

The Wings of the Dove and the Critics

Sarah B. Daugherty
Wichita State University

The Wings of the Dove (1902) is a novel of spiritual desperation. Kate Croy's pleas for recognition—"Father!" (31), and again, "Father" (32)—assume an allegorical significance as the reader meets the other members of her worldly family. Aunt Maud, her would-be patron, worships "false gods" and is acknowledged by Kate to be "unscrupulous and immoral" (37). Maud's dinner guests include "the Bishop of Murrum—a real bishop . . . with a complicated costume, a voice like an old-fashioned wind instrument, and a face all the portrait of a prelate" (98). His presence signals that the established church has been subsumed by the marketplace. Kate's mother was likewise a false mentor, her dying words having instructed her daughter "that it was of the essence of situations to be, under Providence, worked" (52). Marian Condrip, Kate's widowed sister, has been left to rear four children by "the parson of a dull suburban parish" whose only asset was his "saintly profile" (39). Of course, Marian joins the consensus on Kate's "duty" to marry for money (43).

Kate herself possesses a conscience, evidenced in her confession to Densher that her father's unspecified "wickedness" still clouds her life (56, 57). Yet Densher has little character of his own: "You would have got fairly near him by making out in his eyes the potential recognition

of ideas; but you would have quite fallen away on the question of the ideas themselves” (46). Significantly, his status as an empty center results in part from the secularization of the church: “His father had been, in strange countries, in twenty settlements of the English, British chaplain, resident or occasional, and had had for years the unusual luck of never wanting a billet” (71). As a pragmatist, Densher proposes an immediate civil marriage (59); but as an idealist, Kate insists on making a religion of love: “‘ I engage myself to you for ever. . . . And I pledge you—I call God to witness!—every spark of my faith; I give you every drop of my life’ ” (72). Tragically, however, Kate’s failure to accept the burden of moral agency—“I cling to some saving romance in things,” she tells her bewildered fiancé (60)—must undermine her vow. She seeks a foundation while grasping a balloon.

Milly Theale, Kate’s foil, presents a complementary case of “romantic isolation” (77): having lost her family through death, she naturally desires involvement with “‘people’” (93). As she looks down from her precipice on “the kingdoms of the earth,” the narrator observes that “it wouldn’t be with a view of renouncing them” (87). According to F. O. Matthiessen, James was unaware of the “full religious implications” of this scene (494); but the knowing reference to the Temptation supports Milly’s characterization as a vulnerable woman, not a Christ figure. Perhaps the best gloss on her predicament is James’s description of his cousin Minny Temple as “a mere subject without an object” and thus “the helpless victim and toy of her own intelligence” (Skrupskelis and Berkeley 69). Consider, too, James’s later memories of his sister Alice, who “never *could* have lived in this world,” at once despite and because of her “extraordinary courage & superiority” (Skrupskelis and Berkeley 266). To set his plot in motion, James causes Milly to be misled by a parodic figure: Susan Shepherd Stringham, writer and consumer of romantic fiction and the unwitting ally of her friend Maud Lower. The deluded shepherd strings along her victim.

Yet another false guide is Sir Luke Strett, whose intentions are kinder than those of the treacherous Lord Mark but who is hardly the “priest” Milly wants him to be (145). A society doctor, he counsels Milly

to “‘live’” (151), prompting her to have faith in “the famous ‘willpower’ she had heard about” (158). Though Sharon Cameron has argued that “such delusional thinking is Jamesian thinking” (159), the novelist was painfully familiar with the reality of physical illness and with the absence of “real care” afforded such patients as Minny Temple (James “Letter” 458). Indeed, *Wings* is James’s skeptical rejoinder to the theories of his brother William and likewise a reconsideration of the dominant theme of *The Ambassadors* (1903). As Milly succumbs to her disease, the roles of doctor and patient are reversed because she feels obligated to accept Luke’s reassurance: “‘The world’s before you’” (257). Equally harmful is Luke’s lie to Densher, the doctor’s last words as his train departs from Venice: “‘Yes, she’s better’” (353). Far from being moved to action, Densher rejoices that he has been relieved of responsibility by another “man of the world” (350).

