Globalising the 'Closet:' Henry James

Masculine Disempowerment in a Woman's Mansion: Henry James' "The Aspern Papers"

Henry James' tale "The Aspern Papers," first published in 1888, tells the story of an unnamed male editor who is obsessed with the desire to find a lost compilation of letters by the poet Jeffrey Aspern. He assumes them to be in the possession of Juliana Borderau, who, together with her niece, lives a quiet life of old age in a Venetian palazzo. The editor pays the two women a visit under a false name, and a subtle power struggle ensues. The focus of this analysis will be on the three most prominent spaces in the story, namely the house itself, its garden, and Venice, the story's background setting. Reading the tale through the lens of a politics of secrecy and the 'closet,' I will demonstrate how James turns traditional notions of domestic power relations upside-down, making his protagonist desperately try to penetrate a domestic space that promises to hold a secret which, at the same time, he constructs himself in a 'paranoid reading' of his dealings with the two women. The editor increasingly eroticises the 'open secret' of the fetishised letters as a substitute for his unlivable homoerotic desire. It is fitting that James chooses the image of the letter as the focal point of this desire. In Victorian England, as Kate Thomas observes, the expanding postal system produced its own enabling myths: "A dominant fantasy […] was that when you posted a letter, that letter took you [to] places otherwise out of bounds to you, in the close company of a vast miscellany of others. You extended yourself through the post-letter's exploits and got to experience an exuberant displacement of subjectivity." (Thomas 2012: 2)

Imagining his desire through the virtual presence of a dead poet in his letters, the editor displaces it temporally and spatially, and the letters come to stand for the knowledge *of* desire as such. Throughout the story, the female characters remain firmly in control of the power over knowledge, symbolised and embodied by Aspern's letters; or, as Joseph Church puts it in his psychoanalytical reading of the tale, "[t]he phallus […] is in the wrong place. […] To take possession of the letters […] would signify [the editor's] return to a position of mastery." (Church 1990: 28)

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY-NC-ND

In this, however, the editor does not succeed. Instead, in his emphatic and repeated refusal to buy into the economy of heterosexual triangulation of his homoerotic desire for the dead poet, he increasingly occupies liminal spaces that can only seemingly get him closer to what he wants. Faced with both a spatial displacement of his body out of the realm of influence and power, and a linguistic displacement of his desire out of the realm of the sayable, the editor struggles to define himself in a fictional world in which masculinity "and the male body [...itself are] unreachable, undefinable, and unsayable" (Reesman 2001: 43).

Female Domestic Secrecy: The Borderau Palazzo

The reader encounters the Borderaus' house in an account the editor gives of his first impression of it: "Jeffrey Aspern had never been in it that I knew of; but some note of his voice seemed to abide there by a roundabout implication, a faint reverberation." (James 2003a: 54) Significantly, the editor immediately identifies the house with the admired poet, whose only connection with the palazzo is an assumed acquaintance with the house's mistress. The editor projects his abstract (and multiply unlivable) desire for the dead poet onto the actual space of the house. This is further emphasised when he admits that he "adored the place" because

"that spirit kept me perpetual company and seemed to look out at me from the revived immortal face – in which all his genius shone – of the great poet who was my prompter. I had invoked him and he had come; he hovered before me half the time; it was as if his bright ghost had returned to earth to tell me that he regarded the affair [of the letters] as his own no less than mine and that we should see it fraternally, cheerfully to a conclusion." (James 2003a: 75)

In his obsession, the editor constantly feels the presence of Jeffrey Aspern. He even has imaginary conversations with him, and assigns meaning to the things belonging to the house only in connection with the poet. Not only does he "feel a certain joy at being under the same roof with" the "sacred relics" (James 2003a: 76), the letters, of which he does not even know for certain whether they really are in this house, but he also sees Aspern through the house's actual mistress, Juliana, in that, when he encounters her for the first time, he feels "an irresistible desire to hold in [his] own for a moment the hand that Jeffrey Aspern had pressed" (James 2003a: 69). Wishing to get close to a poet who has been long dead, the editor tries to reach him through people and objects existing in the present. He instinctively triangulates his desire for the dead man through the old woman: "Her presence seemed somehow to contain his, and I felt nearer to him at that first moment of

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY-NC-ND

seeing her than I ever had been before or ever have been since." (James 2003a: 64) Eroticising the relationship between Juliana and "the scholarly artifact […] as homosocial fetishized exchange object" (Hoeveler 2008: 125) – Aspern's letters and his portrait – the editor becomes her rival over the dead man's love: "I had an idea that she read Aspern's letters over every night or at least pressed them to her withered lips. I would have given a great deal to have a glimpse of the latter spectacle." (James 2003a: 71) The relationship between the editor and Juliana is, hence, immediately marked as heterosocial. Simultaneously, he reduces the old woman – whose last name's etymology alludes to an inventory or list of things – to a mere object, the receptacle that holds the letters he wants: "In choosing to name Jeffrey Aspern's paramour 'Bordereau,' James himself participates in his publishing scoundrel's transgressions against the woman, reducing her to an object." (Monteiro 2009: 34) As voyeur and misogynistic rival, the editor, however, needs Juliana and the ensuing triangular dynamics to make sense of a desire that is itself unnameable. James, naturally, denies him any fulfilment of this desire, and this denial is expressed on various levels. The editor can only fetishise his homoerotic feelings for Aspern, and project them onto the poet's surviving letters, his being dead emphasising the impossibility of such a desire; a heterosexual triangulation of this unliveable passion – although initially suggested – is also, however, foreclosed, because both Juliana and, as we shall see later, Tita are impossible love objects for the editor. "[W]oman 'for him not as an object of desire in her own right but as a conduit of desire between two men." (Veeder 1999: 27) Negotiating his desire and relationships firmly on the axis homoerotic/heterosocial, as opposed to the normative mirror variant heteroerotic/homosocial, the editor fails to successfully establish a stable gender and 'sexual' identity for himself.

The tale's spatial organisation prominently reflects its preoccupation with deviant and 'lacking' masculinities. While everything in and about the house becomes a metaphor for the dead male poet, and the editor's desire for him, the masculinity that the house represents is not associated with strength and virility, but with fading glory. Approaching the palazzo in a gondola, the editor perceives it to have "an air not so much of decay as of quiet discouragement, as if it had rather missed its career" (James 2003a: 57). This is not what one would expect of a building that was intended by its original owner to represent the strength and power of the male lineage. The house even seems to be half forgotten by the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. Mrs Prest, who lives there herself, has the impression that "though you can pass on foot scarcely any one ever thinks of doing so" (James 2003a: 57). The editor admits that the house looks "impressive," but also "cold and cautious" (James 2003a: 60). Some of the old pride seems to be left, but only a shadow of it. When he first enters the house, and stands in the hall – the hall traditionally being the most representative space of a mansion, in which the male owner displays his

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

power and influence – it seems to him “gloomy and stately” (James 2003a: 60), in itself an apparent contradiction, but again emphasising the shadow of past pride in today’s decay: the hall is stately mainly due to its “noble shape” and the “fine architectural doors” (James 2003a: 60). The original intention for the place to represent its owner’s power is still visible as though through a mist. The rooms are “dusty,” and “disfigured with long neglect” (James 2003a: 70). One should keep in mind, however, that this is only the impression the editor gets of, firstly, the public, representative parts of the house, and, secondly, those private areas of it that are not inhabited by the two women. Those areas of the palazzo that are, in terms of traditionally gendered domestic spatiality, connoted masculine – like the hall, and basically every part of the house which is not a private room of either Juliana’s or Tita’s – seem to have lost their masculine, representative strength. It is striking that the editor explains this condition of the house as “a sign that Juliana and her niece (disenchanting idea!) were untidy persons” (James 2003a: 71), immediately assuming an attitude that assigns the role of housekeeper to the women, not asking after the reasons for the untidiness, or the position of a woman as head of the house instead of overseer of the household and its keeping. The Borderaus’ refusal to keep the house’s ‘masculine’ spaces in good condition can, in fact, be understood as a deliberate denial of the public display of masculine self-representation.

While the editor thus assumes an implicitly sexist attitude towards the two women, several passages in the story point to the fact that he feels threatened and demasculinised by them, and in relation to the house they inhabit. He is constantly afraid of being put in a ‘feminine’ position, which becomes most obvious when Mrs Prest accuses him “of wasting precious time in her salon when I ought to have been carrying on the struggle in the field” (James 2003a: 73). Both Mrs Prest and the editor assume the salon – in its function as the room where mixed gendered groups have tea and pleasant conversation – to be a place not suitable for a man who takes his task (and his masculinity) seriously. The constant company of women demasculinises the editor. In order to escape this threat, Mrs Prest advises him to continue “the struggle in the field,” that is outside the house, in a public space, the only space where men can really be properly ‘masculine.’

The editor’s fear of demasculinisation is also repeatedly revealed in his emphatic need to dissociate himself from domesticity. When he questions his servant about his hostesses’ habits, trying to pick up gossip, he not only claims that “I did what I disliked myself for doing” (James 2003a: 74), but also explicitly denies any part of his own in domestic talk amongst servants: “It was not for me of course to make the domestic tattle, and I never said a word to Miss Borderau’s cook.” (James 2003a: 75) He is equally eager to keep his relations with the Borderaus on the level of business, not only to disguise his romantic obsession with the dead poet, but also to emphasise his ability to be a man of business. Ironically, while business trans-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY-NC-ND

actions are traditionally carried out in either a public, 'masculine' (for example the library), or an intimately homosocial space (the closet), Juliana forces the editor to come into her private apartments to talk about business, confirming her status as equal counterpart in their heterosocial relationship. Doing masculine business in a feminine environment: a highly ambiguous position for the editor, whose main concern is to prove his own masculinity normative and stable.

The two women and the house do nothing, however, to strengthen the editor's masculinity. On the contrary: considering the importance of the gaze in gendered power relations, it is crucial to observe that the editor is repeatedly deprived of his right to look. Instead, the women, especially Juliana, make him the object of a scrutinising female gaze that he cannot set anything against. Juliana, her "green shade" (James 2003a: 65) covering her eyes, making it impossible for the editor to make her out properly, puts herself in a position in which "from underneath [the shade] she might scrutinize [him] without being scrutinized herself" (James 2003a: 65). Although it never becomes clear whether Juliana is blind or not (her niece claims that she is), the explicitness of this unequal distribution of the gaze is striking: "I want to be where I can see this clever gentleman. […] I want to watch you – I want to watch you!" (James 2003a: 106) As William Veeder puts it, "[not] only can [the editor] not penetrate women, but they *can* penetrate him" (Veeder 1999: 24). Similarly, the house's closed windows and shutters constantly make the editor unsettlingly aware of the possibility of being watched by the women without being able to look at them himself; and although, towards the end of the tale, he tries to reclaim his masculine authority by "turn[ing] [his] eyes all over [Juliana's] room, rummaging with them the closets, the chests of drawers, the tables" (James 2003a: 109), imagining a penetrative invasion of her most private spaces, "allowing his eyes to function as an expression of a traditionally masculine species of affront" (Mengham 1997: 49), he is ultimately denied the actual (sexual) penetration of these private spaces.

In his final encounter with Juliana, in fact, her shaming gaze keeps the editor from penetrating her 'closet,' which supposedy holds the Aspern Papers, the object of the editor's desire. James clearly makes Juliana mistress of the management of the 'closet,' in that she knows both how to use a rhetoric of secrecy as an instrument of (heterosocial) power, and how to take advantage of the editor's paranoid tendency to read everything that happens in the house in relation to his search for the lost documents. He can only make sense of his environemt in terms of the politics of the 'closet.' Without having any proof, he assumes that the women's denial to posses any documents relating to Jeffrey Aspern (cf. James 2003a: 58) must mean the opposite, namely that their denial is proof of their having those documents. Although the narrative makes it appear likely that the two women do have something belonging to Apsern, it is mostly the narrator's paranoid predis-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY-NC-ND

position that reads a secret where none might be: "Miss Borderau's secrets were in the air. […T]he two ladies passed their days in the dark. But this only proved to me that they had something to conceal." (James 2003a: 76) Miss Tita, in her unsuccessful attempt to awaken heterosexual interest in the editor, takes up his rhetoric of secrecy, and tries to use it to her advantage by fuelling his fantasies, and making herself his secret sharer, to the exclusion of her aunt: "I have told her nothing." (James 2003a: 89) What Tita does not see, but the reader becomes aware of, is, of course, that she overestimates the heterosexual effect of her heterosocial bond with the editor. He really only takes an interest in her as long as she stands in as the female part of the triangle in his search for the documents that represent his homoerotic desire.

Juliana, more of an expert than her niece in the management of knowledge, is also more ingenious in her employment of a rhetoric of the 'open secret.' Not only does she conciously keep the editor ignorant of what exactly it is she might know (or not know) about the (possibly existing) Aspern Papers, but she also knows how to play with the editor's paranoid tendencies. When Tita tells him that her aunt "wants to talk with [him] – to know [him]" (James 2003a: 89), this immediately triggers a paranoid reaction in him: "I ceased on the spot to doubt as to her knowing my secret. […T]he old woman's brooding instinct had served her; […] she had guessed." (James 2003a: 90) The 'closet-watching' between the editor and Juliana, hence, is mutual: while he tries to penetrate Juliana's heterosocial 'closet' (which, supposedly, contains Aspern's letters), she, through her rhetoric, makes the editor aware that she knows of his homoerotic 'closet' (his desire for Aspern). While, however, Juliana's secret is firmly embedded in the structures of her house, the editor's 'closet' does not have a space to contain it. It is a 'houseless closet,' and the editor fails to protect it from Juliana's knowing gaze. For him, she symbolises the threat of heteronormative policing, both through what he imagines, and through what she actually says. He is constantly afraid that Juliana might burn the papers he is convinced she possesses, an act that would symbolically put a violent end to his homoerotic fantasies. Juliana also explicitly questions the editor's masculinity when she criticises his fondness of flowers, a fondness that, at the turn of the twentieth century would clearly have been associated with notions of effeminacy and decadence: "It isn't a manly taste to make a bower of your room." (James 2003a: 90)

The editor's incessant paranoid readings of all of Juliana's actions suggests that he actually enjoys the game the two of them create between themselves. Juliana's "wish to sport with me that way simply for her private entertainment – the humour to test me and practise on me" (James 2003a: 104) – becomes a challenge for him, a challenge, in fact, that is indispensable for the articulation of his desire for Aspern: only by telling himself, in relation to Juliana's portrait of Aspern, that "[w]hat she

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - BY-NC-ND

wished was to dangle it before my eyes and put a prohibitive price on it" (James 2003a: 104) can he allow himself to express that it "represent[s] a young man with a remarkably handsome face" (James 2003a: 104). Only by participating in a heterosocial power struggle that threatens the stability of his own gender identity can the editor experience the thrill and joy of almost having his unacknowledged homoerotic desire fulfilled. The very impossibility of an actual fulfilment of this desire makes its torturing articulation *as* obscure, *as* secret itself desirable to him.

