Turning the Neo-Victorian Screw: Review of Tim Luscombe's *Turn of the Screw*

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Henry James' *Turn of the Screw*, adapted by Tim Luscombe
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Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) notoriously ends on a note of tantalising irresolution. By refusing to return to the opening frame of the tale's telling, the novella allows for no discussion or interpretation of events by its diegetic listeners, as well as eliding any sense of closure for the extradiegetic reader. Nor does the narrative indicate the subsequent fate of the child Flora, following her brother Miles's sudden demise, or any consequences for the unnamed governess, who may have precipitated the death of a child in her charge. The inconclusiveness extends to the suspected corruption of the children by the former servants, Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, and to the reality of their spectres, which the governess claims to see. The text's stubborn resistance to interrogation, its withholding of what readers most want to know, accounts for the perennial appeal of the tale, but perhaps also inflected James's description of his work as "irresponsible" in his preface to the 1908 edition of the text (James 1995c: 117).

The Turn of the Screw's proliferating ambiguities have elicited copious critical treatments and psychoanalytical readings. These repeatedly debate the governess narrator's reliability, her possibly deranged state of mind, and the extent to which her apparent repressed desire for her employer, the children's uncle and guardian, may have resulted in her projecting the ghosts and causing Miles' death by her paranoid fear of

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sexuality and compromised innocence, implicitly not just the children's but also her own. Stanley Renner, for instance, regards the governess as "fit[ting] the classic profile of the female sexual hysteric" (Renner 1995: 227), in other words, a case study of sexual pathology. In effect, Renner and others have read the governess as a cross between Jane Eyre falling into temptation and Bertha Rochester, the madwoman in the attic, with Thornfield translated into the remote country estate of Bly.[1] The text's equivocations have likewise attracted – and evidently continue to attract – abundant neo-Victorian responses, re-visions, prequels, and sequels. The most noteworthy of recent re-imaginings include Alejandro Amenábar's film *The Others* (2001), A. N. Wilson's *A Jealous Ghost* (2005), John Harding's *Florence and Giles* (2010), and Emma Tennant's enigmatic but critically neglected *The Beautiful Child* (2012). A new screen adaptation, *The Turning*, executively produced by Steven Spielberg and directed by Floria Sigismondi, is currently in production with filming taking place in Ireland (see 'Niall' 2018: n.p.). With the novella's complication of 'truth', its multiplication of possible readings of the narrated past, and the onus placed on readers to decide the matter for themselves (in a sense 'co-producing' the text), *The Turn of the Screw* can be read as a prescient precursor of postmodern concerns, just as its focus on transgressive desires and the darker aspects of the Victorian family idyll pre-empt self-conscious neo-Victorian approaches to revisiting the nineteenth-century past and its works. As Cynthia Ozick remarked now more than three decades ago, "[m]ysteriously, with the passing of each new decade, James becomes more and more our contemporary – it is as if our own sensibilities are only just catching up with his" (Ozick 1986: n.p.).

Turn of the Screw (without the definite article), Tim Luscombe's compelling new adaptation of James's iconic novella, which I saw at the New Theatre in Cardiff on 26 May 2018 on the final night of its 2018 British tour, has certainly 'caught up' with James, presenting the audience with new twists and neo-Victorian turns. The striking set by the designer Sara Perks, with its tilted architectural frame evoking a second proscenium arch,[2] seems to serve as a metafictional allusion to the double narration of James' tale.[3] Luscombe's play, under the direction of Daniel Buckroyd, offers its audience a pointed visual, if superfluous warning that something is radically askew and 'out of joint' in the Victorian world on stage. This impression is supported by suspenseful, predictably ominous music (by

John Chambers) and dramatic lighting design (by Matt Leventhall), as expected of an adaptation touted as "The Classic Ghost Story" on the posters, programmes and websites advertising Dermot McLaughlin Productions' co-production with Mercury Theatre Colchester and Wolverhampton Grand.[4] The opening set also encodes the promise of a 'big reveal', with various pieces of ghostly shrouded furniture and props in the background inviting the spectators' curiosity as to what might lurk beneath the dustsheets – and, metaphorically, beneath Victorian domestic gentility – awaiting exposure. Like James's tale, which wants to have its cake and eat it too as far as the ghosts are concerned, Luscombe's play manages to have it both ways: while remaining symbolically 'true' to James's ambiguous vision, the play also radically diverges from the source text.

In an innovative intervention, Luscombe dispenses with the introductory ghost story-telling frame, a move that might lead viewers to expect the play to come down firmly in the Edmund Wilson critical camp that dismisses the spectres as aberrations of the neurotic governess's disturbed mind (see Wilson 1977: 88). Pertinently, Wilson reminds us that in his collected edition, James strategically chose not to include *The Turn of the Screw* "with his other ghost stories", instead placing it in-between his psychological studies of mania and pathological lying, *The Aspern Papers* (1888) and the short story 'The Liar' (1888) respectively (Wilson 1977: 94). A comparable positioning on Luscombe's part is suggested by the clever conceit that substitutes for the novella's frame, but in this case also closes the play: the governess applies for a position to supervise and educate three young children, only for the interview to take a dark turn towards coerced confession, when Mrs Conray, her potential employer, turns out to be the grown-up Flora, intent on discovering the true circumstances of her brother's death. The playwright's prefatory 'Notes' confirm the adaptation's psychological focus, referring to the governess's "fracturing sanity" that should inspire "growing doubt about her credibility" in the audience, while later acting notes within the script describe the governess as "*hid[ing] a neurotic disposition under a cloak of studied self-assurance*" (Luscombe 2018a: 4, 6).[5]

