedge imagines here an elusive but masterful Shakespeare, a kind of a Keyser Soze in *The Usual Suspects* making himself disappear.[27] The mastery behind this version of Shakespeare is his mystery, his unavailability. One can see how this might be an attractive version of mastery for the notoriously private James, who burnt many of his own letters while attempting to live on through his heavily revised works.

Initially then, "The Birthplace" seems to support Wimsatt and Beardsley's plea to focus on the work and ignore the author's intentions as the best way forward for meaningful criticism. Look to the work, because Shakespeare the man is lost to us; any truth about his life is unrecoverable. When Gedge shows a sophisticated American couple, Mr. and Mrs. Hayes, around the Birthplace, they are skeptical of the authenticity of the site and see through his unconvincing and unconvinced patter to his own doubts. He forms an alliance with them as unbelievers. After Gedge confesses his unhappiness with the lies he must tell on his job, the American husband suggests, as they are leaving, that this doesn't really matter, because the work is what counts:

> "'The play's the thing.' Let the author alone."
>
> Gedge, with his key on his forefinger, leaned against the door-post, took in the stupid little street, and was sorry to see them go—They seemed so to abandon him. "That's just what They won't do—not let *me* do. It's all I want—to let the author alone. Practically"—he felt himself getting the last of his chance—"there *is* no author: that is all for us to deal with. There are all the immortal people—*in* the work; but there's nobody else."
>
> "Yes." Said the young man—"that's what it comes to. There should really, to clear the matter up, be no such Person."
>
> "As you say," Gedge returned, "it's what it comes to. There *is* no such person." (323)

Their trading of words here appears to kill the author off in a Barthesian sense, so that the works can be really born. Mr. Hayes's "There should be no such person" is performatively returned by Gedge as "there is no such person," his characters are the immortals, and Shakespeare the man should disappear into the work (Barthes).[28] But even if in "The Birthplace" there is no such person, one still needs to be invented. The high culture/literary critical position that focuses on the work—"the play's the thing"—is an option that is only available to the wealthy and well-educated. By contrast, economic necessity means that for the nascent Stratford culture industry to survive, and for Gedge to keep his home and livelihood, he must find a way out of his ethical quandary.[29] Like the Shakespeare of Wilde's *Portrait*, but for different reasons, the Shakespeare of "The Birthplace" must be fabricated, and the creation of this Shakespeare becomes a kind of ironic salvation for Gedge. Once he has put aside his qualms about lying, it turns out Gedge is a great tour guide, a humbug of the highest order. When the Hayeses return, Gedge can play both sides of the street—having previously shown them that he knows that "the play's the thing" and that Shakespeare's works are the only evidence we have of him, he is now so convincing in his performance that Gedge imagines it must appear to them as if he believes it himself. Focalized through Gedge's perspective, he imagines the couple's confusion and curiosity about himself. When they return for a second tour of the birthplace, Gedge thinks "For what had brought them back was not, indubitably, sentiment of the shrine itself . . . but their intelligent interest in the queer case of the priest" (333), turning the focus of the story from the truth or falsehood of the Shakespeare myth back on to the rites and rituals that maintain that myth. Literary speculation and criticism are once again invested with religious language, but here the language is reserved for the keeper of the flame (the critic as tour guide to genius), and the sacred object—Shakespeare himself, the man and the myth—has effectively disappeared.

"The Birthplace," on the one hand, clearly endorses Shakespeare's work as the proper site for critical understanding, in contrast to a sentimental, lowbrow investment in the unverifiable origin myths of the author. In general, obsessive pursuit of an author's biography is distasteful to James, both in his life and in his fiction, and critics are often portrayed as parasites on authors in some of his short stories. But, on the other hand, we also find a commercial and creative triumph in Gedge's success—he becomes an ironic embodiment of Wilde's Critic as Artist, elaborating on a myth of genius he knows to be false by weaving it into a kind of truth. In one sense, "The Birthplace" might be seen as Gedge's portrait of Mr. W. H.