The rhetoric and symbolics of the 'closet' that James evokes in this tale cannot be read in a linear fashion. They are multiplied, and contradict, but also complement each other. The editor's 'closeted' desire is mirrored in his wish to penetrate the actual 'closet' space of the house in which he assumes the object of his desire to be hidden. Evoking an imagery of Gothic spatiality, James constructs the house's most secret space (Juliana's apartment) as the physical destination of the editor's search: the documents "were probably put away somewhere in the faded, unsociable room. […I] noticed that there were half a dozen things with drawers, and in particular a tall old secretary, […] a receptacle somewhat rickety but still capable of keeping a secret." (James 2003a: 107) Still without definitely knowing whether or not he is guessing correctly, the editor obsessively fixes his wish to penetrate on this piece of furniture: "[A] simple panel divided me from the goal of my hopes." (James 2003a: 107) Tita, aware of this fixation, plays with it, and directs the editor's gaze to "a queer, superannuated coffer" (James 2003a: 110), claiming that "[t]hose things were *there*" (James 2003a: 110). Deliberately confusing the editor both spatially and temporally about the whereabouts of the object he desires, Tita tries to prolong her hold on him. Although the editor is perfectly aware of the possibility of there not actually existing any documents at all (cf. James 2003a: 110), he has to stick to the masochistic game of desire he has been playing. Fulfilment is, however, as argued above, impossible. Consequently, when the editor actually tries to penetrate the 'closet,' and enters Juliana's room, perfectly aware of the necessity of heteronormative policing ("I wanted to give Miss Tita a chance to come to me" [James 2003a: 115]), his contradictory emotions reach their climax: "I was now, perhaps alone, unmolested, at the hour of temptation and secrecy, nearer to the tormenting treasure than I had ever been." (James 2003a: 116) Just when he is about to open the secretary, however, he faces Juliana's ghostly figure: "[She] stood there in her night-dress, in the doorway of her room, watching me; her hands were raised, she had lifted the everlasting curtain that covered half her face, and for the first, the last, the only time I beheld her extraordinary eyes. They glared at me, they made me horribly ashamed." (James 2003a: 117)

This shaming gaze reminds the editor of the impossibility of an unmeditated encounter with his object of homoerotic desire. He fails to acknowledge that this fantasy is only liveable if triangulated according to the rules of heteronormativity,

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

and that is what the Borderaus keep offering him. As we shall see, however, even the enabling, liminal space of the house's garden cannot make the editor embrace this option.

A Domestic Heterotopia: The Garden

The Borderaus' garden, in which a great deal of the action takes place, functions importantly as a liminal space that enables readings of the characters' actions that go beyond their socially restricted interactions within the domestic space of the house. The garden carries a somewhat mystical air – meetings in the garden mostly take place at night or in the evening – and the narrative foregrounds its paradoxical qualities. When Juliana asks the editor why he does not prefer gardens on the main land to theirs, he answers: "Oh, it's the combination! […] It's the idea of a garden in the middle of the sea." (James 2003a: 66) The in-between position of the garden, between nature and culture, inside and outside, gets combined with the contradictory characteristics of Venice – that it belongs neither fully to the land nor to the sea. The garden as a heterotopian space enables the tale's characters to deviate from their usual behaviour. Tita, who is rather shy inside the house, experiences emotional upheavals in the garden; and, more importantly, the editor, who usually tries to emphasise his masculinity, gets assigned feminising traits. He mentions his fanciful – and 'unmanly' – delight in flowers several times: "It's absurd if you like, for a man, but I can't live without flowers. […] I live on flowers!" (James 2003a: 62; 64) Indeed, just as Mrs Prest criticises him for fighting his battle in the feminine space of a salon, the editor himself feminises his kind of 'warfare' by associating it with a decadent overflow of flowers: "[B]y flowers I would make my way – I would succeed by big nosegays. I would batter the old women with lilies – I would bombard their citadel with roses." (James 2003a: 77) Simultaneously, however, his explicit wish to have a garden ("I must have a garden – upon my honour I must!" [James 2003a: 61]) – ostensibly only used as a pretext to get into the house – makes the reader aware of the potentially enabling qualitites the garden can provide for the editor. His association with flowers is, in fact, what ultimately wins him the heterosocial confidence of his 'landladies:' "I think it was the flowers that won my suit." (James 2003a: 63)

The garden's contradictory qualities can help us establish a reading of the editor's conflicted desire, suspended between a wish for a heteronormative existence, associated with a stable, powerful notion of masculinity, and his homoerotic desire, associated with effeminacy, and a lack of 'proper' masculinity. The garden makes its first appearance when the editor is still outside the house, and sees "a high blank wall which appeared to confine an expanse of ground on one side of the

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

house. […A] few thin trees, with the poles of certain rickety trellises, were visible over the top." (James 2003a: 57) It is an enclosed garden, a "tangled enclosure" (James 2003a: 61), strongly reminiscient of the traditional symbolics of the 'hortus conclusus.' Considering that the 'hortus conclusus' is usually – especially in a biblical context – associated with the female, and female virginity in particular, and that the editor's aim is to get into the house, and get at its deepest secrets – Aspern's letters – it is not far-fetched to say that the editor, his first idea of how to reach his goal being to use the garden as a "pretext" (James 2003a: 58), and assuming a strongly masculine position for himself, attempts to penetrate the house, and rob it of its virginity. This assumption is also reflected in his explicitly planning "[t]o make love to the niece" (James 2003a: 60), and enforced by the editor's thoughts in connection with the garden: "I must work the garden – I must work the garden" (James 2003a: 60), he reminds himself, as if the idea were rooted in a deeper desire than simply to use the garden as a pretext to get to some ulterior aim. The sexual connotation gets further strengthened by phrases such as the editor's "private ejaculation" (James 2003a: 61) at the thought of working the garden – the expression 'working the garden' itself bearing clear sexual implications. In the end, of course, this heterosexual reading of the editor's relation to both the house's garden, and it's female inhabitant turns out to be impossible, not least of all because the editor himself ultimately rejects it, and his striving for hyper-masculine, heterosexual virility within a heteronormative matrix remains a fantasy.

The editor's obsession with the garden has, in fact, from the start, a 'queer' side to it. Although the garden is repeatedly characterised as 'feminine,' and the house's mistresses are female, the editor, as demonstrated above, associates the house with different traits of masculinity, and identifies it with Jeffrey Aspern. Consequently, from his own point of view, the editor tries to penetrate a masculine-identified entity. The garden being in the back of the house, its sexual function evokes the image of anal penetration. Ironically, the editor explicitly denies that he himself will "cultivate the soil" (James 2003a: 61) – the phrase occurring in the same sentence as the "private ejaculation," bringing to mind the image of planting his semen into the earth. In the end, however, it is, indeed, the editor himself who works and cultivates the garden, turning its untamed, virginal character into an artificial landscape.

The garden is juxtaposed with the inside of the house in that, in the latter, the editor often feels insecure and patronised by his female 'companions,' whereas, in the garden, he seems to be more in control of his own thoughts and actions. It is, hence, not surprising that he "made a point of spending as much time as possible in the garden" (James 2003a: 76), in the space that liberates him, but that also makes the house seem even more like "an inscrutable old palace" (James 2003a: 77). The garden is the space in which the editor and Tita have their most private conversa-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

tions, where they are, to a degree, free from her aunt's controlling influence. It enables both Tita's fantasy of heterosexual union with the editor, and his own fantasy of heterosocial confidence, and ultimate homoerotic fulfilment through possession of the letters. In an almost comic encounter between the two, James makes the reader painfully aware of the editor's being oblivious, almost until the very end, of Tita's heterosexual reading of their meeting. He even explicitly disavows it, contrasting it with the heterosexual desire between Aspern and Juliana ("Miss Tita was not a poet's mistress any more than I was a poet." [James 2003a: 81]), and he blatantly misreads all of Tita's approaches: "She came out of the arbour almost as if she were going to throw herself into my arms. I hasten to add that she did nothing of the kind. [...] It was almost as if she were waiting for something – something I might say to her – and intended to give me my opportunity." (James 2003a: 81; 83)

Caught up in the rhetoric of his 'closeted' existence, and the paranoid, homoerotic/heterosocial readings he applies to everything, the editor simply lacks the parameters to understand Tita's 'physical rhetoric' in heterosexual terms. It is clear that the conflict between Tita's heterosexual, and the editor's heterosocial rhetoric, neither of which can be made explicit by either of them, cannot be resolved, and ends only in an acknowledgement of confusion on Tita's part: "'Why don't you believe me?' 'Because I don't understand you.'" (James 2003a: 86) The editor's disavowal of acknowledging Tita's heterosexual understanding of the situation is far more conscious: "I had no wish to have it on my conscience that I might pass for having made love to her." (James 2003a: 86)

While the garden cannot enable the editor to make his homoerotic desire explicit, the encounters in this space make him actively reject the heterosexual triangulation of his wish to get at the Aspern Papers, which, in the beginning, he still claimed to be an option. He can conceive of Tita as a means to get at what he really desires, but only within the temporally limited framework of his stay in Venice. He is willing to make use of this 'traffic in women' as long as it is not institutionalised in striktly heteronormative terms: "I could not linger there to act as guardian to a piece of middle-aged female helplessness. If she had not saved the papers wherein should I be indebted to her?" (James 2003a: 121) The house's garden is the space in which the editor is able to enact this temporally limited, suspended heterosocial bond, whereas the domestic space of the house (associated with, and embodied by Tita and Juliana) would have him enact 'the real thing,' and marry Tita. This kind of heterosexual commitment is, however, exactly what the editor rejects, which is reflected spatially in his preference to meet Tita outside the domestic space of heterosexual intimacy: "Somehow I preferred not to be shut up with her; gardens and big halls seemed better places to talk." (James 2003a: 121) After Juliana's death, the editor feels her influence fade, and the in-between, non-normative qualities of the garden (and the sea) take over the house: he feels "a freshness from the sea

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - cc BY-NC-ND

which stirred the flowers in the garden and made a pleasant draught in the house, less shuttered and dark now than when the old woman was alive" (James 2003a: 121).

The garden, then, can be read in two ways. Firstly, it is a symbol of the editor's obsession with emphasising his own masculine ability – which is constantly being questioned – penetrating the traditionally feminine-identified 'hortus conclusus,' and the virginity of the house, its owners, and their secrets – in which he fails: Juliana, the supposed keeper of the secret, is repeatedly described as "impenetrable" (e.g. James 2003a: 66), and the palace as "inscrutable" (e.g. James 2003a: 77). Secondly, the garden is a sign of the editor's homoerotic desire for Jeffrey Aspern, who is constantly identified with the house. This configuration is, again, an example of the triangulation of the editor's homoerotic longing for Aspern. The editor desires the dead poet, and this homoerotic fantasy gets disguised by redirecting it via a third, female part, in this case the female connotations of the 'hortus conclusus' and Tita. The editor will, however, ultimately reject any kind of heteronormative triangulation, failing to see that it would be the only way he can get what he wants – Aspern's letters, and a (mediated) reunion with his object of homoerotic longing.

A Liminal City: Venice

It is significant that James sets his tale in the city of Venice, a place that "has always attracted the cultural imagination" (O'Neill et al. 2012: 2), and which, as mentioned above, due to its geographical position between land and sea, adds another dimension of heterotopian spatiality to the story. "In eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature, Venice is often praised for its exotic qualities of death and decay" (Fujikawa 2008: 104), easily lending itself as a spatial metaphor of temporal liminality. Michael O'Neill, Mark Sandy, and Sarah Wootton also note that "[t]he city's hold over many writers and artists from Europe and America is bound up with […] doubleness. […They] have sensed in the city a range of imaginatively productive dualities." (O'Neill et al. 2012: 2) Venice, as James, too, constructs it in "The Aspern Papers," is a space that contains various contradictory notions: he establishes it as a place where the past and the present, the inner and the outer, the private and the public get mixed up, and seem to exist simultaneously. It also becomes a space in which the lines between the homosocial and the homoerotic begin to blur, and in which the editor can experience an unusually close mental union with Aspern. For James, "Venice was something of a sexualised locale that had allowed him to admire beautiful young men and then convey that admiration in a somewhat cryptic manner" (Hoeveler 2008: 128) in his letters to J. A. Symonds,

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

and he makes use of this experience of the city in his fiction. In "The Aspern Papers," Venice becomes the space that enables the editor's homoerotic fantasies.

The borders between the past and the present become fluid and permeable when the editor walks through the streets of the city, or imagines his being in it. In one of his imaginary conversations with Aspern, and referring to Juliana, he declares:

"Poor dear, be easy with her; she has some natural prejudices; only give her time. Strange as it may appear to you she was very attractive in 1820. Meanwhile are we not in Venice together, and what better place is there for the meeting of dear friends? See how it glows with the advancing summer; how the sky and the sea and the rosy air and the marble of the palaces all shimmer and melt together." (James 2003a: 75)

In this short passage, time gets completely confused. Aspern, Juliana, and the editor all seem to come together in an ageless, timeless space, and, for the reader, it becomes unclear whether it is Aspern who has come back to the present, or the editor who has gone back to the past. Even Juliana, who is not even physically present in the 'conversation,' gets temporally displaced. Venice enables the editor to have this "eccentric private errand," to feel "a mystic companionship, a moral fraternity with all those who in the past had been in the service of art" (James 2003a: 75). Venice becomes the heterotopia in which the editor's desire to reach Aspern can be fulfilled as nearly as nowhere else. Here, his homoerotic passion does not have to be triangulated. On the contrary, in his imaginary union with Aspern, the editor can afford to patronisingly dismiss the 'poor dear' woman. This heterotopian fulfilment, of course, remains suspended as a product of the editor's fantasy. It does, however, bring him closer to his object of desire than any of his attempts within the female-dominated space of the Borderaus' house do.