Luscombe's Flora assumes multiple roles as investigator, accuser, prosecutor, judge and jury,[6] but also functions as a quasi psychoanalyst, facilitating the governess's reliving and working through of the traumatic events leading up to Miles's demise. Viewers conversant with James's text

will recall the frame narrator Douglas's conviction that the governess "had never told any one [sic]" prior to himself about the happenings at Bly (James 1995b: 23). Flora thus takes on Douglas's role as 'father' confessor – "I wish to hear about your early experiences [….] I wish to hear you speak about your early employment" (Luscombe 2018a, Act I, Scene 2: 8) – as well as his role of providing the backstory for the governess's tale. In line with neo-Victorianism's prevalent feminist politics, this strategy refocuses the tale from the central heterosexual relationship between the governess and Miles in James's text to the woman-woman relationship between Flora and the governess. The confession trope also lends itself particularly well to the dramatic exploration of the novella's sexual undertones, of which more later.

What rings somewhat less true to the source text is Flora's assertion that her staged confrontation with her onetime governess was instigated in part by her dying uncle's compulsion to unravel what took place at Bly: "he's […] started to wonder – perhaps the old chap's losing his wits, what do you think? – whether what was readily agreed by everyone, was what *really* happened" (Luscombe 2018a, Act I, Scene 2: 12, original emphasis). Flora's arch interjection again directs viewers to the delusional interpretation model. Yet the subsequently replayed past underlines how the uncle deliberately cut himself off from the affairs at his country estate, refusing all involvement in his nephew's and niece's lives other than providing financial support, so as to pursue his carefree self-indulgent lifestyle unhindered, just as he does in the novella. Hence his belated death-bed attack of conscience and guilt strikes an unlikely jarring note.[7]

Luscombe's play aptly mirrors neo-Victorianism's typical conflation of past and present by having the characters shift back and forth between the governess's present-day interrogation and the events at Bly three decades earlier.[8] Commonly signalled by Flora's abrupt motionlessness, these temporal shifts occur without any changes of actors, costume, or even scenery, apart from the occasional switching of the projected backlit backgrounds between simulated window frames and an exterior elevation. What Luscombe terms the actors' "rapid morphing" (Luscombe 2018a, 'Notes': 4) proves a highly effective way of representing traumatic flashbacks, as the protagonists' sudden (re-)immersion in the haunting past is literally re-enacted before the eyes of the audience. The stage thus becomes doubled, producing Hamlet-like resonances of a play within a play

that call into question Flora's self-claimed role as genuine truth-seeker as opposed to cunning manipulator. Appropriately, the governess at one point reverses Flora's accusations, suggesting that the girl's guilty conscience has caused her to repress disturbing memories that implicate her in corrupt connivance with the spirits (see Luscombe 2018a, Act III, Scene 2: 34). Put differently, Flora's allegations risk collapsing into self-defensive posturing – in a sense, the play becomes as much a psychological case study of Flora as of the governess. For Flora has already proven herself a sufficiently consummate actress to trick the governess into believing her to be a genuine prospective employer, only to triumphantly reveal her deception: "I'm not married. I have no children. I require no governess. Only the truth" (Luscombe 2018a, Act I, Scene 4: 13).[9] This suggests a propensity for deceit and manipulation possibly first cultivated in childhood. The main female protagonists thus not only summon the ghosts of Quint and Jessel (and Miles), but also the ghosts of their own former selves, who risk revealing more than their 'present-day' counterparts intend. Meanwhile the extent of both women's innocence (or otherwise) remains in doubt, in keeping with the deliberate equivocations of James's novella.

Nonetheless, Buckroyd's directorial interpretation of Luscombe's dramaturgical decision to restage/replay the past within the 'present' interview setting produces a degree of awkwardness. The "fluttered anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage", barely out of the schoolroom herself, "young, untried, nervous" and without any prior teaching experience (James 1995b: 25, 27), is rather difficult to discern in the mature figure of Carli Norris, who plays both the young and older governess in equally confident fashion, exuding a rather commanding presence on stage even when at her most vulnerable and terrified.[10] Rather than being directly shown, the young governess's lack of professional, not to say life experience is merely verbally alluded to in Flora's description of her as "[a] provincial girl – not sophisticated or even knowledgeable" (Luscombe 2018a, Act I, Scene 2: 8). The only suggestion of youthful uncertainty comes upon her initial arrival at Bly. As Flora pulls down the dustcovers shrouding the bedroom furniture, the governess is "*thrilled*" at seeing herself – apparently for the first time ever – in a full-length looking-glass (Luscombe 2018a, Act I, Scene 5: 15). The mirror scene, replicated from James's tale, clearly relates to (lack of) self-knowledge and, in Lacanian terms, to the subject's traumatic entry into the symbolic order, represented by the master's house. Arguably, the scene

also encodes Jane Eyresque allusions, with the interview room/Bly interior serving as a sort of purgatorial 'red room', in which the governess, like Charlotte Brontë's heroine, will be forced to confront the possibility of her own madness and its dreadful consequences.[11]