"The Birthplace" then acknowledges a desire for an embodied Shakespeare (who was born in a particular place) even if it implies that this body will remain elusive, a fabrication. For James, what goes hand-in-hand with an exaltation of the autonomous, mysterious (never fully knowable) work is a yearning toward the embodied (although perhaps similarly unknowable) author. This desire for the body of Shakespeare emerges through the language of James's oddly hot and bothered preface to *The Tempest*, in which, while continuing to remind his readers that the play's the thing, he ignores the play to obsess about the reasons that Shakespeare stops writing after *The Tempest*. In an act of near overt identification with an aging genius author, James cannot imagine Shakespeare giving up writing for sordid mercenary reasons in the wake of the brilliance of his final play. This identification with, and this frustrated yearning toward, the Shakespeare who wrote *The Tempest* and then disappeared manifests itself in a rhetorical wish to get behind the mask, to the face and the body:

> The man himself, in the Plays, we directly touch, to my consciousness, positively nowhere: we are dealing too perpetually with the artist, the monster, the magician of a thousand masks. . . . Here at last the artist is, comparatively speaking, so generalized, so consummate and typical, so frankly amused with himself, that is with his art, with his power, with his theme, that it is as if he came to meet us more than his usual half-way, and as if, thereby, in meeting *him* and touching him, we were nearer to meeting and touching the man. (432)

In this essay, as in many of his short stories about writers, James grapples with the difficulty of reconciling Shakespeare the man with Shakespeare the Author (or as he refers to him, Poet).[30] For James, in *The Tempest* Shakespeare himself seems to play with this distinction: he uses his position as the removed Prospero-like artist to invite readers to catch more intimate personal glimpses. We might just meet and touch this amiable, relaxed version of the artist, generous with his brilliance, and, therefore, just possibly find ourselves nearer to meeting and touching the man.

This yearning for the body of the author, the hand that wrote the plays, that could be *touched*, works alongside the received idea that Shakespeare is the most elusive of authors. James wants a Shakespeare who could answer his questions face to face. We can see in the preface to *The Tempest* a desire to consult the oracle, which might resemble the more overtly sexualized dynamics of Wilde's *Portrait*. However, for James, this initially inviting, seductive imagining of Shakespeare meeting us halfway takes an oddly violent turn:

> The complexity arises from our suffering our imagination to meddle with the Man at all; who is quite sufficiently presented to us on the face of the record. For critics of this writer's complexion the only facts we are urgently concerned with are the facts of the Poet, which are abundantly constituted by the Plays and the Sonnets. The Poet is *there*, and the Man is outside: the Man is for instance in such a perfectly definite circumstance as that he could never miss, after *The Tempest*, the key of his piano, as I have called it, since he could play so freely with the key of his cash-box. The supreme master of expression had made, before fifty, all the money he wanted;

> therefore what was there more to express? This view is admirable if you can get your mind to consent to it. It must ignore any impulse, in presence of Play or Sonnet (whatever vague stir behind either may momentarily act as provocation) to try for a lunge at the figured arras. In front of the tapestry sits the immitigably respectable person whom our little slateful of gathered and numbered items, heaven knows, does amply account for, since there is nothing in him to explain; while the undetermined figure, on the other hand—undetermined whether in the sense of respectability or of anything else—the figure who supremely interests us, remains as unseen as our Ariel, on the enchanted island, remains of the bewildered visitors. (*IT* 438–39)

James recoils at a portrait of an economically secure Shakespeare no longer writing because he no longer had to, the Shakespeare of the "cash-box." James, like Wilde's and his own obsessed literary critics, yearns for more knowledge about this "undetermined figure," and this desire to know more appears as a violent compulsion to "lunge at the . . . arras." Into the healing romance of *The Tempest* comes the most futile killing in Hamlet. James (and by extension, other literary critics) becomes Hamlet killing Polonius when he meant to kill Claudius. What kind of image is this for the critic who is otherwise passionately engaged in knowing, understanding, reading, "getting" Shakespeare? And what might it indicate about James's relationship to literary criticism, that what begins as a generous desire to touch, to, as James might put it, "get into relation," turns so swiftly into the rhetorical violence of lunging at the arras?