Venice is both a place that enables the editor to try and realise his homoerotic desire, and a constant reference point for thoughts that express his wish to emphasise his own masculinity. Referring to Venice, the editor associates private spaces and the indoors with Tita and Juliana, while he is himself obsessed with moving in public spaces and the outdoors. He clings to a notion of gendered space that is reminiscent of an ideology of 'separate spheres,' juxtaposing a masculine public with a restriction of women to private spaces. The editor admits that he often feels the desire to leave the house to walk in the streets of Venice, or sit in front of San Marco, "listening to music, talking with acquaintances[…,] with all the lamps, all the voices and light footsteps on marble" (James 2003a: 80). The feeling of being in a public space comforts him, and strengthens his masculinity, although – unconsciously – he simultaneously contradicts his own desire in placing the outdoors

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

inside again when he compares the piazza to "an open-air saloon" (James 2003a: 80). This paradoxical notion is repeated at the end of the story when the editor compares the city to "an immense collective apartment, in which Piazza San Marco is the most ornamented corner and palaces and churches, for the rest, play the part of great divans of repose, tables of entertainment, expanses of decoration." (James 2003a: 129)

The outside becomes the inside; the city gets domesticated and – with "ornamented corners" and "decoration" – clearly feminised. Although the editor thus finally gets to have the house he has been denied so far, he also confirms his own demasculinisation. In his simultaneous struggle against this demasculinisation, however, he also imagines the Borderau women as being restricted to their home – to their 'proper sphere' – when he thinks of "the Misses Borderau and of the pity of their being shut up in [their] apartments" (James 2003a: 129). It is striking that the editor uses the term "shut up," which implies that the act of staying at home is involuntary. As we learn in the course of the story, however, the two women's seclusion is a chosen one, at least for Juliana. Nevertheless, the editor mentally places them in a position of traditional femininity. Considering that in business – and in her whole attitude – Juliana clearly dominates the editor, and refuses to comply with the gender role he tries to impose on her, he has no choice but to imagine himself in a position in which he is actually not.

The construction of Venice as a liminal space becomes further apparent when the editor compares the city to a theatre, a stage on which socially prescribed roles are exposed as mere performances:

"And somehow the splendid common domicile, familiar, domestic and resonant, also resembles a theatre, with actors clicking over bridges and, in straggling processions, tripping along fondamentas. As you sit in your gondola the footways that in certain parts edge the canals assume to the eye the importance of a stage, meeting it at the same angle, and the Venetian figures, moving to and fro against the battered scenery of their little houses of comedy, strike you as members of an endless dramatic troupe." (James 2003a: 129)

At the end of the story, having failed to reach is goal – the papers, and the fulfilment of his utopian vision of a homoerotic union with Aspern – the editor's comparison of Venice with the theatre is his last attempt to save the city for himself as an enabling liminal space. Even the theatre, however, fails to provide fulfilment. Having left the Borderaus' house, and aimlessly wandering through the streets of Venice, he reaches the statue of Bartolomeo Colleoni, a famous Venetian 'condottiere,' a leader of mercenary soldiers in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy, and the embodiment of combative masculine strength. Desperately looking for guid-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY-NC-ND

ance, the editor finds himself "staring at the triumphant captain as if he had an oracle on his lips" (James 2003a: 129). Militant masculinity, however, cannot provide him with help: "[Bartolomeo] could not direct me what to do." (James 2003a: 129)

The outdoors of Venice is the space the editor instinctively turns to when his last attempt to get what he wants has failed, and he has been shamed by Juliana's heteronormative, policing gaze. After this last encounter with her, the editor immediately leaves the house and rushes, once again, into the Venetian liminal outdoors. He wants to go "[a]nywhere, anywhere; out into the lagoon!" (James 2003a: 127). It is here, in the space that has provided the backdrop for his imaginary union with Aspern, that he finally realises the impossibility of his conforming to a heteronormative triangulation of his desire: "What in the name of the preposterous did [Tita] mean if she did not mean to offer me her hand? That was the price – that was the price! And did she think I wanted it, poor deluded, infatuated, extravagant lady? […] I could not pay the price. I could not accept." (James 2003a: 127) The editor cannot, of course, stay suspended in his aimless wanderings of the canals and piazzas of Venice forever. This real space, as liminal as it might be, cannot provide him with what he wants, and he ultimately has to go back to the house, and face the consequences of his rejection of a heteronormative existence.

Homoerotic Desire Denied: The Ending

The tale's ending leaves it open to speculation whether or not the Borderaus really had any of Aspern's letters, whether their 'closet' rhetoric actually concealed a real secret, or whether they just took advantage of the editor's paranoid need to read it as such. Clearly, Tita increasingly emphasises that the only way for the editor to get at the fetishised documents, the objects of his impossible homoerotic desire, is through a heterosexual union with her: "[I]f you were a relation it would be different. […] Anything that is mine – would be yours." (James 2003a: 125) The editor, however, cannot frame his fantasy in heternormative terms, and his gaze remains fixed on "Jeffrey Aspern's face in the little picture [his portrait], partly in order not to look at that of my interlocutress, which had begun to trouble me, even to frighten me a little." (James 2003a: 124) His wish to penetrate the women's 'closet' heterosocially – in becoming their secret sharer – and achieve a state of unpoliced, homoerotic satisfaction, is disappointed. He fails to see what the tale's premise predicts from the very start: his desire cannot be fulfilled, the poet is dead, and the rules of heteronormativity must be adhered to. To an extent, the editor acknowledges this through his inability to name the reason for his not wanting to marry Tita. His explanation remains void, unspoken, an 'open secret:' "I stood there dumb. […] 'Ah, Miss Tita – ah, Miss Tita,' I stammered, for all reply. […] 'It

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

wouldn't do – it wouldn't do!'" (James 2003a: 126; 27) The editor's "continuing problems with composing" (Church 1990: 35), his frequent inability to speak, "the sometimes quite elaborate blockages of self-expression" (Mengham 1997: 44) that several critics have commented on mark him – and, in extension, his desire – as unnameable. They reinforce the rhetorical association of his secret with the homosexual 'closet,' and emphasise that the phallic power over language remains in the hands of the tale's surviving woman.

In the end, the editor is defeated. Miss Tita consciously replaces her aunt in a position of spatial power within her house, "receiv[ing] him in her aunt's forlorn parlour. […] She stood in the middle of the room with a face of mildness bent upon me." (James 2003a: 130) Her posture and self-confidence awe the editor into accepting the rules of heteronormativity: "It seemed to me I was ready to pay the price." (James 2003a: 130) It is, however, too late. Tita denies the editor another chance, the triangle is broken, and she eliminates the 'closet' that has held so much allure for him: "I have done the great thing. I have destroyed the papers." (James 2003a: 131) It remains open whether she has actually destroyed them (and whether or not there was something to destroy in the first place), or whether she merely acknowledges implicitly that her desired triangulated union with the editor will not take place. It has, in any case, been clear from the beginning that the editor can never actually get to touch the papers. His desire can only exist under the condition that it remain unfulfilled, suspended, and triangulated. "By trying to break through this border and extract the papers from Juliana's caress, the narrator sentences the papers to ash." (Rosenberg 2008: 209) Whether the letters 'really' existed or not, the effect is the same: the editor is left staring melancholically at Aspern's portrait. "When I look at it my chagrin at the loss of the letters becomes almost intolerable." (James 2003a: 131) He has failed to see in time that, despite his moments of imaginary triumph and eroticised enjoyment in the temporally enabling spaces of Venice and the garden, he could never penetrate the Borderaus' female domestic 'closet' that held the key to his own mental 'closet.' Always the paranoid 'closet' reader, the only option the world of this tale would give him – to triangulate his desire in heteronormative terms – is first invisible, and then impossible for him. Trapped between the impulse to establish a stable, 'masculine' gender identity for himself, and the wish to live his homoerotic desire, he rejects a heteronormative choice, and has to face the impossibility of any real fulfilment of his homoerotic fantasy.

For the 1908 New York edition of "The Aspern Papers," James re-phrased the tale's last sentence: "When I look at it [Aspern's portrait], I can scarcely bear my loss – I mean of the precious papers." (qtd. in Brown 1991: 268) Through the introduction of the dash in the latter version, it becomes even more obvious that the loss is something more than the mere loss of Aspern's letters. The editor "experiences

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

a more ambiguous, unnameable loss and suffers because of it" (Brown 1991: 269). The very unnameability of his suffering moves it into the vicinity of the 'closet,' and makes it recognisable only to the 'paranoid reader' who will understand the editor's desire as homoerotic, a desire that cannot be spoken, but that must be continually alluded to. 'It takes one to know one.'

Female Power in the Cage of Knowledge: Henry James' "In the Cage"

"In the Cage," first published in 1898, is, on the surface, primarily a story about class. A nameless young female telegraphist, who has barely escaped extreme poverty, leads a respectable, but mediocre existence 'in the cage' of a small telegraph office in London, fantasising about the lives of the rich, upper-class people she serves. While, however, her situation is mainly represented as one of female powerlessness and spatial confinement, she manages, in the course of the story, to turn her fantasies of power into actual influence over one of her male customers, and questions of gender – particularly the blackmailability of paranoid masculinity in "a culture in which social relations are maintained through the exchange of signs, rather than through face-to-face encounters" (Keep 2011: 251) – and the distribution of power over knowledge become the story's main driving forces. This power is based on the dynamics of a discourse of secrecy that relies mostly on the simultaneously interpellating and enabling nature of language itself: "What James stages in this story is the indirect power, the oblique possession […] that is afforded by the enabling constraints that constitute our social life – by the canny cage of communicative codes." (Buelens 2006: 129)

James sets this rhetoric of power in fictional spaces that serve to enable multiple meanings and associations that go beyond the mere signifiers of language. His use of space in this tale is a prime example of his awareness of its metaphorical potential concerning not only class, but also gendered power relations. While starting out stuck in her 'cage,' the telegraphist soon both dares to extend the space of her actions to the – increasingly liminal – outdoors (the city, the park, the seaside), and starts to regard her position 'in the cage,' at the centre of the transfer of knowledge, as desirable. Although the tale's ending sees its protagonist disillusioned, and accepting her safe, but relatively powerless and unexciting existence, James, nevertheless, lets her have her moment of triumph, and ultimately depicts his male characters as less cunning, less imaginative, and less able to exercise power over others than his women.

"James is fascinated with the epistemology of the secret that will not reveal itself" (Stevens 1998: 122), as Hugh Stevens observes; particularly, I would add, with a secret that is gendered masculine. Stevens goes on to identify, at the centre

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

of James' rhetoric, ways in which "secrecy and ambiguity intersect with a discursive regime of power, knowledge and public representation" (Stevens 1998: 122). In "In the Cage," secretive masculinity is perceived as both desirable – in that it affords those (women) who try to penetrate its secrets a feeling of power and excitement – and exposed to the self-destructive mechanisms of paranoia. The rhetoric James employs is that of the knowledge of a scandal; and although this scandal revolves around issues of illicit heterosexual behaviour (an affair between Captain Everard and the married Lady Bradeen), James unmistakably employs the language of the 'closet' and the open secret of homosexuality, which, by the end of the nineteenth century, had become a major public concern in England. Eric Savoy's detailed analysis of the tale demonstrates a reading of the text as having at its centre a "fundamental queerness, which arises from James' displacement of *fin-de-siècle* homosexual panic into the narrative economies of heterosexual transgression. […L]ike the gay closet, it is the site of panic that acquires specificity *only* when it is threatened by imminent disclosure and disruption." (Savoy 1995: 287; 296)

While I agree with the text's potential for a queer reading, I argue that James' intuitive grasp on the historicity of modern homosexuality as embedded in more general discourses of paranoid masculine self-definition goes even further. I will suggest a reading that sees James' re-fashioning of the 'closet' in primarily heteronormative terms not as an evasion, but as a powerful rhetorical move that shows the mechanisms of the queer 'closet' both to be inextricably linked with contemporary discourses on deviant (male) sexuality, and to work independently from those modern definitions. In "In the Cage," hence, James demonstrates not only that the 'queer closet' is not necessarily 'homosexual,' (in that, as Eve Sedgwick demonstrates, 'homosexual panic' affects both closeted 'homosexuals' and 'heterosexual' men), but also that its rhetoric builds on a spatiality of binaries (private/public, feminine/masculine), densely semanticised with an epistemological logic of power, that goes back to the very beginning of 'modernity.' The masculine 'closet' has always been there, and, moreover, it has always been 'queer,' in that it has continuously questioned a stable, heteronormative, patriarchal masculine identity. Secrecy enables queer performativity by creating a void that the paranoid reader can fill: "Queer performativity, then, does not oppose an already constituted individual subject to the social world, but locates ontologically charged moments when subjectivity is formed through negotiation with social stigmas, with the taboo." (Stevens 1998: 123) Modern discourses on binary sexual identities only add another dimension to the paranoid readability of the masculine 'closet,' and make it – if possible – even more paranoid. Through his use of language, James positions the queer 'closet' at the very centre of social interaction:

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

"[Q]ueerness is inscribed not simply in his characters but in their everyday lives, in the way they talk to each other, and in the way James writes about them. […T]he Jamesian style effect brings deviance to the fore by showing it not to be 'hidden' beneath exteriors but to be always in operation alongside conformity, as a sort of rhetorical effect or aesthetic value that, in its excess, is detached and turned against conformity." (Laughlin 2010: 155)

Just as James' queer rhetoric eludes any definite reading as 'sexual,' his construction of fictional spatiality emphasises less the definite meaning of space than the degree of possibilities that certain spaces afford the characters that move in them on various axes of binary oppositions – private/public, feminine/masculine, central/liminal – which, however, never become explicit. These binary oppositions, at the same time, become questioned and permeable, and the telegraph is the symbol of this effect: "The telegraph responds to a world in which the old boundaries between public and private, the industrial economy and household economics, 'society' in the sense of the nation and 'Society' in the sense of culture, have broken down." (Rowe 2000: 87) In this changing spatiality, the private becomes public, and secrets become readable through signifiers in public circulation.

Confinement in the Cage of Knowledge

The tale's opening paragraphs present the telegraphist's ambiguous spatial situation: although she spends, "in framed and wired confinement, the life of a guinea-pig or a magpie," it is not at all clear whether the "transparent screen [behind which she works] fenced out or fenced in" (James 2003b: 229). While her life 'in the cage' suggests an "effect of inscribing the female telegraphist within the regime of the visible, and in doing so exposing her to [the] controlling gaze" (Keep 2011: 249) of the institution she serves, the narrator also hints at the epistemological possibilities accessible only to those *within* the cage of telegraphic communication, to the exclusion of those on the other side. Although the space of the little telegraph office is repeatedly characterised as prison-like and restricting (cf. Olson 2009: 244-245), and the telegraphist experiences its self-defined middle-class respectability as constantly intruded on by its being part of a (supposedly socially inferior, though actually equally lower-middle-class) grocery store, the employees of this little office are in charge of handling information, a privilege that those 'outside' are dependent on. From the start, the protagonist is aware of this potentially advantageous position: "It had occurred to her early that in her position […] she should know a great many persons without their recognising the acquaintance." (James 2003b: 229) The telegraphist is the objectified embodiment of a modern

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY-NC-ND

mechanism that people employ for the exchange of information, "reduced […] to a means to an end" (Olson 2009: 245). She is, however, aware that, because this position, in theory, asks of her to have no opinion of her own on the information she handles, it will potentially make people 'confide' in the system, and in her. Historically, "[t]he telegraphic cage is an obvious example of a public space in which private knowledge became commodified" (Savoy 1995: 292). This blurring of the boundaries between public and private information was, naturally, perceived as a potential danger: "The development of the telegram posed a new potential for blackmail, or at least for a loss of control of information." (Moody 1995: 59) The possible mishandling of private information in the hands of a female telegraphist in particular is a theme contemporary readers would have picked up on, since, as Christopher Keep shows, it was widely assumed that, "too likely to be swayed by her need for romance, or to fall under the spell of those who might profit from access to the sensitive information to which she had such ready access, the female telegraphist was seen as a danger to the security of the nation's communications" (Keep 2011: 248). The conflict is obviously gendered, for, as Keep goes on to say, "it is not simply the technologies for the transmission and receipt of knowledge that are at risk, but the women who are employed in the service of these technologies" (Keep 2011: 251). The employment of women as telegraphists puts them at the very centre of the transfer of private information.