The performative challenge and difficulty of figuring the same character at two divergent ages and life stages via the sole reliance on posture, gestures, and voice are underlined by the actress Annabel Smith's portrayal of Flora. Smith's youthful appearance allows her to readily embody the eight year old Flora, but she is somewhat less convincing as a mature woman of thirty-eight, the age specified for Mrs Conray in Luscombe's script. Smith's energetic kinetic enactment of the child protagonist involves much hysterical laughter and shrieking, excited jumping about (and over and on top of furniture), and the repeated hitching up of the girl's dress, exposing not just her ankles but also her knees and thighs encased in frilly drawers. Even allowing for extra leeway vis-à-vis a prepubescent child's exuberant spirits, it is difficult to imagine any Victorian governess, particularly one brought up in a religious household, permitting such undisciplined behaviour in a nineteenth-century girl in her charge. If Buckroyd intends the governess's leniency to signal her own immaturity and newness to her position of "supreme authority" at Bly (James 1995b: 26; Luscombe 2018a, Act I, Scene 3: 10), the direction here misses its mark; instead, Flora's wildness at times evokes nothing so much as present-day ADHD.[12]

The young Flora's over-the-top behaviour might have been dramatically justified had her adult counterpart evinced more overt signs of mental health issues. Apart from bursts of sardonic laughter, however, Smith plays the grown-up protagonist in coldly rational fashion, contemptuously dismissing the ghosts and the governess's self-justifications out of hand as "nonsensical" and referring to the latter's romantic fantasies about the master as "the wellspring of your delusion" (Luscombe 2018a, Act II, Scene 5, 29, 28). The only heightened emotion displayed by the adult Flora is anger at what she seems to regard as the governess' inadvertent self-deception or deliberate mendacity about her culpability for Miles's death, though curiously the accuser never resorts to the horrific "shocking" language used by the young Flora in the tale, as reported by Mrs Grose (James 1995b: 104). Hence spectators struggle to discern any real continuity in character between the restless wayward child and the grown-up Flora.

This approach to her characterisation also undermines the asserted investigatory purpose, since the adult Flora appears to have made up her mind about the governess's guilt long before the actual interview. It might have been more in keeping with the disturbing ambiguities – and "general uncanny ugliness and horror" (James 1995b: 22) – of James's exploration of the nature of evil to play the adult Flora with suppressed, even quasi demonic menace, suggesting the possibility of her continued conspiring with, manipulation or possession by Miss Jessel's ghost. This would have recast the interview as a deliberate attempt at destabilising the governess's sanity, by falsely convincing her that her actions at Bly amounted to the manslaughter, if not outright murder of Miles, thus recouping and further developing the potential supernatural threat of James' source text through repetition in the play's present.

The directing decisions pertaining to characterisation prove far more effective with regards to the doubling, or more accurately 'tripling', of the unnamed master with Miles and Quint, all played by Michael Hanratty in the role of 'The Man'.[13] Hanratty also figures Miss Jessel 'in drag', so to speak, a fitting nod to what Priscilla L. Walton terms James's "effort to cross-dress and write from [the governess's] vantage point", "taking it upon himself to represent femininity" (Walton 1995: 254). Both visually and verbally, the play stresses the gallant uncle's quasi seduction of the governess, since the interview for the position at Bly is re-enacted for the audience (rather than just reported) and Flora specifically refers to her uncle's charms and "way with women", even in old age (Luscombe 2018a. Act I, Scene 4: 12). In James's novella, upon the applicant's acceptance of the position, her new employer "for a moment, disburdened, delighted, […] held her hand, thanking her for the sacrifice" (James 1995b: 27). In Luscombe's adaptation, the master expresses himself still more profusely: "[you] would do me, personally, such a very great favour. I would be (*kissing her hand*) forever in your debt. (*Looking into her eyes*) I'd gratefully incur such an obligation to you"; when she finally agrees to take the post, he thanks her "sincerely for the sacrifice you're making for my family. The sacrifice you make for me" (Luscombe 2018a, Act I, Scene 3, 10, 11). The implicit motif of male predatory manipulation of female desires thus prefigures the later introduction of Quint's history in relation to the children and Miss Jessel. Indeed, in another addition to James's tale, the motherly Mrs Grose, played in aptly homely fashion by Maggie McCarthy,

specifically suggests that the previous governess was pregnant at the time of her death by sketching Miss Jessel's extended belly with her hands (see Luscombe 2018, Act II, Scene 7: 32).[14]

Symbolically, the play's conflation of the three male roles thus figures Quint and Miles as literal extensions (or doubles) of the master as the model of exploitative masculinity. The same point is made by Miles's ardent kissing of the governess's wrist, mimicking his uncle's earlier behaviour (see Luscombe 2018a, Act I, Scene 7: 19),[15] and by the ghost of Quint, who at one point enters her bedroom-cum-sitting room, reaching his hand out as if to caress her cheek, as the acting notes stress that "*[t]here's a sexual element to*" their encounter (Luscombe 2018a, Act III, Scene 5: 37). In this manner, both the playwriting and directing cleverly exploit the subtle nuances of James's source text for a pointed gender critique. Rather than simplifying or diluting the complexities of James' text, Luscombe's translation of the novella to the stage simultaneously preserves and intensifies the tale's multi-layered ambiguity, which is no mean feat.[16]

