

Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor, and the authors of articles discussed will be invited to respond.

The Governess and the Ghosts

To the Editor:

It may seem ludicrous to respond now to an article that appeared in *PMLA* a quarter century ago. It may seem even more ludicrous since I now support rather than criticize that article. I have recently discovered, however, a very early letter that the author of that article would surely have cited had he known about it. The article I refer to is Alexander E. Jones's "Point of View in *The Turn of the Screw*" (74 [1959]: 112–22). In it Jones judiciously dismisses the views of scholars who think Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are not really ghosts but the wild imaginings of a sexually repressed neurotic or a pathological liar. Jones then gently bolsters the "old" view that the governess is, though imperfect, basically good, sane, devoted, modest, sensitive, and reliable. And if the governess is all those things, Jones argues, then *The Turn of the Screw* is what she says it is: a frightening story about two evil spirits who seek to woo and possess two young children. Jones's view has not been universally accepted. Indeed, since he wrote his article whole books have been devoted to proving the newer view—that the real evil at Bly is the governess, not the ghosts. We have lacked in all this controversy a sufficient number of accounts contemporaneous with the publication of the story in 1898, accounts that would tell us how intelligent readers in James's original audience read the story.

I am pleased to report that we now have another such account, one of more value than any that have come to light so far. In the Lodge Collection in the Archives of the Society for Physical Research in London is a postcard-sized letter (no. 1520), folded over and handwritten on four sides, from Frederic W. H. Myers to his friend Oliver Lodge. Dated 28 October 1898, the letter was written shortly after the book version of the story appeared in *The Two Magics* on 5 October. (It had earlier that year, from January to April, been serialized in *Collier's Weekly*.) I quote here only that portion of the letter which deals with *The Turn of the Screw*:

Henry James has written a forceful story of country-home life,—“The Turn of the Screw,” in a book called “The Two Magics.” The hero and heroine are two sweet and lovely children,—a boy of 9 and a girl of 6. The little girl feels lesbian love for the partially-materialized ghost of a harlot-governess;

and the little boy (who is expelled from school for obscenity) feels pederastic passion for the partially-materialized ghost of a corrupt manservant. The story is told by a governess (a good and virtuous one) with much force and dignity. The manservant seduces the first governess, who kills herself in pregnancy; he is himself killed by some apparently male victim of his lust. On this simple groundwork some striking and even tragic scenes are inwrought;—the main *motif* being the natural desire of the ghosts to carry off the children to hell.

(I am grateful to the Society for Psychical Research for permission to publish this excerpt and to Alan Gauld, professor of psychology at the University of Nottingham, for pointing me toward the letter.)

Now, there is much that might be said about this letter: why Myers gets the ages of the children wrong, whether there is strong evidence for interpretations of lesbianism or homosexuality; whether Miss Jessel really is pregnant and really does commit suicide; whether the ghosts desire to carry the children off to hell, and so on. I say a few words about such matters in a forthcoming book-length study of *The Turn of the Screw*. Because that study will not be published for some time, however, I thought readers of this journal would like to see a letter that proves that at least one early reader believed that the governess is basically trustworthy and that ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel do appear in the story.

I hasten to point out that Frederic Myers was not just any reader. He was a Cambridge-educated scholar and a literary man in his own right. More important for our purposes, he was a founding member of, and one of the most active workers in, the Society for Psychical Research. Established in 1882, the society was set up with the express purpose of investigating certain supposedly supernatural phenomena: thought transference, hauntings, trance mediumship, poltergeists, and the like. One of the society's earliest, most controversial, and most publicized ventures was to investigate reported sightings of ghosts. Myers participated in these investigations and helped write (with Edmund Gurney and Frank Podmore) the 1886 two-volume *Phantasms of the Living*, which published, classified, and discussed hundreds of reported ghost cases. Myers, then, was not speaking as a layman when he described Peter Quint and Miss Jessel as “ghosts.” He even used the somewhat technical term “partially-materialized” to describe them. By that term Myers meant that James's fiction-

al ghosts were material enough to exist outside the mind of a perceiver, material enough to be seen at times by some people, but not material enough to do physical harm to living people or to be physically touched by them. And well he might have used technical language, for his correspondent, Oliver Lodge, a professor of physics at Liverpool University, was also an active member of the Society for Psychical Research.