The protagonist's awareness of her potentially advantageous position is made even more explicit after her first encounter with Captain Everard, the gentleman who will later become her obsession. She is conscious of "the double life that, in the cage, she grew at last to lead," that of "public servant and private reader" (Savoy 1995: 285), of 'neutral passer-on of information' and paranoid reader, who will look for meaning in any of her customers' "whiffs and glimpses" (James 2003b: 239). The young woman's 'readings' of her upper-class customers through their telegraphic communications is crucially influenced by her consummation of "novels, very greasy, in fine print and all about fine folks" (James 2003b: 231), providing her with an interpretative framework that makes her see the world through the lens of fictional romance that stands in stark contrast to the 'real' world:

"[S]he reads the telegraphs […] through the very paradigms she is familiar with from her trashy romances. (Nixon 1999: 190) What James constructs, then, is literally and metaphorically a reading gaol – a socially imposed cage, in which the female subject […] conflates life and art, only to find that her prison has a pragmatic dimension that resists being co-opted into a form of romance." (Nixon 1999: 182)

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

While it is true that James criticises his heroine's socially conditioned naiveté, and makes her live through a process of growing awareness (and ultimate acceptance) of the harsh realities of her lower-middle-class existence, I would like to draw attention to the subversive dimension of this 'female reader.' The reference to novel reading serves both as a critique of a life-as-fantasy attitude, *and* as a reference to the actual power of the reader: although James makes explicit that his protagonist's 'reading technique' is mainly directed by her imagination, he, at the same time, leaves open the possibility of actual knowledge and power. He acknowledges (albeit ironically) that the telegraphist's "eye for types amounted [...] to genius" (James 2003b: 239), and that, more importantly, she experiences an actual feeling of power:

"[S]he had, at moments, in private, a triumphant, vicious feeling of mastery and power, a sense of having their silly, guilty secrets in her pocket, her small retentive brain, and thereby knowing so much more about them than they suspected or would care to think. There were those she would like to betray, to trip up, to bring down with words altered and fatal." (James 2003b: 240)

This paragraph conveys much of what James' narrative does repeatedly throughout the tale: while always, with an ironic wink, questioning the actual power his heroine can have over her customers, sentences like these generate a sense of paranoia that is due to the way issues of privacy and the important, identity-establishing functions of secrecy are ingrained in modern Western culture – and reflected in its literary tradition. By both making the telegraphist female, and having her spy on the secrets of the upper classes, James playfully touches on fundamental anxieties of modern patriarchal English culture: the loss of clear-cut class boundaries, and of a male monopoly on knowledge management. The paranoia, however, is twofold: the telegraphist, blindly believing in her own powers of intuition, becomes a paranoid reader, looking for meaning where none might be (or a different kind), triggering actual psychological paranoia in the people she 'reads.' To a patriarchal culture in which masculinity is constructed as inherently paranoid, women who read are dangerous indeed. The narrator acknowledges this by commenting that "[h]er conceit, her baffled vanity were possibly monstrous" (James 2003b: 240). In this dynamic, it is not a contradiction that the protagonist admits to spying mainly on the ladies at first. In James' fictional world, the women are the ones pulling the strings, both concerning the amount of information that is being circulated, and in their relation to the other sex: "[I]t was literally visible that the general attitude of the one sex [the men] was that of the object pursued and defensive, apologetic and attenuating." (James 2003b: 241) That the knowledge that is so often hinted at, but never named, while never becoming explicitly sexual knowledge, provokes

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY-NC-ND

sexual associations is not least due to the telling names of the office and its most prominent male customer: Cocker's and Captain Ever[h]ard evoke a phallic symbolism that draws attention to the very masculine virility that this tale negotiates and questions (cf. Stevens 1998: 127).

The dynamics established so far will become more obvious when looking at the tale's three main relationships: between the protagonist and her friend and rival Mrs Jordan; between the protagonist and her fiancé Mr Mudge; and between the protagonist and Captain Everard. It will become clear that it is within the homosocial dynamics of the relationships between the women that power is negotiated, and knowledge acquired and used. The men are reduced to the third part of the triangle in which this power traffic takes place. In all this, however, James insists on a strong ironic undercurrent that never lets the conflict become too obvious. In the end, his heroine is not triumphant in seriously questioning established power relations; his narrative's rhetoric, however, is.

Female Rivalry over Knowledge in Space: The Telegraphist and Mrs Jordan

While most critics focus their readings of James' tale entirely on the relationship between the telegraphist and Captain Everard, I would like to show that the protagonist's interactions with both her friend Mrs Jordan and her fiancé Mr Mudge crucially supplement the main plot's homo- and heterosocial dynamics, especially concerning the metaphorical qualities of space.

The relationship between the protagonist and Mrs Jordan can best be described as a homosocial rivalry between equals over who has got more power through knowledge. Both of them lower-middle-class from some undefined, more 'genteel' background, they have worked themselves out of poverty, and both find themselves (or believe to find themselves) in spatial situations that are advantageous for acquiring knowledge about – and hence power over – those to whose class the two of them can never belong. Both women, by trying to outdo each other in arguing for their own spatially more attractive position, become subversive figures, using their socially accepted positions of access to knowledge for their own struggle to make themselves look more powerful in the eyes of the other.

While the telegraphist's access to knowledge relies very much on the modern space of virtualised communication of her office, and her public and exposed situation there, Mrs Jordan occupies a more traditional position, which is more directly related to modern anxieties over domestic privacy as it is also reflected in Gothic and sensation fiction: she "had invented a new career for women – that of being in and out of people's houses to look after the flowers" (James 2003b: 231). Within the space of only a few sentences, James constructs "the way [Mrs Jordan]

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

was made free of the greatest houses" such that not only has she access to "all the rooms," but also, by bringing the outdoors (the flowers) indoors, creates "a sort of tropical solitude" (James 2003b: 231), a liminal space, "like a new Eden" (James 2003b: 242), that allows her to imagine "that a single step more would socially, would absolutely, introduce her" (James 2003b: 231). Mrs Jordan's arranging the flowers borders, in this rhetoric, on an imaginary subversion of established class boundaries, represented in domestic space. Any actual power and influence remain, of course, her fantasy: "[H]er imaginative life was the life in which she spent most of her time." (James 2003b: 232) James' repeated association of flowers with the upper classes, in fact, emphasises Mrs Jordan's not belonging to that class (since the flowers are not hers), and her delusion comes across as slightly pathetic. As before, however, James' benevolent mockery of his characters does not fully obscure the real potential for unease that he creates in this account of subverted domesticity: "[S]he more than peeped in – she penetrated. There was not a house of the great kind […] in which she was not […] all over the place." (James 2003b: 243) Mrs Jordan's position constantly alludes to the real possibility of secrets unveiled, and barriers of class (and possibly gender) torn down.

This becomes especially obvious when the protagonist, while being repeatedly awed by Mrs Jordan's access to the domestic spaces of the upper ranks of society, and acknowledging that "she could never […] have found her way about one of the 'homes'" (James 2003b: 243), explicitly tries to convince herself that her own influence over people is more real, more powerful: "Combinations of flowers and green-stuff, forsooth! What *she* could handle freely, she said to herself, was combinations of men and women." (James 2003b: 232) Mrs Jordan, however, is equally convinced that she makes the inhabitants of 'her' houses "feel they could trust her without a tremor" (James 2003b: 242). It is, in fact, the combination of both women's spatial situation that conveys to the reader a sense of actual social unease. Both, in their own way, evoke an imagery of both female spatial confinement (the domestic, the 'cage') and female spatial subversion (domestic access in one case, the woman in public in the other), two powerful themes from the Gothic tradition. Not only do both women have the potential to unveil Bluebeard's secret, it is their profession that puts them where they are. It is their job to pry and know. The people they 'know' something about become reduced to mere objects in the women's rhetoric of competitive power: "'I dare say it's some of your people that *I* do.' […] 'I doubt if you 'do' them as much as I! Their affairs, their appointments and arrangements, their little games and secrets and vices – those things all pass before me. […] *I* find out everything.'" (James 2003b: 246)

It is not only, however, those of higher social rank that the two women are competing to 'know' better, but also each other, and their little secrets. In this context, James, again, playfully acknowledges the performative nature of a rhetoric

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

of knowledge as power. When the telegraphist asks her friend: "But does one personally *know* them?" (James 2003b: 244), meaning the people the latter does the flowers for, she both questions Mrs Jordan's real influence over those people, and, at the same time, makes clear that she 'knows' the way 'one' is supposed to speak when 'one' wants to be influential at all in those higher social spheres. Similarly, on an occasion on which Mrs Jordan asks the protagonist to send a telegram to the former's employer, both are equally convinced of their knowing more than the other: Mrs Jordan, aware that her message, containing "an unintelligible enumeration of numbers, colours, days, hours" (James 2003b: 245), is incomprehensible to the telegraphist, consciously takes pride in the 'secrets' of her business, and performs an act of exaggerated over-significance in just saying: "I *do* flowers, you know." (James 2003b: 245) The telegraphist, however, is equally aware that the mere fact of Mrs Jordan's having to rely on her to communicate 'important' information constitutes a "small secret advantage, a sharpness of triumph" (James 2003b: 245). The effect of this is, of course, emphatically comic: the reader is conscious that neither Mrs Jordan nor the telegraphist are actually handling information of any significance whatsoever. This very comic effect, however, draws attention to the ways in which a rhetoric of knowledge alone ('You know I know something.') has a powerful impact.

The competitive dynamics between the two women culminate in the tale's finale scene, in which the important underlying themes of their relationship again surface and combine. In their continued rhetoric of excessive hinting and deliberate vagueness, images of domesticity become the means to juxtapose the two women's fantastic, class-climbing aspirations with a life of lower-middle-class mediocrity. Not only is Mrs Jordan's home explicitly contrasted with the fantastic nature and heterotopian potential of her employer's houses by there explicitly being "no sign of a flower" (James 2003b: 293), but both women finally admit to the desirability of the more realistic goal of a comfortable home of their own by marrying 'attainable' men: the telegraphist reminds herself that "[w]e shall have our own house," and Mrs Jordan replies that "*[w]e* shall have our own too" (James 2003b: 298). An ideal of 'safe,' middle-class domesticity – and, hence, normative femininity – is contrasted with the domestic space of higher classes that the two women will never actually penetrate socially.

At the same time, the 'knowledge' that has so far only been vaguely referred to now becomes explicit, to a significant and, again, comic effect. While the two women's 'knowledge' of their upper-class employers and customers amounts to nothing that actually affords the former any significant influence over the latter – and, indeed, the telegraphist must admit to herself that, in fact, she did not really 'know' anything at all – the rhetorically prolonged, and elaborately playful act of exposure that Mrs Jordan performs, proving that, after all, she 'knows' more than

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

her friend, does effect a feeling of triumph on her part: “Don’t you know, dear, that [Captain Everard] has nothing? […] Why, don’t you know?” (James 2003b: 299; 300) This feeling, however, is checked by her simultaneously having to expose both the “loved friend” (James 2003b: 293) she gets her information from as her future husband, and this future husband as being ‘merely’ the butler of one of ‘her’ great families, triggering, in turn, a feeling of triumph in the telegraphist, for “[i]t was better surely not to learn things at all than to learn them by the butler” (James 2003b: 296).

James manages to stage this linguistic battle over knowledge such that, in the end, it becomes almost insignificant what is actually exposed; if, that is, it were not for another effect: by revealing Mrs Jordan’s future husband to be a butler, and, more significantly, by exposing the tale’s alleged male ‘hero’ to be not only penniless, but also not master of his new home (“How *can* he, with any authority, when nothing in the house is his?” [James 2003b: 299]), involved in a scandal that was “on the very point of coming out” (James 2003b: 300), and being “*in* something” (James 2003b: 301), James, playing on the rhetoric of the ‘closet,’ and despite satirising his lower-middle-class protagonist’s fight over power as fantastic, reduces the men in this tale to objects to be traded in his female characters’ interest: to be married either – in the case of the telegraphist and Mrs Jordan – to secure a stable, albeit mediocre, middle-class existence, or – in the case of Lady Bradeen – to get the man she wants, and make him financially dependent on her.

Spatial Respectability: The Telegraphist and Mr Mudge

One of the tale’s two important male characters is the telegraphist’s fiancé Mr Mudge, whose name’s “telling mixture of ‘mud’ and ‘drudge’ […] reminds the reader of the foodstuffs he works with and the material nature of trade in general” (Olson 2009: 246). James creates him as an extreme example of mediocre, working-/aspiring-lower-middle-class respectability. While he is obsessed with, and represents, from a spatial point of view, the normative, capitalist, masculine indoors of the workplace, the subplot depicting his relationship with the protagonist also enables her to temporarily move out of this stifling sphere into the liminal space of a seaside resort that, for a while, liberates and enables her to both reflect on her life and relationships, and to break free from the social conventions that normally keep her from being honest with herself and others.

Mr Mudge is introduced as a man obsessed with space, and with his ability to have spatial access to, and control over his future wife. Having been removed to a job in “a higher sphere” himself, he expects the telegraphist to follow him there, and to work “under the very roof where he was foreman,” and where “he

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

should see her, as he called it, 'hourly'" (James 2003b: 230). The young woman perceives this masculine access to her body as uncomfortable, and she is determined not to give up her current relative liberty too soon, being aware of "the improvement of not having to take her present and her future at once" (James 2003b: 230). The narrative repeatedly refers to the telegraphist as "the betrothed of Mr. Mudge" (James 2003b: 244; 247; 248 [twice]; 272 [as "his betrothed"]; 273 [as "his betrothed"]), both drawing attention to his 'owning' her, and, at the same time, through over-emphasis, making the reader aware of her reluctance to comfortably occupy this position as object of a male capitalist desire for ownership.