Neo-Victorianism, of course, evinces a particular interest in all nineteenth-century matters sexual, deviant, and transgressive. Since Luscombe's play clearly engages not just with James's novella, but also with the history of interpretive (particularly psychoanalytical) criticism on the text, it comes as no surprise that the adaptation accentuates the tale's sexual subtext and textual unconscious, sometimes in 'sexsational' fashion. Not least, of course, for present-day audiences, biographical speculation about the likelihood of James's own homosexuality adds extra spice to inferences of Quint's potential queer relationship with Miles, which would self-evidently also constitute paedophilia. In the novella, the paedophiliac trope is further hinted at in what Wilson describes as the governess seeming to fall "in love with the boy" (Wilson, 1977: 91), while in the play, the trope echoes through Mrs Grose's query upon hearing of Miles' expulsion from school: "Are you afraid he will corrupt *you*?" (Luscombe 2018a, Act I, Scene 5: 17, original emphasis). Particularly in light of the play's later, more overtly sexualised scenes, the housekeeper's wording evokes the 'spectre' of illicit adult-child sexual relations, albeit cleverly inverted from adults seducing (possibly consenting) minors into the child 'grooming' the adult. Yet rather than concentrating on the threat of paedophilia as the tale's covert sexual transgression, Luscombe's adaptation shifts the focus away from the adults and more onto the child characters themselves.

Strikingly, the grooming trope recurs in an explicitly incestuous scene between Miles and Flora towards the end of Act II. As the governess's attention is focused elsewhere in conversation with Miss Grose (stage left), the children wrestle playfully (downstage right), then lie down on the floor with Miles atop of his sister, moving sinuously up and down above her in a manner suggestive of sexual intimacy.[17] Thereafter, the siblings rise and embrace, and Miles caresses Flora's cheek (prefiguring Quint's later gesture in the encounter with the governess). While the children's actions do not provide the governess with evidence of her charges' corruption, since only witnessed by the audience, they certainly do supply visible 'proof' of the same for the spectators. At ten years of age and two years older than his sister, Miles appears to confidently direct the simulated sex-games, seemingly 'grooming' Flora; hence the scene suggests the pernicious cycle of victims of child sex abuse becoming perpetrators in turn. The triad of master-manservant-boy, all played by the same actor, renders the men and Miles interchangeable versions of "predatory" masculinity (Luscombe 2018a: Act II, Scene 1: 22).

In the novella, the governess cries out to Mrs Grose that "They *know* – it's too monstrous: they know, they know!" (James 1995b: 54, original emphasis). Yet her horrified conviction focuses more on the children's knowledge of the presence of the ghosts and the illicit (i.e. sexual) knowledge the latter may impart, risking harm to innocent *minds*, than on the children's bodies and their engagement in literal sexual activity. Readers are left to infer the potential double archaic meaning of 'knowing' as 'having sexual intercourse'. As Robert Heilmann aptly notes,

> [t]hough James wisely leaves undefined what the children are doing under the tutelage of the ghosts, it would be plausible to suppose that sex is involved and to conclude that, despite his shift of emphasis from the clinical to the moral, James had "anticipated" the Freudian discoveries of preadolescent sexuality. (Heilmann 1961: 347)

Buckroyd's direction of Luscombe's adaptation renders this anticipation literal. In the play, the governess's derivative exclamation – "It's too monstrous. They *know*. [….] All that *we* know – and heaven knows what else besides." (Luscombe 2018a, Act II, Scene 7: 30, original emphasis) –

occurs just shortly before the siblings' simulated sex, which takes places while Mrs Grose speaks of the infamous Miss Jessel and intimates her pregnancy and the ghosts appear as silhouettes against the backlit backdrop. Hence the siblings' incestuous encounter could also be read as a re-enactment of Miss Jessel's 'fall' and her affair with Quint in a doubled sense: either Miles and Flora 'represent' Quint and the former governess, or they pretend to be the servants, re-enacting sexual behaviour they may have witnessed.[18] However, the scene certainly struck me as much darker and more disturbing than children's play-acting, in spite of the acts' apparent consensuality. The implied threat of James's novella is re-directed from the children's souls to their bodies – in Heilmann's (inverted) terms from "the moral" to "the clinical" – now targeting their sexual rather than spiritual corruption, in line with today's prevalent fears of sexual exploitation and abuse as *the* major threat to children besides war, disease, and famine. Arguably, the scene also contains self-conscious metafictional resonances, reminding spectators of the selectivity of attention that determines exactly what we 'see' and focus on (and what we disregard) in arriving at interpretations of read/performed texts, as well as our constructions of child 'innocence' in a post-Freudian age.

Later scenes develop the children's sexualisation. One of these relates to another ingenious insertion: Miles's and Flora's performance of another play within a play (or an excerpt thereof) for the governess, namely the first encounter of Bottom and Titania from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This scene adds extra layers to the already bottomless ambiguities of James' novella. Although here too Miles seems to play the 'leading' role, viewers may recall Titania's excessive amorousness as well as her delusion, evoking James's governess's repeated comparisons of her sojourn at Bly to a dream. In a sense, Flora's responses to and relations with Miles replicate those of the governess vis-à-vis the absent master. In the words of Bottom himself, from Act III, Scene 1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, recited in Luscombe's play, "reason and love keep little company together nowadays" (Luscombe 2018a, Act III, Scene 4: 37). The play within a play, of course, also underlines the children's capacity for consummate acting, which the governess, both in the novella and adaptation, comes to attribute to the siblings: "I began to think your charms might be entirely studied" (Luscombe 2018a, Act II, Scene 5: 28; also see Act III, Scene 7: 40). Miles's appearance in the guise of Bottom as an ass –

signalled by his wearing "*a horse head mask*" (Luscombe 2018a, Act III, Scene 4: 36) – may also be intended to play on Miles's and Flora's 'beastliness',[19] creating a "grotesque contrast" between the characters' "beauty" and "refinement", on the one hand, and their "earthiness" and "grossness" on the other, analogous to that discerned by John A. Allen in Shakespeare's play (Allen 1967: 108).[20]