Nina Schwartz argues that in the preface to *The Tempest*, James constructs Shakespeare as an elusive and unknowable author, desirable for the secrets he conceals. It is not a case of Shakespeare's total disappearance into his work so much as it is of the desire created in the reader by that disappearance. Schwartz suggests that the secret's power is "in its effect, its production of another's desire, and not necessarily in some actually hidden value" (80). The measure, in this sense, of the worth of a literary work is the depths of desire it produces in the would-be critic, the questions it refuses to answer. My suggestion here is that "Figure" and *Portrait*, as representations of the obsessive longing of late-nineteenth-century literary critics toward elusive textual secrets, can be read in relation to a similar set of longings we find in James's work directed toward Shakespeare, who represents a man (with an ordinary, economically motivated, life); the Author (with supreme authority and mastery over his own intentions—the oracle, in Wimsatt and Beardsley's terms); and also, and not least, the texts themselves, which are divorced utterly from the author, who we may never find lurking behind them. In the ethics of criticism, like that of Wimsatt and Beardsley (inherited from aestheticism), we should not *want* to find the author lurking behind them, but for James his investment in authorship is at least as strong as his admiration for texts that fend off prying questions about authors. It may be this confluence of conflicting desires that leads to James's apparent glee at the thought of stabbing a Polonius-like (humbuggish) Shakespeare lurking behind the arras.

James ends his essay not only by returning to the image of the arras but also by suggesting that this continued lunging is a way forward for the future of Shakespeare criticism:

> The secret that baffles us being the secret of the Man, we know, as I have granted, that we shall never touch the Man *directly* in the Artist. We stake our hopes thus on indirectness, which may contain possibilities; we take that very truth for our counsel of despair, try to look at it as helpful for the Criticism of the future. That of the past has been too often infantile; one has asked one's self how it *could* on such lines, get at him. The figured tapestry, the long arras that hides him, is always there, with its immensity of surface and its proportionate underside. May it not be but a question, for the fullness of time, of the finer weapon, the sharper point, the stronger arm, the more extended lunge? (*IT* 442–43)

Here the future of theory is imagined as finding a better way to "get at him." The finer weapon is aimed toward the author rather than the text. James's inability to let his desire to metaphorically murder Shakespeare go, returning to it at the end of his essay, leads me, finally, to the multiple deaths in "Figure" and *Portrait*. A surprising number of violent deaths are strewn through the pages of the two stories.[31] Why so many, and how should they be read? In "Figure," people die for theory seemingly only by the wayside, as a structural impediment to the disclosure of Vereker's secret. Characters die so that the secret remains a secret, and the figure will never be deciphered. Deaths are comic (consider the narrator's unemotional response to his best friend's death as he desperately wonders whether Corvick has told the truth to his new bride). By contrast, in Wilde's story, people commit suicide for the theory, or pretend to commit suicide for the theory, to show that they believe. In both works we are left with a string of dead critics and chains of transmission that last beyond the deaths themselves. And both works end on an ambiguous note in relation to the desire for proof.

At the end of "The Figure in the Carpet," all the characters who might have verified the figure are dead: Corvick, Vereker, Gwendolen, even Corvick's wife. The only exception is another literary critic, Drayton Deane, whom Gwendolen marries after Corvick dies. By the story's logic of sexual/textual transmission, the still-obsessed narrator assumes Gwendolen must have told Deane about the theory when they married. It turns out, however, that the narrator is mistaken. When he confronts him in their gentlemen's club, Deane has not heard a word about Vereker and appears chagrined that his wife had kept a secret of this magnitude from him. The final paragraph of the story relays the moment when the narrator realizes that anyone who could possibly know the secret (without having figured it out for themselves) is dead. The secret is still there in the texts, but there is no more oracle, no more keeper of the author's flame.