Notably, although Mr Mudge is clearly associated with the indoors of the lower-middle-class, capitalist workplace that he dedicates his whole life to, most actual encounters between himself and the telegraphist are set in the outdoors and the public, "in the Regent's Park," or "in the Strand" (James 2003b: 248). Her determination to emphasise their fundamental difference ("She was not different only at one point, she was different all round." [James 2003b: 248]) – his being fundamentally working-class versus her being fundamentally a "lady *manquée*" (Galvan 2001: 299) – is reflected in her meeting him only outside the spaces that he moves in, and that, for her, represent finality and powerlessness. She explicitly contrasts these spaces with those she herself occupies professionally, and which she believes to afford her some power: "Where I am I still see things." (James 2003b: 250) She tries to explain to Mr Mudge why she derives pleasure from her position 'in the cage:' "What I 'like' is just to loathe them [her customers]. [...] It's immense fun." (James 2003b: 251) Mr Mudge, however, is too much a man of "propriety" (James 2003b: 251) to appreciate this kind of half-masochistic, class- and gender-conscious pleasure. His character sharply contrasts with the telegraphist's curious, subversive drives. She sees the potential power of knowledge acquired, and the desire to occupy a position that affords her to do so is her way of expressing the wish to break free from her life as governed by normative rules of class and gender. She is willing to explore the potential of her constrained spatial situation, deriving "a rush of interpretative pleasure" from her position as reader of other people's lives, "suggesting an erotic connection between enclosure and interpretation" (Olson 2009: 247) that is evocative of the female Gothic of the kind of Radcliffe's *Udolpho*.

Mr Mudge, on the other hand, is "troubled by the suspicion of subtleties on his companion's part that spoiled the straight view" (James 2003b: 252). He fails to see that the straight view is exactly what the young woman refuses to live by. She wants to penetrate the secrets of those who are her social superiors (men, and the upper classes), because she enjoys the feeling of power over those that are normally out of her reach. Mr Mudge is not only 'just' a man of her own class (and as such an impossible object of her eroticised subversive fantasies), but his lack of 'subtleties,'

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - cc BY-NC-ND

the fact that he holds no secrets for his fiancé, also makes him, to her, an admittedly 'safe,' but also extremely uninteresting man. What fascinates the young woman in Captain Everard, as we shall see later, is not just his obviously higher social standing, but also, and not least of all, the fact that she does *not* 'know' everything about him, that she needs to figure him out. The young woman idealises paranoid masculinity as a source of pleasure, an attitude that Mr Mudge, "habitually inclined to the scrutiny of all mysteries" (James 2003b: 272), cannot relate to. While his lack of paranoia (in both senses as paranoid reader and paranoid subject) makes him a seemingly stable male character (if he suffers from any anxiousness at all, it is class-anxiousness), it also rules him out as an object of desire.

Although the telegraphist cannot phrase those feelings in her everyday surroundings, or even admit them to herself, the heterotopian space of the seaside resort "down at Bournemouth" (James 2003b: 272) enables her to reflect on, and see more clearly her desires and opinions. Time, in this place, seems to be suspended, and the young woman is in a state of tranquil contemplation, "seeing many things, the things of the past year, fall together and connect themselves, undergo the happy relegation that transforms melancholy and misery, passion and effort, into experience and knowledge" (James 2003b: 273). In this liminal space, she realises what the narrative has, up to this point, already suggested, namely that she finds secrecy in others desirable because it gives her a sense of power: what bores her most in people is when "[t]hey don't seem to have a secret in the world" (James 2003b: 275). Those people coming into her office that pose a mystery make her feel powerful: "I've seen the thing through – I've got them all in my pocket." (James 2003b: 275) Her transparent future husband, in contrast, cannot arouse her interest.

Mr Mudge's character forecloses secrecy. The young woman even admits to him that she has met Captain Everard alone in a park. This act of confidence, however, does not make her bond more strongly with her fiancé. On the contrary, "telling him the whole truth that no one knew" (James 2003b: 275) only creates more distance between the two. Reflecting on her meeting the Captain in the park while sitting by the sea, the telegraphist connects the two liminal spaces that afford her a certain amount of freedom (both physically and mentally), a fact that Mr Mudge alludes to when he asks her: "Want you to sit with him in the Park?" (James 2003b: 276) In a manner more bold and free than she has displayed at any previous moment in the story, the protagonist admits to the pleasure she derives from making Captain Everard feel that she has got power over him: "He's in danger, and I wanted him to know I know it. It makes meeting him – at Cocker's, for it's that I want to stay on for – more interesting." (James 2003b: 276) It is also at this point that the young woman explicitly says what she thinks she has found out about that man, what she thinks his 'dark secret' contains: "He's in love with a lady – and it isn't right – and *I've* found him out." (James 2003b: 277)

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY-NC-ND

The way the telegraphist reveals all this to Mr Mudge is emphatically disinterested and neutral, as if she were rather talking to herself than to the man she could expect to be jealous. Instead, Mr Mudge is increasingly marginalised through her imagining the man that really fascinates her. The narrative as a whole confirms that the man who is not even present in this scene, through his having a secret, is superior to the transparent Mr Mudge, who does not grasp the nature of the feelings the young woman is expressing, and, instead, can only judge the situation in purely selfish, economic terms: "[W]hat will [Captain Everard] give *me*? […] I mean for waiting." (James 2003b: 277) The telegraphist makes this discrepancy explicit: "You're awfully inferior to him." (James 2003b: 276) Mr Mudge does not contradict her. In fact, he not once voices a strong opinion or seems moved, and is, in the end, linguistically eliminated: on his asking "Then where do I come in?", the telegraphist replies: "You don't come in at all. That's the beauty of it." (James 2003b: 277) For a brief moment, in the liminal space of the seaside, thinking back to her meeting the Captain in the park, and reflecting on her own real wishes and desires, the telegraphist fully realises the amount of pleasure and meaning she derives from the game of power she plays with the man with the secret. Mr Mudge's open nature and lack of mystery make him undesirable to her, and their relationship is reduced to being imagined in purely economic (and unexcitingly non-subversive) terms. At the end of their conversation by the sea, Mr Mudge takes back 'what is his:' he "presently overtook her and drew her arm into his own with a quiet force that expressed the serenity of possession" (James 2003b: 277).

Thrilling Games of Power: The Telegraphist and Captain Everard

The tale's central relationship, finally, is that between the young woman and the man whose secretive nature fascinates her: Captain Everard. While undoubtedly the object of the telegraphist's desire, James constructs him as an anti-hero, a troubled man, whose very paranoid nature makes him both attractive to the protagonist, and the object of the female characters' manipulative power games. Making him powerless both in economic and epistemological terms, James, aware of the precarious self-image of modern masculinities, subtly suggests that what makes his tale's men desirable is their lack of power, insofar as the women, who derive pleasure from being in control of the organisation of knowledge, can use it to their advantage.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that Captain Evarard is introduced to the story not by making an appearance himself, but through a woman who, due to the sheer mass of telegrams she sends, which are all signed with different names, and addressed to different people, impresses the telegraphist as a woman very much 'in

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

charge.' This impression triggers a dynamic that reverses expectations of traditional gender roles. The telegraphist, in the tale's "most emphatically queer moment" (Keep 2011: 250), both admits that the woman, whose real name remains unclear, "was handsome, the handsomest woman, she felt in a moment, she had ever seen," eroticising "the living colour and splendour of the beautiful head" (James 2003b: 234), and takes up the challenge of matching this woman, who turns out to be Lady Bradeen, in her seemingly endless capacity for 'managing' people: the telegraphist "had seen all sorts of things and pieced together all sorts of mysteries" (James 2003b: 233). James here plays on the powerful cultural tradition of male rivalry as eroticised and mediated through a love triangle and the 'traffic in women,' and turns it on its head: the two women (as, similarly, the telegraphist and Mrs Jordan) are the rivals ("How little she knows, how little she knows! […] How much *I* know – how much *I* know!" [James 2003b: 259]), and Captain Everard (whom both turn out to desire) is the third part of the triangle, the man who mediates a dynamic that is primarily purely homosocial/homoerotic, a fact that is made explicit later in the story when Lady Bradeen visits again: "The girl looked straight through the cage at the eyes and lips that must so often have been so near his own – looked at them with a strange passion." (James 2003b: 258) The telegraphist's homoerotic gaze on Lady Bradeen shows that the narrative not only marks her as 'deviant' in epistemological terms, but also opens up possibilities of female queer desire. Kate Thomas observes

"that the doubleness of the telegraphist, and the more-than-doubleness of her clients produces queer effects that entangle her; her life is queer because it is postal. […H]er bending of the bars of the telegraphic cage, her entanglements in telegraphic wires, and the way gaps and blanks make her 'flash' throughout the story must be seen as themselves queer and queering." (Thomas 2012: 215)

When Captain Everard finally does make an appearance himself, it is in the company of Lady Bradeen. Only after she has 'introduced' the telegraphist to the Captain, the young woman's desire is redirected from the female to the male body. This process is, however, a somewhat conscious decision on the telegraphist's part: "[S]he had taken him in; she knew everything; she had made up her mind." (James 2003b: 236) This decision, while remaining ambiguous, entails a deliberate focus of her energies on the Captain and his secrets. This kind of desire, in its being, to some extent at least, a conscious decision, leaves the impression of being not an end in itself, but a means to derive pleasure from the game the young woman is about to play with this man that the other woman has introduced to her life, a game she could never play – and, hence, a pleasure she could never experience – with Mr Mudge.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - BY-NC-ND

During their following intercourse, the telegraphist repeatedly stresses the feeling of growing power she derives from it. "Every time [Captain Everard] handed in a telegram it was an addition to her knowledge." (James 2003b: 253) She keeps looking for a chance "to show him in some sharp, sweet way that she had perfectly penetrated the greatest of" (James 2003b: 254) his secrets. Again, it is important to acknowledge the humorous undertones James employs to question the 'power' the young woman imagines to have. However, although the Captain's remark that the telegraphist has him "completely at her mercy" (James 2003b: 254) is clearly ironic, it is so in more than one way: the reader is aware that Captain Everard pokes gentle fun at the young woman, but also that this really is a relationship in which knowledge might make him blackmailable. The telegraphist makes this potential for danger explicit: "She quite thrilled herself with thinking what, with such a lot of material, a bad girl would do." (James 2003b: 255)

The subplot of the telegraphist's relationship with Captain Everard also sees another instant of a spatial movement from the respectable, masculine, capitalist indoors of the office, which does not allow for their relationship to develop ("[H]ow could he speak to her while she sat sandwiched there between the counter-clerk and the sounder?" [James 2003b: 256]), to the outdoors. She follows him to his place at Park Chambers in town, where she waits outside, looking at the windows, and feeling "as if, in the immense intimacy of this, they were, for the instant and the first time, face to face outside the cage" (James 2003b: 257). Although, in fact, actual physical intimacy is reduced, the mere reversal of positions (from his gazing at her through the bars of 'the cage' to her imagining to gaze at him thorough the windows) is enough for her to experience their situation as improved.

As Patricia McKee observes, James constructs the telegraphist's experience of the city's spatiality as emphatically 'other,' "a space that might have been different if different visions of it had prevailed, a space subject always to multiple configurations, only some of which achieve recognition as the way things are" (McKee 2008: 29). This London is a space of possibility, a space open to re-configurations and re-interpretations, and when Captain Everard and the young woman finally actually meet 'by accident,' the telegraphist – just as she needs to move to the seaside to be honest with herself and Mr Mudge – needs the liminal urban space of a park to open up to Captain Everard. This positioning of the female body in a liminal 'public' space also has a scandalous and subversive effect. "[N]o figure in late Victorian London was more equivocal than the woman in public." (Savoy 1995: 288) By making his female protagonist repeatedly move independently into the public, James associates her with the deviant type of the female prostitute, a woman on the margins (cf. Savoy 1995: 288-289). "Public women were, after all, encoded with a rhetoric of visibility that determined that women on display were necessarily advertising themselves for prostitution." (Nixon 1999: 189) While "the

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY-NC-ND

telegrapher's publicised body" (Galvan 2001: 297) alone invites associations with the deviant female body of the prostitute, the young woman's increasingly independent movement in public spaces makes her even more subversive.

Just as much as the telegraphist derives pleasure from 'finding out' the Captain's mysteries, she wants him to 'find her out:' "She had an intense desire he should know the type she really was without her doing anything so low as tell him." (James 2003b: 264) She wants the man she has chosen for her game to actively play along. At the same time, however, this is the only moment in which she realises that such reciprocity would leave her powerless. It is the only instant in the tale in which she loses control and starts to cry, completely surrendering her raised, self-confident position in admitting "I'd do anything for you. I'd do anything for you." (James 2003b: 268) She realises that her feeling of superiority very much depends on the Captain's being there for her to 'figure out.' At the same time, the telegraphist acknowledges that the amount of honesty the heterotopian qualities of the quasi-public, quasi-private space of the park afford her make her see both that Captain Everard will, just as Mr Mudge, not play her game after all ("*[H]e* wasn't obliged to have an inferior cleverness – to have second-rate resources and virtues." [James 2003b: 267]), and that she needs the ambiguously restricting spatiality of her office to keep their relationship in a desirable equilibrium ("I mean [we cannot keep] meeting this way – only this way. At my place there – that I've got nothing to do with, and I hope of course you'll turn up, with your correspondence [Lady Bradeen] when it suits you." [James 2003b: 267]). The game of power that both are involved in very much depends on the socially charged 'public' space of the workplace.