The novel is tragic, not melodramatic, because its characters’ fates are determined more by their own choices than by the machinations of others. Increasingly resentful of being manipulated by women, Densher uses sex to assert control over Kate. But after he and she plot Milly’s betrayal (against the backdrop of “the great mosque-like church” of Saint Mark [298]), his dominant emotion is fear—primarily fear of himself. After his final meeting with Milly, he feels “forgiven, dedicated, blessed” (370) and observes Christmas “on the edge of a splendid service” at the Brompton Oratory (380). Recognition, however, fails to translate into conversion. Densher remains manipulative, forcing Kate to make the decisions; and for the same reason he is manipulable despite his sentimental attachment to Milly’s “memory” (403). “I’m in your power,” he tells Kate just before she breaks their engagement (401).

As for Kate, her repeated demands that Densher “believe” in her are undercut by their joint acts of deception (196, 237): “‘We’ve told too many lies,’” she admits (294). Her punishment is the loss of Densher’s desire for her, notwithstanding their mutual need “to bury in the dark blindness of each other’s arms the knowledge of each other that they couldn’t undo” (396). But the source of Kate’s perversity remains mysterious. During their reunion at the home of Marian Con-

drip, where Lionel Croy has fled “in terror,” Kate implores Densher: “If you love me—now—don’t ask me about father” (392). Recent interpreters have tried to close this gap: Eve Sedgwick and Wendy Graham theorize that Lionel is a homosexual,¹ whereas the film directed by Iain Softley portrays him as a drug addict. James, however, refuses to represent the origins of evil. He invites readers to “think it for [themselves]” (Art 176), that is, to acknowledge, more wisely, the insufficiency of explanations.

The most mysterious figure in the novel is Milly Theale. Her growing consciousness of her mortality contrasts sharply with Kate’s efforts to dehumanize her as a “dove” (171), a being “without sin” (140). Once she “turn[s] her face to the wall” (331), however, she is hidden from the view of the reader who knows only that Densher marvels at “her beauty and her strength” during the suppressed scene (362), and that Kate’s burning of Milly’s letter is, for him, like the loss of “a priceless pearl” (398). In declining to represent the source of Milly’s grace, James gestures beyond the world of the novel.

Modern critics of *Wings* have been hampered by excessive faith in and, more recently, by excessive doubt about James’s religious purpose. The Norton edition of the novel includes his speculative essay, “Is There a Life After Death?”—an analogue, say the editors, “to the novel’s redemptive theme” (back cover), though the essay actually has little to do with James’s narrative of life in a fallen world. And those who exaggerate Milly’s redemptive role run into other interpretive problems, evident in their own discussions as well as in the rejoinders of skeptics. Isn’t Milly too human and fallible to be a Christ figure?² How persuasive is the supposed transformation of Densher?³ Finally, if redemption is indeed the primary theme, what can be made of “James’s sympathy for the dark brilliance of Kate’s presence” (Wegelin

¹See Sedgwick (73–103) and Graham (219–22, 242).

²See J. A. Ward (535), Dorothea Krook (550), Laurence B. Holland (570–72); cf. Matthiessen (502), and Charles Thomas Samuels (576–77), who question Milly’s redemptive role.

³Matthiessen (502), Sallie Sears (560), and Samuels (578) doubt Densher’s

527)?

In the age of cultural materialism and deconstructive irony, skeptical readings of the novel have naturally predominated. William Stowe cites a number of critics who stress Milly's involvement in the forces of the marketplace. "Her final blessing is not divine grace," says Stowe, "but a 'stupendous' check drawn on her 'thumping bank account,' a check that ends by dividing its intended recipients rather than facilitating their union" (200-01). For other analysts, such as Jonathan Warren, Kate's tragedy overshadows Milly's (110-11), while still others see Kate playing an exemplary role. Elisabeth Bronfen, for example, sees her as a knowing agent of modernity whose destruction of Milly's letter signals her rejection of outworn "romantic narrative" (144); Henry McDonald goes further, arguing that Kate, who incarnates Nietzsche's "master morality," is superior to Milly, who personifies "slave morality" (193, 197). Even Densher has a partisan in neo-pragmatist Phillip Barrish, in whose reading of the novel Densher acquires "realist prestige" through his refusal to act and his "tastefully self-denigrating . . . regret" in the face of Milly's doom (49, 66).

Fortunately, a moral philosopher, Robert B. Pippin, offers a salutary rebuke to literary critics and theorists who overestimate James's skepticism in their discussions. For him, Densher is the central figure, but in a negative sense: by ignoring the claims of good faith and mutuality, Densher loses his own identity as he wanders aimlessly around Venice. Yet Pippin has much less to say about Kate and Milly, for he assumes James's primary concern is the problem of judgment in "a secular, non-religious, self-interested society" (3). Readers poised between faith and doubt—especially doubt of the sufficiency of secularism—may share the vision of James himself.

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