> I looked at him [Drayton Deane] well; I hesitated; I considered. "Come and sit down with me here, and I'll tell you." I drew him to a sofa, I lighted another cigar and, beginning with the anecdote of Vereker's one descent from the clouds, I recited to him the extraordinary chain of accidents that had, in spite of the original gleam, kept me till that hour in the dark. I told him in a word just what I've written out here. He listened with deepening attention, and I became aware, to my surprise, by his ejaculations, by his questions, that he would have been after all not unworthy to be trusted by his wife. So abrupt an experience of her want of trust had now a dis-

> turbing effect on him; but I saw the immediate shock throb away little by little and then gather again into waves of wonder and curiosity—waves that promised, I could perfectly judge, to break in the end with the fury of my own highest tides. I may say that to-day as victims of unappeased desire there isn't a pin to choose between us. The poor man's state is almost my consolation; there are really moments when I feel it to be quite my revenge. (*FC* 315)

"Figure" ends where *Portrait* begins, with a man telling another man about a literary theory that will take over his life in another act of homoerotic transmission. The widower seamlessly lets the desire to know a male literary secret eclipse his sense of betrayal by his wife. The shock "throb[s] away" but gathers again into "waves of wonder and curiosity."

Portrait ends in a similar, tonally ambiguous way by suggesting that the theory will have a long afterlife:

> This curious picture hangs now in my library, where it is very much admired by my artistic friends, one of whom has etched it for me. They have decided that it is not a Clouet, but an Ouvry. I have never cared to tell them its true history, but some times, when I look at it, I think there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare's Sonnets. (Wilde 350)

As William Cohen has observed, the ending of *Portrait* is also very close to the ending of "The Aspern Papers" (234). In both endings a critic gazes mournfully at a portrait that signifies his lack of certain knowledge about a desired author. *Portrait* and "Figure" both conclude with an "unappeased desire" that becomes a kind of critical satisfaction. "Figure" ends in another Sedgwickian space (the shared gentlemen's club), with the narrator creating another version of himself (not a "pin to choose between us"). The desire for theory seems to replicate and multiply bodies, even as it also seems to dispense with the need for them. Critics appear and then die off to keep texts and their secrets alive, moving from person to person.

Wilde's ending, however, suggests a different "Criticism of the future" than that of James's preface to *The Tempest*, in which a "finer weapon, the sharper point, the stronger arm, the more extended lunge" of critical acumen might get us closer to the truth about Shakespeare or his plays. Rather, Wilde's narrator's gazing on a false portrait and affirming his renewed investment in the Willie Hughes theory can be seen, almost casually, to set the terms for a homoerotic alternative history. Indulging in speculative, even fabricated, theory provides a kind of narrative/erotic satisfaction. Dying for theory in *Portrait* is dying for a cause: the possibility of a homoerotic world and canon-making. So even as Wilde's narrator dismisses an over-investment in literary criticism as melodrama—"To die for one's theological opinions is the worst use a man can make of his life; but to die for a literary theory! It seemed impossible"—the story also reveals a serious desire for a queer history that might set the terms for a queer future. The fact that that history may be based on a kind of fraud is irrelevant. Keeping the theory going is a form of queer continuity. Willie Hughes becomes a "touch across time," in Carolyn Dinshaw's phrase (1). Long after Wilde's death, Bosie, still

living through the narrative that Wilde set for him, writes a book in support of the Willie Hughes theory. Fiction becomes fact, at least for some.

If Wilde's "dying for theory" shows that theories can be made valid or possible even if they are detached from historical truth, then James, more cautiously, also recognizes a version of the expansive theoretical creativity one finds in Wilde's "The Critic as Artist." He does so in the wry upbeat ending to "The Birthplace" in which economic security combines with a sense of the critic as creative force, allowing Gedge to triumph in his defeat. The death of the truth about Shakespeare is the birth of Gedge as an economically viable showman, mythmaker, maybe even ambivalently Jamesian author, alert to the nuances and ironies of his position. "The Figure in the Carpet" at first seems different. The apparent goal of the story is to keep the literary secret safe from the obtuse and self-serving critic-narrator by killing off characters who learn the truth of the secret with a kind of gleeful abandon. There is little room for a celebration of the Critic as Artist here. The primary critic, the narrator, is a picture of exquisite defeat, left with nothing to show for his efforts: neither intimate human relations nor a theory of Vereker's work. And yet, the narrator's near-sadistic amusement at the end of "Figure," as he sees his "revenge" in the creation of another unsatisfied critic-obsessive, is also suggestive. In his jokey emphasis on the connection between theory and consummation in the story, we might see James taking a detour into Wilde territory, where wanting to know a text, wanting intimate knowledge of an author's secret, becomes an erotic, communal desire, the royal road to more criticism, and more critics, of all sexes, putting their heads together over books. If, on the one hand, the mysteries of authors and texts are finally sustained, and the critics who pursue these mysteries appear laughable, expendable, or substitutable (in the deadly kill-a-critic logic of both stories), on the other hand, readers—reading creatively, passionately, productively, insanely—also "make" both author and text and futures for theory. The two works, taken together, show us the ways in which the death of the critic may be as enabling a trope as the "death of the author" for a future for criticism in which the aesthetic autonomy of the artwork is only an imperfect defense against the yearning desires of critics, like James and Wilde and maybe even Wimsatt and Beardsley, to touch, to stab, or send a letter to, the oracle, the Author, the text, behind the arras.

NOTES

I would like to thank Geoff Gilbert, Rachel O'Connell, and Kevin Ohi for their generous editorial input. All mistakes and overly extravagant claims are my fault alone.

[1]Hertz describes Freud's *Dora* and James's *What Maisie Knew* as if they were one plot (221). I owe the conceit to him.

[2]James followed newspaper reports of Wilde's trial avidly, writing to William on 26 April 1895: "you ask of Oscar Wilde. His fall is hideously tragic—& the squalid violence of it gives him an interest (of misery) that he never had for me—in any degree—before. Strange to say I think he may have a 'future'—of a sort—by reaction—when he comes out of prison—if he survives the horrible sentence of hard labour that he will probably get" (Edel 439).

[3]See Wimsatt and Beardsley. Another context for thinking of the artwork as autonomous in James and Wilde is obviously the elevation of the artwork we find in aestheticism. James's and Wilde's debts to aestheticism have been deftly handled by critics, including Freedman, Gagnier, and Ohi (*Dead*). Although I will touch on aestheticism in this article, I prefer to trace a somewhat more perverse route toward the idea of the autonomous text by putting James's and Wilde's portrayals of literary criticism in dialogue with "The Intentional Fallacy." McCombe similarly sees James as both a precursor of, and in conflict with, New Criticism by connecting James's criticism to Bradley's work on Shakespeare. Bradley's method of reading Shakespeare's tragedies was proto-close reading. As McCombe says, "For Bradley, clearly, 'the play's the thing'" (182). McCombe argues that James stresses the failings of Bradley's "proto-New Criticism" (183),

linking James's perspective in his preface to *The Tempest* to Wilde's "The Critic as Artist," which suggests that "the best criticism may be superior to great art because great art is the raw material from which the critic fashions something new" (183). William Cohen makes similar connections.

[4]See Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* for the classic formulation of this Oedipal version of literary history.

[5]Ohi notes the ways in which *Portrait* is centrally about literary transmission (*Dead* 106). I should note that I am using the phrases "literary criticism" and "literary theory" interchangeably in this article, when clearly they connote different activities in the twentieth century.

[6]The expanded version was eventually published in 1921 by the New York publisher Mitchell Kennerly.

[7]The excellent *The Annotated Portrait of Mr. W. H.* website suggests that the story "is primarily a parody of . . . the obsessive, semi-idolatrous industry of Shakespearean criticism that grew up in the nineteenth century" (Boyles).

[8]See Danson for a reading of *Portrait*'s self-deconstructing, protective, valences—a way of speaking the love that dares not speak its name without precisely speaking it. "In form, then, 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' denies as much as it affirms the theory it creates" (980).

[9]See Sedgwick on the bachelor (*Epistemology* 182–212). Ohi points out that one important result of the theorizing in *Portrait* is that "men stay up all night together feverishly reading and talking about the sonnets" (*Dead* 109). There is one important female exception to this rule in "Figure," Gwendolen Erme, the narrator's friend Corvick's fiancée and then wife, to whom I will return shortly.

[10]Mendelssohn uses the phrase "long-term intellectual flirtation" (13) as one way of describing their relationship.

[11]The obscurity that surrounds James's erotic activities and desires is exactly summed up by Sedgwick: "James had—well, exactly that which we now all know that we know not" (*Epistemology* 196). Mendelssohn takes issue with recent readings of James and Wilde that portray James's reaction to Wilde as solely one of homosexual panic, arguing that the queer theoretical focus on Sedgwick's framework for the Wilde-James relationship has functioned to obscure other valences of that relationship: "to pick out this one thread and call it the figure in the carpet is to claim that the intricate tapestry of modern selfhood is woven of a single strand, which, as everyone knows, is not the case" (9). I argue here that the actual story "The Figure in the Carpet" is itself a fascinating lens through which to register one aspect of the James-Wilde relationship: their alternately differing and converging attitudes toward the interwoven private and public passions of literary criticism in the 1880s and '90s.

[12]Even a shortening of the titles of the two stories puts them at odds with each other in relation to this schema. *Portrait* suggests a person, body, or character, while, "Figure" usually implies metaphor or figure of speech. However, this schema also breaks down because figure can refer to the body as well, as in "he's a fine figure of a man and handsome too."

[13]This would parallel the ways in which *Dorian Gray* has been read as a moralizing text because Dorian gets his comeuppance in the end.

[14]As Sedgwick's famous reading of "The Beast in the Jungle" suggests, James's bachelors, obsessed by obscure and abstract quests, and avoiding potential heterosexual love objects, can be seen as evading or sublimating their own dissident desires (*Epistemology*).

[15]James's winking equation of sex with literary criticism has been noted by Kermode, who also reminds readers that the story is really funny, pointing out that the narrator "can conceive of no other motive for marriage except the acquisition of the secret" and that a major joke in the story is "the confusion in the narrator's mind between two sorts of penetration and two sorts of secret; for him the secret of the bridal chamber can only be Vereker's secret" (27).

[16]Erme is, I think, a more interesting version of one of James's oft-satirized literary society ladies. For one thing she is both critic and author (as she says toward the end to the narrator, "I don't review. . . . I'm reviewed!" [309]). Is she, possibly, an oblique George Eliot figure? Her name Gwendolen evokes *Daniel Deronda*; her initials are G. E. Although the grudging, but untrustworthy, narrator does not rate her work much (it seems not to make it past suspicion of middlebrowness), she appears to be critically acclaimed and respected.

[17]Ohi's reading suggests, and William Cohen's implies, that this confusion of text and person is generative for aestheticism: "Oscar Wilde's remarkable story 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' spells out the paradoxical erotics of the disappearance of particular beautiful bodies and explores what it means to say that their beauty 'lives on' in art. In so doing it mediates on 'queer reading'—on what it means to 'recognize' desires in art, or even to be called to a particular desire by a passionate experience of aesthetic apprehension—and links queer reading to literary history" (*Dead* 105).

[18]The temporal stakes of the Willie Hughes theory as an intervention into the past and future of literature reminds me of Sedgwick's questioning of the canon in the style of Bellow's racist dismissal of literary genius outside the white Western world: "Is there, as Saul Bellow put it, a Tolstoi of the Zulus? Has there been, ask the defenders of monocultural curriculum, not intending to stay for an answer, has there ever been a Socrates of the Orient, an African-American Proust, a female Shakespeare? . . . From the point of view of this relatively new and inchoate academic presence, then, the gay studies movement,

what distinctive soundings are to be reached by posing the question our way—and staying for an answer? . . . Has there ever been a gay Socrates? Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare? Has there ever been a gay Proust? . . . If these questions startle, it is not least as tautologies. A short answer, though a very incomplete one, might be that not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust but that their names are Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust" (*Epistemology* 51–52). The (unrecognized or unrecognizable) queer canon comes to be recognized in a future/present that allows it to be seen for what it always already was.