The frankness the telegraphist allows herself to display in the park does, however, enable her to explicate the nature of the bond that the sharing of knowledge between the two of them entails: "This is what I meant when I said to you just now that I 'knew.' […T]hat knowledge has been for me, and I seemed to see it was for you, as if there were something – I don't know what to call it! – between us." (James 2003b: 267) Here, James has his protagonist perform a powerful rhetorical move. So far, it seemed as if her influence over the Captain relied mainly on her 'knowing' things about him, playing on the possibility of blackmail so famously associated with the contemporary homosexual scandals of the Wild trials and the Cleeveland Street Scandal (cf. Stevens 1998: 128-132). Now, she additionally employs a rhetoric of (traditionally homosocial) secret sharing (which, in this context, becomes ambiguously heterosocial/-sexual), turning her moment of apparent weakness into a reinforcement of her (albeit still mainly imaginary) power over Captain Everard. This is further emphasised by the young woman's actually making herself, their relationship, and their shared 'knowledge' both a shared secret, and the Captain's secret, deliberately forcing herself, as it were, into his 'closet:'

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

"'Have you ever spoken of me?' 'Spoken of you?' 'Of my being there – of my knowing, and that sort of thing.' 'Oh, never to a human creature!' he eagerly declared." (James 2003b: 268) In a rare instance of narrative insight into the Captain's thoughts, James has him acknowledge the impression this makes on his male 'hero:' "She held him, and he was astonished at the force of it." (James 2003b: 268)

James draws attention to the discrepancy between "what *counts* as the telegraphist's knowledge, and its indirect relation to what *circulates* among the characters as the performative effect of that knowledge" (Savoy 1995: 286). During their encounter in the park, the reader, as opposed to the young woman herself, becomes aware of her making Captain Everard acutely conscious of his blackmailability by this female public servant, although she herself consciously decides against doing just that, because she is not a 'bad girl.' James celebrates – always with an ironic twist to it – the power of a rhetoric of knowledge that works almost independently from any actual exchange of information. The signifiers alone suffice to trigger paranoia. It is crucial that James makes a woman mistress of this game of power, subtly – and with a wink – suggesting the subversive potential of a woman 'managing' the patriarchs around her, playing on their masculine self-definition based on issues of (always potentially paranoid) secrecy in a culture increasingly concerned with questions of deviant male sexuality, and "obsessed with naming, while making public naming a matter of great risk" (Stevens 1998: 131-132). Although the young woman denies any intent to blackmail, she nevertheless achieves this effect, precisely because Captain Everard's paranoia must make him read her rhetoric in that way. "Whatever she thinks she knows and however wrong it may be, she nonetheless has touched the one region in which the ruling class is vulnerable – its control and command of language." (Rowe 2000: 88) Unable to make his own paranoid knowledge of his 'sexual secret' explicit (he cannot be absolutely sure of what *exactly* she knows), he can only acknowledge the powerful impression the telegraphist's rhetoric has on him: "'You're awfully clever, you know; cleverer, cleverer, cleverer –!' […] 'Cleverer than who?'" (James 2003b: 269), asks the young woman. It is for the reader to fill in the gap: cleverer than Lady Bradeen, cleverer than any woman the Captain knows, cleverer than any man even; and the Captain admits: "Well, if I wasn't afraid you'd think I'd swagger, I should say – than anybody!" (James 2003b: 269) This cleverness makes the young woman dangerous in a world ruled by the patriarchal, male-homosocial system of secret sharing that traditionally excludes women from the exchange of knowledge, and that is increasingly in danger of being read 'queer' by the paranoid reader.

The telegraphist, having established this close bond between herself and the Captain, goes on to explicitly making him aware of the pleasure she derives from the power she believes to have: "I like all the horrors. […] Those you all – you know the set I mean, *your* set – show me with as good a conscience as if I had no

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

more feeling than a letterbox. [...They d]on't know I'm not stupid[.] No, how should they?" (James 2003b: 270) The young woman makes Captain Everard see that her power goes beyond a mere gendered power game between the two of them. Her position, she believes, potentially subverts the whole of those higher classes that are ignorant of the ways she (believes she) could use their knowledge against them. She 'knows' all of their weaknesses, "[y]our extravagance, your selfishness, your immorality, your crimes" (James 2003b: 270). While not directly influencing these people's lives, the telegraphist is conscious of "the harmless pleasure of knowing. I know, I know, I know!" (James 2003b: 271) This 'harmless pleasure' is, of course, not harmless at all, particularly for men. Oscar Wilde is the best example.

James never lets the game of power between the telegraphist and Captain Everard go beyond the mere pleasure of rhetoric, and the telegraphist herself admits that "to be in the cage had suddenly become her safety, and she was literally afraid of the alternate self who might be waiting outside" (James 2003b: 282), again acknowledging her 'caged-in' spatial situation as the only one in which she is afforded a certain amount of actual influence. "[T]he power the telegraphist possesses crucially depends on the position in the social sphere that she inhabits: only by virtue of her place in the cage can she achieve such control over those outside the cage." (Buelens 2006: 130) James does, however, afford his protagonist one moment in which she literally exerts power over the Captain by withholding knowledge from him. Only 'in the cage' can she feel that the Captain "only fidgeted and floundered in his want of power," and when he comes back for his final request, it is "with a face so different and new, so upset and anxious" (James 2003b: 284-85). Back in a position of power in "her role as public servant [...that affords] her to protect the secrecy of telegraph messages" (Moody 1995: 64), *and* manage this information according to her own interests, the telegraphist feels that the Captain needs her, "like a frightened child coming to its mother" (James 2003b: 286). The Captain, exposed to the psychological mechanisms of paranoia that the telegraphist's rhetoric has triggered in him, indeed has to admit to exactly the kind of discrepancy in power that has been hinted at so many times in the story. He needs to recover a telegram: "There was something in it that has to be recovered. Something very, *very* important." (James 2003b: 287) At this moment, the girl finally has him where she wants him. She knows something he needs, and he depends on her to tell him; he is in her power: "[S]he could almost play with him and with her new-born joy." (James 2003b: 288) James has his protagonist enjoy this moment, making her play with her power, not immediately revealing what she knows, watching the Captain suffer: it was "the deepest thrill she had ever felt. [...S]he held the whole thing in her hand. [...] This made her feel like the very fountain of fate." (James 2003b: 287) This is her final triumph, her moment of greatest power: "She continued to hold him, she felt at present, as she had never held him; and her

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

command of her colleagues was, for the moment, not less marked." (James 2003b: 290) Strikingly, the young woman achieves this moment of triumph by acting out the very function that is expected of her: she "derives *jouissance* from the performance of a socially prescribed role" (Buelens 2006: 134), aware both of her power over Captain Everard, and of the socially conditioned spatial and professional situation that affords her this power in the first place. In a way, hence, she breaks free from social conventions, because her performance, "in its hyperbole, actually explodes the stereotype and instead works the gap between role and performance" (Buelens 2006: 134).

The moment, of course, does not last, and everything the telegraphist has imagined to 'know' is abruptly reduced to absurdity in her final confrontation with Mrs Jordan as described above. All this, however, does not diminish the effect this experiment in the power of a rhetoric of secrecy and knowledge has on the reader. On the contrary, the effect is starkly contrasted with the fact that, actually, the telegraphist does not 'know' anything, which draws even more attention to this rhetoric's independence of actual content: power through knowledge is derived mainly from a language of knowledge. What that knowledge actually is turns out to be only secondary. As Kate Thomas observes, James emphasises the act of communication as being much more important than what is actually communicated: "The content of [the] many telegrams […] is meaningless. […] Although there is zero content in these exchanges, there is plenty of relation." (Thomas 2012: 208) In the young telegraphist, James creates a character who, while never actually breaking free from the social conventions that restrict her (in terms of both class and gender), is very much aware both of the performative nature of a rhetoric of secrecy, and of the structure of a social spatiality that simultaneously restricts and empowers her. She might not be able to change the rules of the game, but she plays it expertly – at least for a moment. From an economic point of view, she has to realise that her profession reduces her to "just another object available for [the aristocrats'] frivolous purchase and enjoyment," and the alternative she opts for in the end is another form of female objectification as "the conjugal possession of Mr. Mudge" (Galvan 2001: 304; 305), the marriage to whom will also end her time as a working woman, re-integrating her, as it were, into the safe sphere of domesticity. While, however, James acknowledges this late Victorian woman's inescapable objectification in terms of the economies of money, he empowers her in terms of the economies of knowledge as paranoid reader.

Although James does not take his little story and its characters too seriously, and repeatedly pokes gentle fun at his heroine's ambitions and imagination, he does, nevertheless, get the message across: knowledge is (potential) power, particularly when negotiated through a rhetoric of secrecy that evokes the paranoid 'closet,' a rhetoric that lies on the border between speaking and not speaking, be-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

tween knowing and not knowing. The 'closet,' as James demonstrates in "In the Cage," is "a performative space of discretion that occupies a liminal position between the private and the public, between secrecy and the imperative to represent" (Savoy 1995: 297). James constructs a masculinity whose paranoia is reminiscent of the paranoid Gothic of the Bluebeard kind, but now takes on an additional dimension in that it reverberates with contemporary discourses on the homosexual 'closet.' His neo-Gothic protagonist not only tries to invade the masculine 'closet,' but has learned to become a multiply subversive force in her movement in space, and her deliberate employment of a powerful 'closet' rhetoric. The way James constructs space to serve his point reflects his awareness of the metaphorical qualities of the inside and the outside, the public and the private, the central and the liminal, and a tradition of gendered spatiality that goes back to the earliest novels in literary history.

In the context of contemporary discourses on sexual identities, his rhetoric takes on another dimension: "Sexuality […] becomes irretrievably a question of style and intonation, not of depth." (Laughlin 2010: 156) James, "fascinated by the incoherence, the polymorphousness, of identity" (Stevens 1998: 132), and aware of an historically ever-increasing need to 'read' people's 'sexualities,' denies his readers just such definite readings, emphasising the power of a rhetoric of secrecy that defies definite meaning. "In the Cage" illustrates the moment in (literary) history at which a more general masculine paranoid 'closet' starts to get sexualised, and becomes *the* 'closet.' James' 'closet,' however, is not simply 'homosexual,' but emphatically 'queer.' The space of telegraphic exchange is the ideal place for this ambiguous 'flirtation' with knowledge. James "delineates a relationship between the post and the closet: both are capacious and both have a swinging door between the public and the private. James relishes this swing and wants little to do with efforts to pin the door either open or shut" (Thomas 2012: 220). He constructs both his female protagonist and his reader as 'paranoid readers,' locating the psychologically damaging effects of paranoia in his male anti-hero. The reader, however – and the paranoid reader in particular – is always also a writer: just as the protagonist uses her 'readings' of the people around her and their telegrams to create her own fictional romance (cf. Vaux 2001), the reader/writer of fiction, and the 'reader'/'writer' of 'real' people, in their "excessive subjectivity" (Vaux 2001: 133), are always on the lookout for (a fantasy of) meaning, and this meaning, especially at the turn of the nineteenth century, is likely to be construed as 'sexual.' In his tale of the female paranoid reader and the male paranoid 'closet,' James not only dramatises a "crisis of interpretation […] that is innate to the experience of reading modernist fiction" (Olson 2009: 244), but one that is also innate to the experience of modern masculinities.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Autoerotic Paranoia in the 'Closet:' Henry James' "The Jolly Corner"

James' short American tale "The Jolly Corner" returns the 'closet' to its literary roots in the fictional architectural spaces of the Gothic. Its protagonist, Spencer Brydon, comes back to America after thirty-three years in Europe. Following the death of all his relatives, he has inherited the family mansion in New York, "his house on the jolly corner, as he usually, quite fondly described it" (James 2003c: 342). This house becomes the space in which Brydon haunts and is haunted by his 'alter ego,' the past self he left behind when he went to Europe, the man he could have been. James, in a "complete exercise in the psycho-dynamics of place" (Hardy 1997: 192), constructs the 'closet' as both metaphor and actual space, in a rhetoric that is reflected in the intricate architecture of upstairs and downstairs, the back rooms, doors, windows, and passage ways of the house. Far from ever making homosexuality an explicit issue, James creates an interpretative void, a linguistic space of allusions, drawing heavily on the rhetoric of the 'open secret.' "James's signalling of Brydon's homosexuality takes the oblique form of connotation, but the play of connotation is sufficiently elaborate to acquire a solidity and a specificity in differential relation to the signs of heteronormative American masculinity." (Savoy 1999: 2) As in earlier tales, James employs a language that calls for being filled with 'meaning,' creating a secret which, at the turn of the twentieth century, must reverberate with sexual implications. In this late piece of fiction, however, he goes a step further: both de-sexualising the tale's apparently heterosexual sub-plot between Brydon and his friend Alice Staverton, and making her a woman who seems to 'know' more about the protagonist than he does about himself, James makes the question of Brydon's position as 'masculine' and 'heterosexual' man more than conspicuous. Staging his protagonist's crisis in a space reminiscent of early Gothic domesticity, he makes Brydon a modern Bluebeard, a man who knows that his secret is not – and never has been – safe. Brydon is also, however, crucially different from his paranoid 'predecessors:' as one of the first male characters in this tradition – and in the face of women who are 'in the know,' but pose no threat, and a desire that becomes increasingly nameable – he contemplates 'coming out,' facing his 'closeted' alter ego, and embracing his 'difference.' Although, in the end, Brydon does not 'come out,' and James has him ostensibly return to the safe haven of heternormativity, this tale presents paranoid masculinity as a choice, and asks what an alternative might be. Relishing the very impossibility of naming Brydon's secret, James both celebrates and questions a 'queer space' that defies definite signification.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Return to the 'Queer House'

The house itself is introduced at the beginning of the tale – in a similar fashion to the palazzo in "The Aspern Papers" – as a mansion that is clearly not the symbol of patriarchal power and inherited strength that it might be expected to be. The protagonist, at least, refuses to inscribe himself into that tradition, and retains an ironic distance: "He had come – putting the thing pompously – to look at his 'property,' […] he had yielded to the humour of seeing again his house on the jolly corner." (James 2003c: 342) Brydon assumes no attitude of presumably 'masculine' pride in ownership, and the adjective 'jolly' brings to mind associations of fun, festivity, joy, and pleasure, rather than sombre pride and dignity: the 'jolly corner' is explicitly contrasted with "the comparatively conservative Avenue" (James 2003c: 345). At the same time, however, although "alienated" (James 2003c: 342) from his ancestral home, Brydon's income from renting out this and a second house in New York has afforded him to "live in 'Europe'" (James 2003C: 342), the inverted commas around 'Europe' drawing attention to its standing for the symbolic difference and emphatic separation of the life that he chose from what he left behind in America.

Similarly, Brydon's two houses in New York both, in their own way, stand for the contrast between the life he has lived, and the life he denied himself. The house on the 'jolly corner,' as we shall see later, symbolises both the emptiness of the life he chose, and the ghost of his 'closeted' existence; the other house, "already in course of reconstruction as a tall mass of flats" (James 2003c: 342), both serves as a means for Brydon to realise the "lively stir […that] had been dormant in his own organism" (James 2003c: 343), a reminder of the life he could have lead, associating his 'missed career' with the modern, masculine, capitalist occupation of 'erecting' new buildings, and, in its contrast with the old, haunted, 'other' house that is the actual focus of his attention, demonstrates that the 'lively' stir might in fact be something else.

The regret, the feeling of having missed a chance, "the queerest and deepest of his own latterly most disguised and most muffled vibrations" (James 2003c: 344), is immediately phrased in terms of the spatiality of the Gothic domestic: the feeling haunts him "very much as he might have been met by some strange figure, some unexpected occupant, at a turn of the dim passage of an empty house" (James 2003c: 344). His 'alter ego,' as Brydon will call it himself later, is a personified ghost, a forgotten version of himself, and this self is indeed 'closeted,' found on "opening a door[…,] some quite erect confronting presence" (James 2003c: 345).