Frederic Myers and Henry James were friends. When *Phantasms of the Living* was published, Henry James bought his own copy and later consulted it before he wrote *The Turn of the Screw*. When James's story was published, Myers read it. Surely more than casual importance should be attached to the opinion, written shortly after publication of the story, by a personal friend of the author, to a fellow investigator of supernatural phenomena. If Myers, who had spent years recording and studying the narratives of people who said they saw ghosts, thought the governess was a generally reliable narrator of a story about ghosts, perhaps we should pause before we decide that she is neurotic and her ghosts imaginary. But then, Alexander Jones told us that twenty-five years ago.

PETER G. BEIDLER
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Reply:

I should like to make two very brief comments. First, I congratulate Peter Beidler on his discovery of a most interesting piece of evidence. Second, it is gratifying to learn that items consigned to *PMLA* have such a long shelf life.

ALEXANDER E. JONES
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Gawain's Wound

To the Editor:

Paul F. Reichardt's "Gawain and the Image of the Wound" (99 [1984]: 154–61) makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. For it is very important to know that the neck was associated with the will in medieval imagery and that Gawain's wound symbolizes the correction of an improperly ordered will. But we need to look at the early events in the story to understand why Gawain's will—and by extension, Arthur's—needs to be corrected.

Chaucer's Parson tells us that ostentatious hospitality is a sign of pride (vainglory) and that the remedy is humility or true self-knowledge. The ostentatious

Christmas celebration staged by Arthur is probably a sign of pride. Moreover, Arthur himself needs to be carefully assessed on other matters. In lines 85–99, he is described as still subject to the needs of youth for lively action, and he acts against the virtue of fortitude (or courage) when he brashly accepts the stranger's no-win game. At this point his nephew, Sir Gawain, steps in and becomes a surrogate for the brash Arthur. The lesson that Gawain—and by extension, Arthur and his court—learns at the end through the wound is to take care of himself. He needs to value his life properly and not put it on the line just to meet stupid, meaningless challenges. Thus the author reaffirms the idea that the cardinal virtue of fortitude is the mean between the extremes of pusillanimity and brashness.

The author also implies through the images of the story that there is an intimate connection between the right ordering under reason of the irascible appetites (leading to true courage) and of the concupiscible appetites (leading to true temperance). The author calls attention to these interrelated aspects of our animal nature by juxtaposing the hunting scenes, involving aggressive tendencies, and the temptation scenes, involving cupidity. When Gawain learns how to care for himself properly and not be brash, he presumably also learns how to moderate and rule by reason his concupiscible appetites. When everyone at Arthur's court joins in wearing the green banner won by Gawain in his victory over pride, they symbolically join in his newly acquired humility and maturity.

THOMAS J. FARRELL, SJ
Toronto, Ontario

To the Editor:

Paul F. Reichardt's "Gawain and the Image of the Wound" provides some helpful insights into a major symbol of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. At the same time, the overall thrust of his essay sends the reader striking off in a wrong direction. Reichardt observes in the beginning that "more remains to be said about Gawain's culpability" (154) and, later, "the threat of beheading that hangs over the plot of *Gawain* may be related to the impending dissolution of the Arthurian body politic through the corruptive pride of its own knights" (158). First, nothing in *Gawain* suggests the dissolution to be "impending." This story takes place in the earlier part of Arthur's reign, as indicated by the description of Guenevere as "without a flaw" and, more significant, of Arthur as "a little boyish." Second, in both quotations Reichardt emphasizes the problem as individual sinfulness. Along this line he connects the pentangle only with *homo se relictus*, "the individual operating without the aid of divine grace" (159). He ignores that it can also apply to Arthur's court in its en-