Still more unsettling is the possibility – of which the production could have made more – that the angelic Miles (rather than Quint) might be at the 'bottom' of the corruption feared by the governess, a sort of nineteenth-century equivalent to Damian from *The Omen* (1976), with Flora his female counterpart. If Miles, like the master, symbolically seduces the governess, might he have done the same with Quint? Curiously, both James's tale and Luscombe's adaptation do *not* invite speculation on one particular point: the exact nature of Quint's death from a head wound attributed to "a fatal slip, in the dark and after leaving the public-house, on the steepish icy slope" (James 1995b: 51). An adaptation so deliberately exploring child sexuality and raising the possibility of child sex abuse might have played with the possibility that Quint was murdered by his 'victim' or else the betrayed Jessel, to whom Miles might have "said things" about his greater claim on Quint's affections (Luscombe 2018a: Act IV, Scene 2: 59), much as he supposedly said inappropriate things to his schoolmates, resulting in his being expelled.

The trope of child sexuality is also explored through Flora. In the novella, Flora's two visits to the lake, one supervised, the other unauthorised, finally convince the governess of the girl's cognisance of Miss Jessel's ghost, who in both instances appears on the opposite shore. Flora's boat-making attempt on the first visit – screwing a piece of wood into a hole in another fragment to make a mast – lends itself to a Freudian reading as indicating the child's sexual knowledge inappropriate for her age. As Shoshana Felman explains, "[t]he screw – or the mast – is evidently, in this incident, at least in the governess's eyes, a phallic symbol, a metaphor connoting sexuality itself" or, in the view of some critics, even an "indication of the literal object – the real organ – desired by the governess without her being able or willing to admit it" (Felman 1995: 200-201),[21] but in Luscombe's adaptation perhaps also desired by Flora herself. The re-enactment of this scene on stage seems intent on reproducing such Freudian critical readings rather more than Flora's actual, rather innocuous

actions in the novella. In the play, the girl grasps one of the posts at the foot of the wrought iron bedstead and frenziedly slides her hands up and down – 'screwing' in the 'mast' – as though masturbating a phallus, her body writhing as if in the throes of orgasm. Her actions are accompanied by the governess's retrospective voice-over: "You were screwing in the mast, screwing and screwing, so intently, brazenly yes, violently. And I knew in that moment that you knew too" (Luscombe 2018a, Act II, Scene 6: 30). Note the repetition of the loaded term "screwing", combined with the equally obvious sexual connotations of "brazenly". In effect, the adaptation here transfers the imputation of sexual hysteria from the governess to Flora.

This might have worked better in terms of Jamesean ambiguity had the director come up with some way of suggesting that Flora was acting out the *governess*'s desires, instead of acting out those of Miss Jessel (or her own). Here the (too) explicit rendering of highly oblique insinuations in James's source text comes across as something akin to melodramatic parody, almost as though the adaptation intended to forcibly excise any residual doubt in the viewers' minds (as well as the governess's) as to the child's loss of innocence. This loss, however, *undermines* rather than supports the aimed at psychological interpretation – unless, that is, the same reading of sexual hysteria is extended to Flora. While the scene, being recalled and recounted by the neurotic governess, could well be liable to distortion, its visual representation or actualisation on stage invariably imbues Flora's actions with verisimilitude from the audience's perspective. The scene thus constitutes an instance of what Chiara Strazzulla terms "too much on-the-nose" (Strazzulla 2018: n.p.). Aptly, Strazzulla goes on to argue that when the play instead resorts to understatement and "a slow build" of atmosphere, which "is often resolved in nothing definite", it generates a much more satisfying "unnerving feeling" (Strazzulla 2018: n.p.). Arguably at such times, the play better captures the indefinite nature of desire itself, which of course only exists for the duration of its *un*fulfilment.

The least successful of the three discussed instances of the children's sexualisation, the over-played boat-building scene also risks issuing into vicarious paedophilic spectacle. Priscilla L. Walton aptly describes "[t]he structure of the audience" in *The Turn of the Screw* as "resembl[ing] a peep show"; while in the case of James's tale, "that which will be peeped at are the governess's secrets" (Walton 1995: 260), in Luscombe's adaption, we

peep at the children's secrets instead. The missing 'perpetrator' implicates the audience in unpalatable transgressive desires: as we pretend to watch an eight year old girl performing sex, the play invites us to project her missing sexual partner and imagine the unseen. Put differently, we occupy the position of voyeuristic onlooker and co-producer on 'the other side' of the lake/stage, out-front alongside Miss Jessel's spectre, with the governess' horrified gaze riveted upon us. To transpose Felman's remarks on reactions to the tale's initial publication to the experience of viewing Luscombe's adaptation, the audience is compromised by being "*forced to participate in the scandal*" – "the [viewer]'s innocence cannot remain intact: there is no such thing as an innocent [viewer] of this text" (Felman 1977: 97, original emphasis). Put differently, the viewer comes to share in the confused sense of complicity that Mrs Grose experiences following the servants' deaths: "afterward I imagined – and I still imagine. *And what I imagine is dreadful*" (Luscombe 2018a, Act II, Scene 7: 32, added emphasis).