Brydon's relationship with his house on the 'jolly corner' is clearly odd. Not only does he prefer "to leave the place empty," but, without intending to live in it, he also goes there "absurdly often" (James 2003c: 345). The only other person

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

having access to the house is Mrs Maldoon, "a good woman living in the neighbourhood" (James 2003c: 345), who comes to clean the place. Although Brydon is called the house's "master" (James 2003c: 345) in this passage, it is the only time in the tale he is referred to as such, and his position of actual authority is questioned by his impulse to keep his nocturnal visits to the place a secret, even from his housekeeper, hiding candles "at the back of a drawer of the fine old sideboard that occupied […] the deepest recess in the dining room" (James 2003c: 346). Brydon actively avoids taking possession of the house's spatiality as the patriarchal owner that he actually is. Instead, he makes himself, as it were, the 'closeted' secret of his own house, deliberately putting himself in the position of the Gothic heroine of the type of Emily in *Udolpho*. Brydon does not want the house to enable him to be the patriarch; quite the contrary: he "can afford for a while to be sentimental here!" (James 2003c: 346).

It becomes increasingly clear, however, that James constructs here not a juxtaposition of the patriarchal home with the feminised, sentimental, 'queer' sensitivity of his protagonist, but, instead, places the latter at the very centre of the mansion: Brydon remarks that he "*might* have lived here," and, had he done so, "everything would have been different enough – and, I dare say, 'funny' enough" (James 2003c: 347). 'Funny' how? And how does this alternative, 'funny' existence in the house at the 'jolly corner' relate to Brydon's "perversity" (James 2003c: 347)? In creating an unusual linguistic connection between expressions of deviance and joy that all carry potentially 'sexual' meanings, and relating them to the architecture of the abandoned house, James locates Brydon's 'queer' identity at the very centre of patriarchal domesticity, suggesting that, far from being a marginal phenomenon, 'sexual' deviance and 'queer' possibility are constitutive of patriarchal masculinity.

This potential for deviance is further emphasised by James' constructing the house as a liminal space, "a non-place characterized by [a] hugely suggestive absence" (Nixon 2004: 811), "a space neither here nor there" (Zwinger 2008: 7), stripping it of the rules of socially sanctioned domesticity. Being completely empty, the house enables Brydon to imagine his own version of it, according to his desires: "For me it *is* lived in. For me it *is* furnished." (James 2003c: 348) He also explicitly contrasts the house's imaginary qualities with "the comparatively harsh actuality of the Avenue," and even alludes to the emphatically liminal image of the emergence from "an Egyptian tomb" (James 2003c: 348) to characterise this juxtaposition.

James depicts the house as a spatiality that simultaneously alludes to an imagery of patriarchal lineage and traditional domesticity (Brydon "let himself in and let himself out with the assurance of calm proprietorship" [James 2003c: 352].), and bears the secret to an alternative life that the tale's protagonist might have

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

led. The house is at once Brydon's 'closet,' haunted by his "strange *alter ego*" (James 2003c: 349), and the enabling space that triggers contemplation on what this 'closet' means: being in the house makes Brydon reflect on his life choices, and provokes melancholia; he starts brooding over "the question of what he personally might have been, how he might have led his life and 'turned out,' if he had not so, at the outset, given it up" (James 2003c: 348). While what 'it' is remains ambiguous, Brydon clearly is aware that there are people who have embraced 'it' ("I see what it has made of dozens of others." [James 2003c: 348]), leading the life he has denied himself. On the surface, this passage alludes to his possibly becoming a successful businessman, the embodiment of American, capitalist, masculine strength. By employing an ambiguous rhetoric, however, and by constantly associating 'it' and the life that Brydon never lived (that "fantastic, yet perfectly possible, development of my own nature I mayn't have missed" [James 2003c: 349]) with "his stifled perversity" (James 2003c: 351), and his "abysmal conceit of [his] own preference" (James 2003c: 349), James subverts these capitalist associations, which are, as many critics have remarked on, so present in "the commercial language that pervades the text" (Nixon 2004: 810), with the language of the 'open secret' that will always invite 'sexual' readings. This powerful interpretative draw becomes even more prominent in the way James constructs the character and rhetoric of Alice Staverton.

Heterosociality and the 'Open Secret:' Alice Staverton

The narrative introduces Alice Staverton as an independent, and markedly unusual woman. She owns her own house, the address of which, "in Irving Place" (James 2003c: 343), is the only one in the tale to be explicitly mentioned. She and her house are a point of stability for Brydon, the house being "a small still scene where items and shades, all delicate things, kept the sharpness of the notes of a high voice perfectly trained, and where economy hung about like the scent of a garden" (James 2003c: 343). Where Brydon is searching and restless, Miss Staverton seems to have found an existence in equilibrium. Ostensibly Brydon's heterosexual love interest, James de-sexualises their relationship from the start, making her at once fascinating and strange, "a fair young woman who looked older through trouble, or a fine smooth older one who looked young through successful indifference" (James 2003c: 344). Rather than being eroticised, Miss Staverton is a friend whose femininity is glorified not as something to be desired sexually, but as something to find stability, calm, and trust in. The relationship between her and Brydon is not 'heterosexual,' but heterosocial: "They had communities of knowledge, 'their' knowledge." (James 2003c: 344)

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Miss Staverton is repeatedly, indeed excessively, referred to as a woman 'in the know.' Her relationship with Brydon is dominated by a seemingly complete understanding of her friend that does not need to be explained in words. She even seems to understand his thoughts and actions better than he does himself, an impression she gives through "the particular mild irony with which he found half her talk suffused" (James 2003c: 346). Her language is full of ellipses and things unsaid: "[T]hings she didn't utter, it was clear, came and went in her mind." (James 2003c: 348) She employs the rhetoric of the 'open secret,' confidently aware of what she seems to 'know' about Brydon. It is crucial to observe, however, that she never shares what she thinks she knows with him. Knowing more about his 'queer existence' than he does himself puts her in a position of power. She does not, however, take advantage of that position: "[S]he was a woman who answered intimately but who utterly didn't chatter." (James 2003c: 347) With Alice Staverton, James constructs a female character who has penetrated the workings of paranoid, 'queer' masculinity, but who becomes neither a 'female helper,' nor a threat, but instead remains calmly observant, only subtly instigating Brydon's quest for self-knowledge through a conscious employment of the fascination of the unsaid: "[H]er untold reading of Brydon haunts his readings. […] It is [her] who first invokes, conjures, narrates […] the other Brydon into existence." (Zwinger 2008: 10; 12)

There are only a few instances in which Miss Staverton actively tries to influence Brydon, assuring him that she believes in what he could have been, could still be, that she knows about and believes in his 'queer existence' and its potential: "I believe in the flower [the 'alter ego']. […] I feel it would have been quite splendid, quite huge and monstrous." (James 2003c: 349) This is also the only moment at which James, through his female character, explicitly questions the surface reading of Brydon's alternative existence as capitalist patriarch: "'You'd have liked me that way?' he asked. She barely hung fire. 'How should I not have liked you?' 'I see. You'd have liked me, have preferred me, a billionaire!' 'How should I not have liked you?' she simply again asked." (James 2003c: 350) Both keeping their relationship on a level of friendship ('like' not 'love'), and curiously denying to react to Brydon's reading of his own 'alter ego,' Miss Staverton makes him – and the reader – aware of his self-delusion: the 'alter ego' must be 'something else.'

The 'alter ego,' the tale's supernatural element, is the allegory through which Miss Staverton can give her knowledge of Brydon shape. The fact that "she divined his strange sense," and her "apparent understanding" (James 2003c: 350) take on an almost physical quality when she admits to have seen Brydon's 'alter ego' in a dream. Again, however, she is reluctant to share all her 'knowledge' with the man it concerns: "'Then you know all about him.' And as she said nothing more: 'What's the wretch like?' She hesitated, and it was as if he were pressing her so hard that, resisting for reasons of her own, she had to turn away. 'I'll tell you some

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

other time!'" (James 2003c: 351) The irony here is that James' rhetoric implies that the rules of the 'open secret' have to be adhered to: although Miss Staverton 'knows,' she cannot simply make this knowledge explicit, for it is knowledge that cannot be spoken – or rather the 'closet' becomes 'known' only by speaking about it *as* a secret. James does not have to make Brydon's 'alter ego' explicitly 'queer;' the rhetoric he employs to so markedly *not* do just that is more than sufficient. Alice Staverton must play her part, but her knowing smiles, reassuring hints, and motherly concern make the question as to *what* she knows so exaggeratedly pressing that it becomes almost redundant.

The tale's ending, although apparently depicting the heterosexual fulfilment of Brydon and Miss Staverton's relationship, picks up the theme of motherly femininity again, and ultimately makes it almost impossible for the reader to imagine any actual sexual consummation of the heteronormative plot, which, in the end, defeats itself. Having confronted, and finally – as we shall see later – rejected his 'queer alter ego,' Brydon is found and woken up from unconsciousness by the story's two female characters. Strongly playing on the imagery of a scene of (re)birth (He is "lifted and carefully borne as from […] the uttermost end of an interminable grey passage" [James 2003c: 366].), James ironically suggests Brydon's awakening to an ultimate acceptance of a heteronormative life, and a confirmation of the politics of the 'closet.' "[H]alf-raised and upheld," however, he wakes up like a child in his mother's arms, with his "head pillowed in extraordinary softness and faintly refreshing fragrance" (James 2003c: 365). Again, James' choice of words forecloses any normatively eroticised reading of the relationship between Brydon and Alice Staverton. He is only "conscious […] of tenderness and support" (James 2003c: 365). Brydon is both infantilised ("Alice Staverton had made her lap an ample and perfect cushion to him." [James 2003c: 365]), and feminised, in that he completely gives in, "so gratefully, so abysmally passive" (James 2003c: 365), to a physicality that contradicts powerful notions of the very capitalist, active masculinity he has pretended to want to inscribe himself into. Hence, although rejecting his 'queer alter ego,' Brydon, in fact, only moves on to another kind of 'queer' – non-heterosexual, non-normative – existence.

While the characters' physical demeanour suggests the impossibility of a heternormative ending, Brydon rhetorically glorifies his 're-birth' as a return to knowledge of his heterosexual destiny. The terms, however, in which he praises Miss Staverton uncannily suggest his realisation that she is much more his 'mother,' who has helped him acknowledge his nature (which he continues to deny), than an object of desire: "You brought me literally to life." (James 2003c: 366) Miss Staverton is not only de-sexualised (in strictly procreative terms) as Brydon's 'mother,' but this image takes on almost iconographic dimensions when she becomes the Virgin Mary, the Christian embodiment of sexual impenetrabil-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

ity, who has brought her son back from the dead (Brydon says, "I can only have died" [James 2003c: 366].), and whose "cool charity and virtue of […] lips" (James 2003c: 366) denies being physically consummated by her 'son'/the 'queerly' penetrated body of Jesus.

In the end, Brydon remains in denial: "There's somebody – an awful beast. […] But it's not me." (James 2003c: 367) Miss Staverton, who has "known, all along" (James 2003c: 367), accepts his denial as the only socially possible choice: he sees in her face "some particular meaning blurred by a smile. '[…]Of course it wasn't to have been.'" (James 2003c: 367) Both accept that, socially, their fate has to be the heteronormative fulfilment of the marriage plot: "'And now I keep you,' she said. 'Oh keep me, keep me!' […] It was the seal of their situation." (James 2003c: 366-67) James does, however, have Miss Staverton explicitly deny the horror Brydon feels in remembering his 'alter ego:' "[W]hy […] shouldn't I like him? […] I *could* have liked him. And to me […] he was no horror. I had accepted him […] I pitied him." (James 2003c: 369) In Miss Staverton, James constructs a femininity that has penetrated the 'closet' of masculinity, but, far from entering into a dualistic power struggle, accepts the possibility of 'queer secrecy' with a benevolent smile. While, in this tale, any erotic fulfilment is ruled out, James does posit an alternative to paranoid masculinity, and the 'closeting' of a 'queer' existence, which, while not yet liveable, becomes at least conceivable.

Confronting the 'Other' in the Gothic 'Closet:' The Eroticised Chase of the 'Alter Ego'

The tale's core is Brydon's solitary nocturnal visit to the house, in which dichotomies of private and public, open and closed spaces take on a powerful significance. The house's spatiality can only serve Brydon as a catalyst for a "surrender to his obsession" (James 2003c: 351) at night, and, more specifically, at the transitional moments "of gathering dusk, of the short autumn twilight" (James 2003c: 351). These in-between times enable Brydon to "let himself go" (James 2003c: 351); their liminal, dream-like nature changes his perception of the house's architecture, and the lines between private and public, open and closed blur: the private space of "the great vague place" suddenly opens up, and displays "open vistas, reaches of communication between rooms and by passages" (James 2003c: 351). The domestic turns into the open landscape of Brydon's chase: "[H]is odd pastime was the desire to waylay and meet" (James 2003c: 353) his 'alter ego.' This desire is eroticised and fetishised as Brydon's thrilling obsession: "[H]e had tasted of no pleasure so fine as his actual tension, had been introduced to no sport that demanded at once the patience and the nerve of this stalking of a creature more subtle, yet

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - [cc] BY-NC-ND

at bay perhaps more formidable, than any beast of the forest." (James 2003c: 353) The narrator compares the house's 'landscape' to the wild outdoors, and Brydon's externalised 'other' self becomes both object of his desire to possess, and object of his wish to destroy. More specifically, the 'hunt' itself is eroticised, and hence – keeping in mind the function of the 'alter ego' as Brydon's alternative, rejected self – the workings of the 'closet' as a psychological mechanism are equally charged with erotic tension. Brydon's 'closet,' although staged as an uninhabitable domestic space, is fetishised as a desirable state of liminality.

This liminal state also questions and destabilises conventional roles and relations. Identities are reversed, and it becomes increasingly less clear who is haunted, and who haunts: Brydon has "turned the tables and become himself, in the apparitional world, an incalculable terror […for] the poor hard-pressed *alter ego*" (James 2003c: 354). What Brydon finds desirable about this state, however, is not the power he gains, but the very loss of control he can allow himself to experience: "He was kept in sight while remaining himself – as regards the essence of his position – sightless." (James 2003c: 355) Brydon is made the object of a (strangely auto-erotic) male gaze, which disempowers and feminises him in a way very much reminiscent of the female Gothic. In a similar reversal, the narrative focus shifts back and forth between an emphasis on the open and enabling nature of the house's landscape ("He liked […] the open shutters." [James 2003c: 354]), and a penetrative fascination with its intricate architecture 'in the back:' "[N]one the less often the rear of the house affected him as the very jungle of his prey." (James 2003c: 354) While evoking – in a similar fashion to the editor's penetration of the back garden in "The Aspern Papers" – a very physical imagery of anal fixation, this passage also alludes to a voyeuristic fascination with modern privacy, and, again, the house's spatiality mirrors the space of Brydon's mind, in which he has 'hidden' his 'alter ego:' in the back, "[t]he place was […] more subdivided; a large 'extension' in particular, where small rooms for servants had been multiplied, abounded in nooks and corners, in closets and passages" (James 2003c: 354). Brydon walks the 'closets and passages' of his secret thoughts just as much as he secretly discovers the 'nooks and corners' of the house's actual space.