[19]As Gagnier points out, Wilde was not the first to hold the theory: "'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' presents a theory that Wilde understood to be no more than a fanciful construction answerable to the private exigencies of his own personality. Not only did it confront bourgeois standards of truth, it also affronted professional standards of originality and honesty, for it is a plagiarism, having been first advanced in 1766 by a Shakespearean scholar named Thomas Tyrwhitt and then duly incorporated in Malone's 1780 edition of *The Poems of Shakespeare*. Moreover, in the *Woman's World* of September 1888 Wilde had edited an article by Amy Strachey entitled 'The Child-Players of the Elizabethan Age,' from which he had also borrowed significantly" (41).

[20]Many readings of "Figure" have seen in it a poststructuralist allegory of the unendingness of interpretation. See Miller, Todorov, and Halter.

[21]This is what Wimsatt and Beardsley deem "internal evidence." In "The Intentional Fallacy," they define the difference between internal and external evidence for deducing the meaning of a text: "(1) internal is also public: it is discovered through the semantics and syntax of a poem, through our habitual knowledge of the language, through grammars, dictionaries, and all the literature which is the source of dictionaries, in general through all that makes a language and culture; while what is (2) external is private or idiosyncratic: not a part of the work as a linguistic fact: it consists of revelations (in journals, for example, or letters or reported conversations) about how or why the poet wrote the poem—to what lady, while sitting on what lawn, or at the death of what friend or brother" (1239–40). These distinctions are almost impossible to maintain, but that is another topic.

[22]"What New Criticism did, in fact, was to convert the poem into a fetish. . . . The New Critical poem, like the Romantic symbol, was thus imbued with an absolute mystical authority which brooked no rational argument" (Eagleton 49).

[23]See Borges's short story about Shakespeare, "Everything and Nothing." The prime exemplar of Keats's Negative Capability is Shakespeare. Keats writes in a letter to his brother in December 1817: "I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, upon various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (261). Also see Bloom (*Shakespeare*).

[24]James would have read the earlier, shorter, 1889 version rather than the later more explicit one, which didn't see the light of day until the 1920s.

[25]Shapiro writes of James's doubting of Shakespeare's authorship, "We don't know when he became interested in the subject or how his views changed over time" (141). It would be interesting to know if all or most of James's comments about Shakespeare's authorship are post Wilde's *Portrait* (but obviously not conclusive of anything, especially since *Portrait* is not about doubting the authorship of Shakespeare's plays). James's brother William was skeptical, writing in 1902 that "a visit to Stratford now seems to be the strongest appeal a Baconian can make," pointing out the "absolute extermination and obliteration of every record of Shakespeare save a few sordid material details . . . I feel ready to believe in almost any mythical story of the authorship" (Shapiro 142).

[26]James coyly refuses to use Shakespeare's name in the story, although it is clear it could be nobody else. Does the very name of Shakespeare become a problem in the midst of the authorship controversy? Or is it just that refusing to name Shakespeare emphasizes his sacred status? (The "h" in Him and He is capitalized.)

[27]"The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he did not exist" (*The Usual Suspects*).

[28]See Sedgwick (*Touching* 73–75, 35–65) on James's performative language—the batting back and forth of words often serves to cement some otherwise dubious claim as fact, such as "Charlotte is great" or "Charlotte is wonderful" in *The Golden Bowl*.

[29]Zembulys shows how "Gedge matures from an unbeliever to a master ironist; in the end, his skepticism is artful and fine, far subtler in expressing doubt than typical Stratford fare. . . . Gedge's new stance, Fadiman notes, not only saves his job but also 'in a strange way saves Shakespeare, saves the value of the imagination.' . . . More recent critics have found something even more positive that further sets the short story apart from the crowd. Tanner does not accept the story as a re-treading of the 'well-worn path' of Stratford skepticism but rather sees it as evidence that James did not give up hope in finding the 'Man' Shakespeare there . . ." (250).

[30]Ohi also notes this distinction between Man and Poet (*Style* 142–43).

[31]Miller suggests that in "Figure" "the possession of the secret is deadly" (116).

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