Elsewhere, I have discussed the ramifications of the widespread use of the child sex abuse trope in neo-Victorian fiction, suggesting that "through its complex manipulations of affect and desire it may produce more self-conscious and self-critical consumers of commodified child trauma" (Kohlke 2018: 196). An analogous argument could be made for other neo-Victorian genres, such as drama. The staging of the boat-building scene in Luscombe's adaptation, however, risks instrumentalising the sex-act for unreflective shock and horror, akin to a cinematic special effect. In this case, the directorial decisions end up blunting rather than accentuating the novella's equivocations. The children in Luscombe's adaptation do more than "hover on the brink of puberty" and the "emergence of their sexuality" (Renner 1995: 224) – in proper Freudian fashion, they are depicted as already wholly and incontrovertibly sexual subjects.

According to Luscombe, he was "specifically tasked" by Dermot McLaughlin, the project's commissioning producer, "with retaining the ambiguity of the original" (Luscombe 2018c: n.p.). The children's express sexualisation makes this project much more difficult. In other words, just as a more complex portrayal of Flora would have been preferable, so too a lower-key, less-is-more approach to the representation of the children's corruption might have proved more effective. On this issue, the adaptation leaves no scope for hesitation. Instead, it problematically shifts the question from the 'fact' of the children's corruption (in this case firmly established)

to its undisclosed origin and/or cause. The play seems to want viewers to interpret Miles's and Flora's sexualisation as the traumatic after-effect of literal abuse, while attempting – albeit not wholly successfully – to side-line possibilities of demonic influence/possession or innate evil.

This problem, of course, also relates to the nature of theatrical representation and the way that embodied performance concretises (i.e. gives specific material form to) what texts can leave to readers' own visualisations. As regards adapting *The Turn of the Screw*, the difficulties are heightened by the source text's complicated layering of ambiguities and the challenge for both playwright and director to achieve commensurate depth and complexity in the comparatively short time of a two-hour performance, including the interval. Curiously, however, in the case of the ghosts' real or imagined nature, the theatrical constraints have very different consequences, paradoxically *reinstating* Jamesean inconclusiveness by undermining the very same psychological reading that the play repeatedly suggests viewers should adopt. For most of the play, the ghosts' representation shifts between back-lit black silhouettes outlined against the sky in the 'outside' background and brief, voiceless, three-dimensional and embodied appearances on stage in the Bly interior. This necessarily imbues the ghosts with substantiality as well as phenomenological actuality.[22] The performance thus aligns theatre-goers with the governess's viewing position: unlike other characters in the novella or on stage, we can and *do* actually 'see' the spectres, making them appear more 'real' and making us more inclined to countenance their independent existence outside of the governess's mind. Indeed, Luscombe's article on 'Dealing With Ambiguity in Adapting Henry James' Turn of the Screw', included in the New Theatre programme,[23] reminds spectators that "James himself was a member of the Society for Psychical Research" of which his brother William was sometime president (Luscombe 2018c: n.p.), and hence appears to have accepted at least the possibility of supernatural phenomena. A slight discordant note is struck, however, when the governess describes the ghost of Miss Jessel to Mrs Grose as possessing "extraordinary beauty" (Luscombe 2018a, Act II, Scene 7: 32), although the spectre (the cross-dressing Hanratty) only appeared heavily veiled in black, so that the face could not be seen.

Luscombe's adaptation ends with a return to the present of the interview, following the re-enactment of Miles's death, with the governess, mired in memories, still holding the boy's corpse. The acting notes that

close the script stress that the governess "*begins to understand that she has murdered Miles*", as "*[s]he looks up at Flora with growing horror*", since "*from now on, the governess will be forced to bear the guilt*" (Luscombe 2018a, Act IV, Scene 3: 61). Her prior versions of past and self (as self-sacrificing, if failed heroine) have been rewritten. However, in the performance I attended in Cardiff, prior to having sight of the draft script, this was not the actual impression conveyed. Instead, I was left unsure as to what extent the play intended to support a 'purely' psychological reading. Let me try and unpick why this was the case.

For me, the ending of Luscombe's play reiterates rather than resolves the source text's crucial hesitation between supernatural and psychological explanations of the events. Admittedly, the viewer, along with the horrified governess, is forced to consider at least the possibility of her delusion and corresponding guilt in the light of Flora's query, "Was he really ever possessed?" (Luscombe 2018a, Act IV, Scene 3: 61). Luscombe adds a coda to *The Turn of the Screw*'s famous closing lines – "I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped." – by reworking a passage from slightly earlier in the novella, as the governess coerces Miles's confession of his wrongdoing at school and experiences a moment of "appalling alarm of his being perhaps innocent. It was for the instant confounding and bottomless, for if he *were* innocent what then on earth was I?" (James 1995b: 116, 115, original emphasis). Luscombe's play closes on the governess's faltering speculation, petering out before its completion:

> […] if *he* were guiltless…
>
> *She draws breath sharply as a new realisation dawn[s].*
>
> *(continued)* Then…I…
>
> (Luscombe 2018a, Act IV, Scene 3: 61, original emphasis, italics and un-bracketed ellipses)

As the interview abruptly ends, the inconclusiveness of the curtailed confession mimics the irresolution of James's source text, once again leaving it up to the audience what interpretation to adopt and how to fill in the unspoken blanks. Yet insofar as the play has already definitively established the children's *sexual* 'guilt' in the viewers' eyes, Miles's

'guiltlessness', it could be argued, has been rendered impossible, merely becoming another of the governess's potential delusions. As regards the aimed at retention of the source test's ambiguity, then, the most problematic aspects of the adaptation – the children's sexualisation and the material ghosts – pose a contradiction in terms: working in opposite ways, they respectively undermine *and* re-affirm the undecidability of James's tale.

In the end, Luscombe's adaptation, Buckroyd's direction, and the play's 2018 co-production by Dermot McLaughlin Productions with Mercury Theatre Colchester and Wolverhampton Grand rise to the myriad challenges of James's novella, even if some dramaturgical choices and directorial decisions produce unintended complications. Luscombe's play clearly aligns with the neo-Victorian predilection for imagining afterlives for iconic nineteenth-century characters, or for 'completing' unfinished Victorian texts as in the case of Charles Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870),[24] as well as with neo-Victorianism's perennial fascination with 'sexsation' and madness. In other ways too, Luscombe's adaptation is self-consciously neo-Victorian, perhaps most obviously so in its revisionary re-gendering of the tale's telling and the opportunities it affords marginalised figures for self-representation, whether corrective or self-damning, as the case may be. In Luscombe's own words, he omits the "parenthetical storytelling devices" so as to "give the governess a stage on which to tell her tale uncluttered by male interpreters" (Luscombe 2018c: n.p.) – one might be reminded of Jean Rhys's retrospective granting of a voice to Bertha Rochester née Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Nonetheless, Luscombe strikes me as slightly ingenious here, as he disregards the extent to which 'Mrs Conray' imposes a constraining confessional regime on the governess, disturbingly turning the adult Flora into the mouthpiece of the misogyny of both Victorian mad doctors and patriarchal psychoanalysis.

More significant, as noted earlier, is how Luscombe's re-gendering shifts the primary focus away from the tale's dominant relationship – that between the governess and Miles – to the relationship between Flora and the governess. The move resonates with Virginia Woolf's criticism in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that "all the great women of fiction" – and also *in* fiction, one might add – "were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen *only in relation to the other sex*. And how small a part of a woman's life is that" (Woolf 2000: 75, added emphasis). The play's

overriding impression is of the confrontation not between the governess and the ghosts or the governess and Miles, but between the two women,[25] contending to assert "supreme authority" over the audience's interpretation of the retold past (James 1995b: 26; Luscombe 2018a, Act I, Scene 3: 10), and, by extension, of James's tale also.

Luscombe's adaptation, it seems to me, highlights the fact that James's turning of the screw pushes beyond the interrogation of the nature of evil to explore the dubious, often contradictory quest for sincerity and salvation in an increasingly secular world stripped of certainties. In a strange roundabout way, we are once again confronted with the pertinence of Ozick's previously cited words: "with the passing of each new decade, James becomes more and more our contemporary […] as if our own sensibilities are only just catching up with his" (Ozick 1986: n.p.). His tale returns us to our own historical moment and once again underlines James's contemporary relevance. Arguably, both *The Turn of the Screw* and Luscombe's new adaptation plunge their characters and audiences into an indefinite state of 'post-truth': a subjective reality in which opinions and judgements are shaped not by objective verifiable facts and rational considerations, but by manipulated emotions, often illogical convictions, and visceral responses to events – what we *want* to believe without any conclusive evidence either way. These 'alternative facts' or factoids take on a new life of their own, like the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel – part reality, part fantasy that spins, twists, and turns, burrowing into audience's imaginations and cultural consciousness. Luscombe's adaptation does not, finally, lay the governess's possible factoids and the ghosts convincingly to rest. Rather, it makes clear that playwrights and writers can always discover further means of turning the neo-Victorian screw.

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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the playwright Tim Luscombe for generously sharing his script of the adaptation and for kindly granting me permission me to quote freely from it.

Notes

1. For James' intertextual debts to *Jane Eyre* (1847), see Tintner 1976 and Petry 1983.
2. Images of the set and actors can be viewed on the Mercury Theatre Colchester's website: https://www.mercurytheatre.co.uk/event/turn-of-the-screw/.
3. It also brought to my mind Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) with its incestuous siblings and dramatisation of self-destructive delusion, as though Bly too was about to slide into a figurative quagmire (which, of course, it does).
4. McLaughlin conceived the adaptation and eventually commissioned Luscombe to write it.
5. All citations are from *Turn of the Screw by Henry James:* Adapted for the stage by Tim Luscombe, Draft 4 (27 February 2018), kindly made available by the playwright. A published version by Oberon Books is planned for later this year. In the interim, requests for copies of the script can be made via Luscombe's personal website: http://www.timluscombe.com/request-a-script?1subject=Request+for+script:+Turn+of+the+Screw.
6. Flora intimidates the governess into compliance by threatening her with "a more formal investigation" by "external agencies" that "would be less accommodating": "For who – what rational outsider – on hearing the facts as I heard them reported, would believe that you should go free?" (Luscombe 2018a, Act I, Scene 4: 13). This metafictional inflection – with the audience functioning as the "rational outsider" – again promotes the adoption of a psychological approach to interpreting the happenings at Bly.
7. Since the dying uncle himself never appears on stage, for all the spectators know, he might be Flora's own invention to give her coercive project a gloss of borrowed, legitimating, patriarchal authority. This would mirror the male 'authorisation' of the governess's tale through James's framing male narrator, although undermining the neo-Victorian gender dynamics apparent elsewhere in Luscombe's play.
8. At the start of the interview, in response to Mrs Conray's query, the governess gives her age as "fifty" (Luscombe 2018a, Act I, Scene 2: 6), while James' narrative frame cites her taking up her post at Bly "at the age of twenty" (James 1995b: 25). The 'Notes' in the script identify the adult Flora's age as thirty-eight, although Annabel Smith, the actress who plays her in the 2018 production, appears significantly younger.

9. The wording employed in the Cardiff performance I attended was slightly more powerful, because almost more ritualistic: "I am not married. I have no children. I do not require a governess. All I require is the truth" (Luscombe 2018b, Act 1, Scene 4).
10. Akin to the possibility of the ghosts being 'creations' of the governess's unstable mind, the governess herself could perhaps be viewed as a projection/construction of Flora, who functions as 'director' of the coerced staging and performance of the traumatic past.
11. Other resonant intertextual echoes relate to Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* (1983), which itself, of course, draws on James's novella, and possibly, D. H. Lawrence's 'The Rocking Horse Winner' (1926). Luscombe's play opens with a deserted stage, dark apart from a spot-lit rocking horse moving every more violently without a rider before suddenly standing still. In Act III, Scene 3, Miles rides the same rocking horse. A detailed comparative analysis of Luscombe's dramatic choices and those adopted by the numerous prior stage (and/or film) adaptations of *The Turn of the Screw* might throw further light on the extent to which Luscombe's re-vision draws on prior adaptations as well as James's source text. However, such an analysis is beyond the scope of the present essay.
12. Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder.
13. In contrast to the theatre programme, Luscombe's as yet unpublished script designates the male character as "The Employer, Miles and the Others" (Luscombe 2018a: 2).
14. In the novella, Miss Jessel is implicated in sexual transgression with Quint, but her 'fallenness' and premature death appear to be the only consequences.
15. An excerpt of the scene can be viewed on the YouTube compilation available on the Mercury Theatre Colchester's website; see https://www.mercurytheatre.co.uk/event/turn-of-the-screw/ (0:09-0:13).
16. In her review of the Cardiff performance, Chiara Strazzulla pertinently remarks that "[i]n a visual medium like theatre, it is much harder to preserve this ambiguous nature than it would be on the page"; however, as I go on to discuss, her claim that "in this respect this production fully meets its objective" requires qualification as regards some scenes (Strazzulla 2018: n.p.).
17. See https://www.mercurytheatre.co.uk/event/turn-of-the-screw/ (0:14-0:16) for part of the scene. The acting directions in the script specify that Miles and Flora are "*outside playing on the lawn*" (though in the performance, I took them to be in the house), "*messing about – rolling over each other. Is it*

simply a gleeful childish game, or possibly something more sinister?" (Luscombe 2018a, Act II, Scene 7: 32).

18. The latter reading is also suggested by Luscombe's further acting notes in the scene: "*It could look like the children are recreating, mirthfully, unaware of the implications, Quint and Jessel rolling over each other in the throws [sic] of sexual abandon*" (Luscombe 2018a, Act II, Scene 7: 32).
19. Interestingly, however, John A. Allen points out that Bottom himself is "not lascivious in the least" but more concerned with the prosaic appetite for food (Allen 1967: 108).
20. According to Allen, the audience of Shakespeare's play "[c]onsciously […] enjoy[s] the comedy of grotesque contrast between amorous beauty and oblivious earthiness, refinement and grossness of taste, fancy and blunt fact" (Allen 1967: 108). In James's tale, however, that contrast is far from comic.
21. Note that Felman and Walton, among other critics, attribute this reading to Wilson, who actually never explicitly discusses the sexual connotations of the scene in his article.
22. Towards the end of the play, however, the ghosts become insubstantial, no longer seen by the audience but only by governess, as specified in the playwright's prefatory 'Notes'. For instance, when the governess asks the child Flora point-blank where Miss Jessel is, "*[s]ound and light create the mood for an apparition. This time, however, no ghost appears. The governess sees it out-front*" (Luscombe 2018a, Act IV, Scene 14: 50).
23. An expanded version of Luscombe's article is forthcoming in the *Henry James Review* 39:3 (Fall 2018).
24. See, e.g., Dale Powell's *Timothy Cratchit's Christmas Carol, 1917* (1998), Louis Bayar's *Mr. Timothy* (2003), and Dan Simmond's *Drood* (2009).
25. One might be reminded of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's argument that Jane Eyre's "confrontation, not with Rochester, but with Rochester's mad wife Bertha, is […] the central confrontation" of Charlotte Brontë's novel (Gilbert and Gubar 1997: 339). Implicitly, Luscombe's play invites an analogous reconsideration of James's text, criticism of which tends to concentrate much more on the governess's relations to the male characters.

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