When Brydon finally confronts his 'alter ego,' the narrative positively overflows with descriptions of his physical reactions to the situation, which oscillate between stress and excitement, and of a continued negotiation of the confrontation through the house's architecture. "[H]e seemed all of a sudden to know what now was involved." (James 2003c: 356) Deliberately ambiguous, the narrative does not clarify exactly 'what' is involved. James' typical over-use of inverted commas does not produce meaning, but evokes associative, non-linear 'meaning-making' reactions in the reader: "I've come, as they say, 'to stay.' […] I've hunted him till he has 'turned.'" (James 2003c: 356) Lee Clark Mitchell, in his formalist analysis

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

of the tale, shows how James' excessive use of scare quotes mirrors and reinforces epistemological processes at the level of content: the scare quotes "question[] [a term's] conventional denotations and thus transform[] a more or less literal statement into a figurative one. […] Brydon exposes a range of possibilities inherent in any language that never quite means what it says." (Mitchell 2007: 225; 228) This is the very effect that crucially characterises the rhetoric of the 'closet.'

Brydon is about to face the epistemological crisis of 'coming out,' and his physical reactions emphasise the fundamental nature of this crisis: "[H]e had broken into a sweat. […It was] a sensation more complex than had ever before found itself consistent with sanity." (James 2003c: 356) This moment of fundamental choice – whether or not to embrace the 'closeted alter ego' – confronts Bryon with fear and excitement, and, for a moment, he considers a reunion with his suppressed self: "[T]his ineffable identity was thus in the last resort not unworthy of him. […] It was as if it would have shamed him that […his 'alter ego'] should to the end not risk the open. […He felt] the vivid impulse, above all, to move, to act, to charge, somehow and upon something – to show himself, in a word, that he wasn't afraid." (James 2003c: 357)

This crisis of choice is reflected in the way James stages Brydon's chase of the 'alter ego' within the house. Rejecting a model of chivalric masculinity from "an age of greater romance," still dominant in the early Gothic, the "heroic time" in which a man would "have proceeded downstairs with a drawn sword in his other grasp" (James 2003c: 357), as almost comically inadequate, Brydon proceeds to confront his 'alter ego' with a candle that "would have to figure his sword" (James 2003c: 358). The phallic sword is substituted with the phallic candle, the former representing a masculinity relying on brute strength, the latter putting an emphasis on the 'enlightening' power of knowledge. This substitution, at the same time, again refers to the image of the candle-carrying, castle-exploring Gothic heroine, feminising Brydon's attitude towards the dangers he fears to encounter. Spatially, he has reached the innermost part of the maze-like house; an overwhelming "multiplication of doors" (James 2003c: 359) and corridors reflects the transitional stage Brydon is going through: "The door between the rooms was open, and from the second another door opened to a third[…, and] there was a fourth, beyond them, without issue save through the proceeding." (James 2003c: 358) Brydon's remarking on "the violent shock of having ceased happily to forget" (James 2003c: 358) reflects that the passage through these multiple doors is closely associated with a process of recognition. In the 'closet' behind the doors, he is about to confront what he has tried to suppress.

The act of opening the last door comes to stand for the ultimate confrontation with Brydon's rejected past. The narrator comments on this exaggerated conflation of the metaphor of the 'closet' with its actual spatial origins: "The house, as the

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY-NC-ND

case stood, admirably lent itself." (James 2003c: 358) This is, in fact, the whole purpose of the house: to lend itself as the spatial metaphor of Brydon's mental crisis, as the actual locus in which James can stage this epistemological dilemma. Finally confronted with the choice whether or not to open the door, Brydon realises that this is a "question of courage[…:] [S]hould he just push it open or not?" (James 2003c: 359) In the end, he decides not to, and lets the 'closet' remain unopened. It is crucial, however, not to overlook that the narrative does not absolutely condemn this lack of courage. Just as the chase itself was eroticised earlier, Brydon now draws attention to "the value of Discretion" (James 2003c: 359), an excuse, however, that is exposed as just that by Brydon's eagerly "jump[ing] at that" (James 2003c: 359). This moment of ambiguity and ultimate resignation is the only point in the tale at which the narrator assumes the first person, emphasising the particular importance of this choice as the story's central issue, summarised in Brydon's plea: "I retire, I renounce – never, on my honour, to try again. So rest for ever – and let *me*!" (James 2003c: 360)

Having built up extreme suspense and tension over his protagonist's inner crisis, and elaborately creating an instant of absolute epistemological possibility – the knowledge at stake bearing the potential to change Brydon's life – James has his protagonist withdraw. Making the opening of the 'closet' graspable, he opts against it. What follows is resignation: "His spell was broken now." (James 2003c: 360) Brydon willingly embraces his daytime existence, ruled by social constraints: "The empty street – its other life so marked even by the great lamplit vacancy – was within call, within touch." (James 2003c: 360) Instead of finally 'knowing' himself (the candle, his 'light of knowledge,' "burnt […] well-nigh to the socket" [James 2003c: 360]), he is ready to be interpellated – in a most literally Althusserian way – by the society he is ultimately unwilling to be cast out from: "[H]e would have welcomed positively the slow approach of his friend the policeman, whom he had hitherto sought to avoid, [… of] the patrol […he] felt the impulse to get into relation with […], to hail." (James 2003c: 360) The feeling of belonging and community, however, comes at the price of paranoia: he wants to "save[] his dignity and [keep] his name out of the papers. […H]e was so occupied with the thought of recording his Discretion […] that the importance of this loomed large." (James 2003c: 360) The choice is between the street and the house, between confronting one's 'alter ego' at the risk of crisis and scandal, and social acceptability at the price of paranoia.

Society, however, will ultimately not provide Brydon with the sense of community he is looking for. "His choked appeal from his open window" is met by the unwelcoming, quasi-human 'gaze' of the "hard-faced house, […g]reat builded voids, great crowded stillness put on" (James 2003c: 361). Brydon is conscious that he cannot help being a stranger in a society that is obsessed with privacy, and

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

simultaneously polices everybody's privacy according to certain (sexual) morals. Facing the choice between the 'closet' and the (eventually impossible) alternative of 'speaking out,' his 'queer subjectivity' experiences a "large collective negation" that leaves him "deeply demoralised" (James 2003c: 361). The negation emphasises society's reliance on denial: as long as Brydon's 'closet' remains unopened, he will remain a respected, albeit haunted (and paranoid) member of society – after all, "he was positively rather liked than not[…,] a dim secondary social success – and all with people who had truly no idea of him" (James 2003c: 352). So long as his 'alter ego' remains hidden within the private sphere of domesticity, the narrative suggests, Brydon will not lose his social status. Speaking out, in this tale's world, would be social suicide. Hence, for Brydon, "the closing [of the door] had practically been an act of mercy" (James 2003c: 361). Socially, the opening of the 'closet' would mean abjection and shame; confronting and naming the 'other' in his self would make Brydon vulnerable: "He knew […] that *should* he see the door open, it would too abjectly be the end of him. It would mean that the agent of his shame – for his shame was the deep abjection – was once more at large and in general possession." (James 2003c: 362) Society's mechanisms of shaming, and its abjection of the (deviant) self are the very processes that enable the modern, sexually charged 'closet.'

James does not, however, end on this note, tacitly accepting social policing through shame. Just before Brydon's final confrontation with his 'alter ego,' James has the house's domestic architecture completely dissolve into a limitless, heterotopian space without boundaries: "The house, withal, seemed immense, the scale of space again inordinate." (James 2003c: 362) The rooms look like "mouths of caverns," and the whole place seems like "some watery under-world […at] the bottom of the sea" (James 2003c: 362-63). Although Brydon tries to suppress his 'closeted' secret, even delete it from the space of his mind ("They might come in now, the builders, the destroyers – they might come as soon as they would." [James 2003c: 362]), James, in the tale's highly Gothic climax, acknowledges that the house of the mind will not let Brydon forget what he is, what is part of him. The house's "inner door had been thrown far back," and although Brydon knows that "the key was in his pocket," that, in the end, he is the one in control of what remains hidden, and what does not, the house, the architecture of his innermost self, makes him aware of the allure of facing what he is trying to suppress: "[H]e let himself go with the sense that here *was* at last something to meet, to touch, to take, to know." (James 2003c: 363)

When the 'alter ego' finally shows himself, his physicality turns Brydon's vision of the social workings of shame upside-down: covering his face in his hands, "buried as for dark deprecation" (James 2003c: 364), the 'alter ego' confronts Brydon with his 'queer' self ("his queer actuality of evening-dress" [James 2003c:

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

364]); "one of these hands had lost two fingers," is symbolically castrated, and when the 'alter ego' finally reveals his face, Brydon can only recoil in horror, "for the bared identity was too hideous as his, and his glare was the passion of his protest" (James 2003c: 364). Brydon's 'closeted alter ego,' effectively unmanned and disfigured, shames Brydon for the very act of denying him, a psychological reaction the latter cannot help but continue: he "look[ed] away from [the face] in dismay and denial" (James 2003c: 364). This face, his own face, is abject to Brydon; he lacks the psychological potential to grasp the meaning of this confrontation. At once part of himself and 'other,' "monstrous[…,] the face of a stranger[…,] evil, odious, blatant, vulgar" (James 2003c: 365), this face, both same and different, "says the things we cannot say" (Zwinger 2008: 13), and physically evokes the taboo that keeps it from speaking its name. James' narrative – very much in the manner of Radcliffe, who makes Emily faint in *Udolpho* when she draws back the veil – acknowledges the impossibility of Brydon's incorporating his 'closeted' existence. Caught between the desire to 'know' himself, to speak, and the need to deny, to keep hidden, Brydon can only escape by ultimately rejecting to make the choice through a loss off consciousness.

In the end, Brydon remains in denial, but, as discussed above, the plot's heteronormative ending leaves the reader unsatisfied. Although Brydon claims that the experience "had brought him to knowledge, to knowledge" (James 2003c: 366), this knowledge remains unspoken and unlived, heterosocially shared with a woman, but veiled in the language of the 'open secret' that leaves the workings of the paranoid 'closet' intact. To speak – to 'know,' and put into words – is impossible: "'I was to have known myself.' 'You couldn't!'" (James 2003c: 368) Shalyn Claggett, in his analysis of James' tale through the lens of narcissism, convincingly sees the danger that lies at the heart of Brydon's denied self-recognition: "[E]ncountering one's alter ego necessarily traumatizes the subject because it threatens the individual's investment in a single, unified identity. […] Brydon avoids disaster by choosing ignorance, recognizing in the crucial moment that self-knowledge would be psychically disastrous." (Claggett 2005: 192; 196)

Claggett, however, rejecting a 'reductive' reading of the 'alter ego' as 'homosexual,' overlooks the social dimension of the psychological mechanism he analyses so aptly: Brydon cannot incorporate the narcissistic desire for his rejected self precisely because it is phrased in epistemological terms that are socially regulated. The knowledge Brydon has to deny himself is not just any kind of self-knowledge; it is charged with a taboo, and must not be spoken, but will be spoken *about* excessively. These are the dynamics of the 'open secret,' of the 'closet,' and while the 'alter ego' remains "a sign in the chain of continuing signification, forever deferring its meaning" (Claggett 2005: 199), this very perpetual deferral emphatically marks the lack of any particular meaning as a significant lack, and makes "The Jolly Cor-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY-NC-ND

ner," at the turn of the twentieth century, consciously open to be read not as story about any kind of knowledge, but about *the* knowledge of 'sexual' deviance. It is no coincidence that Brydon's "obsession for a single meaning […] comes in contrast with the narrative's openness to alternative possibilities" (Anastasaki 2008: 85). In this very contrast, James demonstrates the circular nature of the paranoid 'closet:' the rhetoric of masculinities that this tale is another example of is in itself paranoid in that it withholds knowledge of what it truly 'is;' this withholding of knowledge, in turn, enables a second dimension of paranoia, that of being read by the paranoid reader as *the* knowledge that cannot be named. Indeed, this dynamic, as Eric Savoy demonstrates, not only consciously enables 'queer' knowledge, but also de-stabilises a 'gay' subjectivity just as much as it de-stabilises heteronormativity:

"Spencer Brydon returns to America as a self-knowing 'gay' bachelor – closeted, to be sure, but with a sexual affiliation richly and connotatively established – whose provisional identity is contested and unravelled by his encounter with his hypothetical and rather differently closeted double, [and hence] 'The Jolly Corner' might be read as a supple and prescient allegory of the queer undoing of the gay subject." (Savoy 1999: 3)

Although Savoy rightly observes that James disables a reading of Brydon's subjectivity as straightforwardly 'gay,' he does, to an extent, commit to an equally reductive reading of Brydon as 'queer' in the sense of a readable (albeit more complex) 'sexual' identity. I would argue, however, that what the tale produces is not identity at all, but a vision of the impossibility of a stable subjectivity in the 'queer closet' as a rhetorical space of possibility. For Brydon, this space of possibility becomes one of melancholia. He is at once paranoid secret holder and paranoid reader, trying to read himself in an economy of knowledge over which he has lost control. He *wants* to be able to read himself, pin down what the life he has not lived might have been exactly, and rejects the undefined openness his 'alter ego' suggests. "The mapping of a consciousness which aspired to expand itself in its endless possibilities of being could be overwhelming." (Anastasaki 2008: 88) James simultaneously constructs Brydon's 'queer alter ego' as a locus of endless potential beyond definitions (the 'queer' life postmodernity will aspire to), and exposes this very rejection of definition as unliveable: Although Brydon, in refusing to identify with his 'alter ego,' "rebels against this image of the self and refuses to be pinned down and fixed to that alternative" (Anastasaki 2008: 93), he cannot positively embrace a lack of definite identity either. He both desires and refuses to be named, "queerly suspended between desire for, and repression of, signification" (Savoy 1999: 11), and thus remains trapped in, and actively embraces the paranoid mechanisms of the 'closet.'

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

The tale's message remains ambiguous. Eroticised as a desirable state of mind, and, at the same time, perceived as shameful, the paranoid 'closet,' in "The Jolly Corner," is both confirmed and questioned as a valid cultural mechanism. Drained of any association with power (the knowledge has become shared across the lines of gender), only fetishised as a source of ambiguous pleasure, the paranoid 'closet' remains intact. At the same time, however, James constructs a world in which power over knowledge is being democratised, gender relations re-configured, and heteronormativity ultimately made impossible in the face of a 'queerness' that can neither be denied, nor acceptably incorporated any longer. In this moment of masculine 'crisis' – in the word's basic meaning of fundamental change – 'masculinity,' stuck in a 'closet' that is increasingly read, and needs to be spoken as 'homosexual,' repeatedly has to redefine itself along the axes of the more and more rigid dichotomies homosocial/homosexual, and heterosocial/heterosexual.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434680-004 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND