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Paul Sharrad

University of Wollongong, psharrad@uow.edu.au

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Turning the Screw Again: The Precocious Colonial Child in Henry James's Story

Paul Sharrad
University of Wollongong

Let me start by asking two questions to which the voluminous scholarship on Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* has seemingly not paid full attention. First, from where does Flora learn her shocking language? Second, in a tale whose details are inspected from as many angles as critics can devise, what weight might we give to the Indian origin of the two children who provide an extra turn to the storytelling screw? My argument here is that a postcolonial reading of the text can provide us with answers. In teasing out intertextual uses of the details regarding the children's Indian origin, we can arrive at a fresh appreciation of the links between James and Rudyard Kipling and, by extension, colonial discourses about the figure of the precocious child. In particular, I read young Miles and little Flora against Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911).

Colonial Links

In a tale whose every detail is inspected from as many angles as critics can devise, the Indian connection in *The Turn of the Screw* has, surprisingly, been the subject of only a few critical works. In 1988, Graham McMaster pioneered commentary on the tale's connection to India; indeed, many of the points he makes are brought out in this paper. Nonetheless, he passes these over to mount a Marxist reading in which the novella is code for empire's *fin de siècle* fears of loss of hold on property as the contradictions and excesses of capitalism become manifest (31-2). He also reads it as an expression of James's own dismay at the collapse of Anglo-American relations (36-8). Robert Martin reads James's work intertextually, linking it to Lilian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour* and Benjamin Britten's opera version of *The Turn of the Screw* to highlight queer sexuality and its oriental associations. Both articles leave room for considering how Indianness plays out through the children as part of the central intangible horror of the tale. Lucy Hamilton looks at the raising of the boys of Empire, discussing *Kim* alongside *Peter Pan* and *The Turn of the Screw*, but she is content to interpret the latter as an expression of anxiety over sexuality and the New Woman in a British context without assessing the role that India might play in the narrative. Laura Moss discusses the value of postcolonial readings in connection with *The Turn of the Screw* but uses the ambiguities in James's tale to

analyse Coetzee's fiction. The beginnings of a more rigorous postcolonial analysis appear in the suggestive but somewhat uneven commentary of Kazuhiro Masui in 2001. My argument is that the brief detail of the children's Indian origins is a significant part of the unspoken terror that permeates all those other aspects of the text that have fuelled a critical industry since 1898.

We can still accept the documented origins of the tale in Archbishop Benson's anecdote (qtd in James, "A Notebook Entry" 112-14), and the possible sighting of an illustration in a popular magazine (Wolff 133-4). We may also take as given James's own summation of the story as a "potboiler" of interest only as a work of entertainment on the one hand and, on the other, an exercise in creating a tight, organically-structured narrative whose appeal lies mainly in the contrast between our ideal of childhood innocence and the threat of its corruption by an unnamed and therefore profoundly terrific evil (Edel, *Letters* 4: 85-8). None of these originating factors, however, requires the particular details that James injected into his narrative, and certainly nothing demands that the children be anything other than orphans of either unspecified or English origin. So why might the author, otherwise so taken up with Europe and its potential for corrupting innocent Americans, specify India as the birthplace of Flora and Miles? And what are the effects of this detail?

There is no absolute evidence to answer this question, but we know that by 1890 James had met Rudyard Kipling (Edel, *Letters* 3: 308). The two writers became friends to the extent that James gave away the bride at Kipling's wedding, Caroline being the sister of James's recently dead friend Woolcott Balestier (Edel, *Henry James* 45). James's letters show how he saw the young returnee from India as an exciting new luminary on the English literary scene, such that it is not improbable that the sudden fashion for India prompted attribution of the children's origins to that part of the world. Kipling had already published some "eerie" stories in *The Phantom Rickshaw* (1888), so once again the connection between the East and the paranormal was there for James to pick up. In a letter to Grace Norton, James reveals his ambivalence about his adoptive nation, hinting that it would do Britain good to be taken down a peg, but not wanting his "dear old" racial and cultural home to be too humiliated in the conflict with Russia over Afghanistan because it would "resonate all over India" (Edel, *Letters* 3: 83; McMaster 35).

James was most likely fully aware of what he was doing in giving the children an Indian origin. The mirroring of unstable governess and ambiguous Anglo-Indian children doubly destabilizes *The Turn of the Screw*. Moreover, the nature of the children's Indianness is itself deliberately opened to question as a result of James's alteration of the original *Collier's* publication. As T. J. Lustig notes, the reluctant guardian uncle originally takes charge of his niece and nephew at the death of "their parents" (27). The original wording is preserved in the Signet Classics reproduction of the 1898 American text. Only later is the phrase "their parents" re-worded "*his* parents in India" (appearing in the Lustig and Beidler editions, respectively, pages 120 and 27)

following the death of the guardian's "younger, military brother who he had lost two years before" (James 288). As Shoshana Felman points out, "[i]t is thus death itself which moves the narrative chain forwards" (128). But, as McMaster and Martin show, the details of the deaths imply questions: Who raised the children before their military father died? Is their mother dead or not? If she is not dead, why were the children put into the care of their grandparents and/or the uncle? Are the children illegitimate? Is/was their mother Indian? Why are the grandparents not in the "old family place in Essex?" (McMaster 23-5; Martin 403-4).

A rough calculation based on the complex layers of dating and narration in the story's frame reveals that the military brother dies some time in the 1840s. If it is *their* parents' death that occasions the adoption, then the children have been raised in India for as long as their father was stationed there. As William Dalrymple has pointed out in *White Mughals*, and as Masui is at pains to establish, prior to the systematizing of colonial administration that followed the 1857 Indian Mutiny it was common for East India Company soldiers to take mistresses and wives in India. So it is entirely probable that the children are not completely English. Any racial mixedness would add another level of meaning to the uncle's readiness to keep them out of the way in the country. It also suggests that the change from "their" to "his" is not just a slip in editing, as the demise of the grandparents explains why no family is at the family estate. Moreover, if the grandparents were also serving in India, it allows for the uncle and his brother to be either Anglo-Indian or Eurasian—even more reason for the uncle to distance personal links to India from his fashionable life in London. In line with James's story, which will and will not "tell" (James 286), the brother may not have died or even lived in India, so a postcolonial scenario is just one more possibility amongst many. Nonetheless, either wording still leaves the children as having had at least two years of formative upbringing with their grandparents and as "colonials" (re)turning to England.

Given James's general awareness of India and his editing, it is unlikely that the origin given to the children was just a trivial fancy. Since the eighteenth century, British parents in India had been dying of accidents, fevers or fighting and leaving orphans to be cared for. The Bengal Military Orphan Society, the Charity School, and the Calcutta Free School were all housing orphans of East India Company functionaries by 1790, and by the end of the nineteenth century orphanages had proliferated in all major towns, cantonments, and hill stations (Hubel 240).¹ The figure of the white child raised as a native after being orphaned in the Mutiny was "a popular Anglo-Indian myth" (Hubel 236, 240). Satadru Sen underlines Hubel's reading of *Kim* as a "poor white" who disturbs colonial ideals of clear racial and class distinctions by noting that "[t]he crisis in British authority had generated various fantasies and nightmares in which colour—a product of authority—seemed to fade into ambiguity, and the danger of this ambiguity was perhaps greatest in racial material that had not reached the hardness of adulthood" (469). James, then, drew on social fact in

setting up the unusual isolation of his two “innocents.” Part of the uncanny disruption of that innocence also rests on the paradox of their being colonial “innocents abroad” who are also “at home”: free spirits from the Indian frontier who resent being hemmed in by the social controls of civilised England. We may recall that the governess at one point refers to Bly as “our small colony” (James 316).

The Precocious Child

To return to the biographical context for a moment, there are some further grounds for positing a direct focus on India, and they relate to the depiction of Miles and Flora as variously precocious. The language James uses to describe Kipling in the early days of their acquaintance is worth noting. He is very much seen as a child prodigy. Kaplan, following James’s correspondence, depicts Kipling as a young genius bullied by his older governess-like wife and losing his spark as he subsides into English domesticity (395-6). We might detect some jealousy on James’s part as his young male friend is removed from ready contact, but his concern is also linked to a lament that Kipling’s genius rests in India and that settling down in England will destroy his talent: “He charged himself with all he could take of India when he was very young and gave it out with great effect; but I doubt if he has anything more to give” (Edel, *Letters* 3: 421). India, then, was on James’s mind in the years preceding his commission to write a story for *Collier’s*, and it was associated with ideas of precocity. It is suggestive that James saw his friend Kipling as child-like and unnaturally talented. He is an “infant monster” (Edel, *Letters* 3: 327). Later, he is referred to as “that little black demon of a Kipling” (360).

It is the figure of the precocious, even demonic, colonial child I am interested in here. Whether or not the Kipling connection caused James to give the orphans an Indian origin, he is already himself part of a British discourse about proper childhood that is disturbed by the colonial “East”. Miles is accorded a “secret precocity” (James 363), and he and his sister are “little grandees”: small Oriental despots used to the casual exercise of power because of their being raised in a bubble of total adulation—in the governess’s terms, the children are raised “knowing nothing in the world but love” (James 299). To McMaster’s observation that the Indian orphan was a “common motif in nineteenth-century narratives” (25), we can add that the figure of the precocious colonial child was also a significant trope in writings of Empire and provides added meaning to the various interpretations of the ghost story.

The beginning of James’s story resembles that of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*. A child is raised in India, orphaned, and sent to a remote estate in England ruled over by an absentee male relative where she has to learn to relate to a different kind of servant class. In Burnett’s novel, the change is a positive one. There is an internal British colonialism in the Yorkshire setting, where locals are the linguistic and class equivalents to Indians (Burnett 165),

but they are more able to assert their dignity and teach the child from India how best to connect to nature and other people. Indian servants are too indulgent of their charges, so much so that they grow up like autocratic rajas. Mary even likens the spoiled invalid Colin to one in England (Burnett 124, 177). Mary herself has the liberty of not having “been trained to ask permission or consult ... elders about things” (Burnett 61). As with Kipling’s *Kim*, childhood liberty can be a positive enabler of independence and adventure, but Burnett’s Mary is sour, shallow, tyrannical, and selfish (Burnett 7), largely because she is house-bound and constrained by the enervating heat of India. She must learn to sensibly curb selfish desire in the interests of practical survival and pleasurable sociability. The fresh air of the English moors and physical exercise sharpen her wits (Burnett 45, 62), whereas Kim needs no change of climate to be nimble of foot and mind.

India renders both Kim and Mary precocious: the boy knows more than he should of adult ways, and the girl knows so little of anything that she can only emulate the stiff behaviour of “old-womanish” and imperious adult society (Burnett 40, 66). Mary has to learn how to be a child (playing with a skipping rope, for example), while also learning how to be a reasonable adult by emulating the gardener, Ben Weatherstaff, with her small set of gardening tools. Both she and Kim thrive on being out and about in the natural world, getting a Rousseau-like education (like Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*, 1894), although Kim’s is also a very picaresque and social one. Mary thrives precisely because she does not have a governess, and Kim has to be given his freedom at regular intervals so that school does not spoil him. Both authors have to grapple with showing the curtailment of precocity as a reasonable necessity in producing civilized children while allowing for the exciting educational potential of freedoms that can be perverted into dangerous precocity.

The Secret Garden ultimately preaches normative imperial values: England heals and tames the Indian-born “Mistress Mary,” who is supplanted by Colin, male heir to the estate.² As Daphne Kutzer argues, “[i]t is Colin’s empire, not Mary’s” (62). Mary’s precocious drive can be “shut down” because she is female: in her childhood India she is rescued from being orphaned and abandoned in a cholera outbreak by a male military officer; in her latter years her new British home is ruled over in wild nature by young Dickon, in the garden by Ben Weatherstaff, and in the end by Colin, the boy-master whom she ‘tames’ to fit him for assuming power.

However, as a child of India, the empire *is* Mary’s: she is white and comes from a family that works for the colonial government. Moreover, she shows more initiative and pluck than most of the English characters. Kutzer also points out that she returns to “discover” England and, helped by its colourful natives, leads the local chief and his son to fulfil their destiny, growing up herself in the process (59). It is the doubleness of the white colonial (Anglo-Indian) child that makes the story more interesting than would an outright piece of imperialist propaganda. As such, it serves as a forerunner for

the more radical ambivalence, as well as the uncanniness, of James's tale.

Rudyard Kipling has his own versions of Anglo-Indian children, and their maleness makes them more potentially disruptive to the imperial status quo. Stalky and his gang practise "guerrilla" tactics to maintain a more egalitarian colonial life in and out of the confines of the kind of British boarding school James's Miles is sent to, though they do so as training for imperial service as adults (Kutzer 40-1). Mowgli is a wilder version of Burnett's Dickon, working with local creatures, but in the end he is forced to move back to human society once he has paid his debts by defeating the evil tiger. Kim is more complexly hybrid than Dickon or Mary: British but not English, Anglo-Indian by birth, but Indian by upbringing and appearance and language. He is the ideal colonial because he is on friendly terms with the natives, can move about the country, respects its religions to the point of belief in spirits and magic, and is curious about everything. He is also a threat to colonial power, European codes of gentility, and Victorian middle-class ideals of childhood innocence. Kim can chat up courtesans, mix familiarly with all classes and speak their argot, and can disappear into the native world. He has to be contained by clothes, formal training, rational thinking, correct English and a "proper sense of his racial and class identity in the colonial system in order to be a full subject of empire" (Kutzer 15-24). Even then, he remains something of a loose cannon, that is, a precocious child—a boy who knows too much (Hamilton 32-3). He cannot return to England and can only be employed at the edge of society as a secret agent, a knowing shape-shifter, a "spook."

In *The Turn of the Screw*, Miles also has a precocious and "untamed" charm that allows him to relate to adults on their own terms, to mix uninhibitedly with servants, and to roam out of doors at will. It makes him a potential master and a danger to the social codes protecting mastery. As with Kim, he is a liminal, and therefore transgressive, figure and, at the same time, the model of what the modern child might be. Hodgson Burnett's Mistress Mary is less of a model child at first, but she does gradually begin to exhibit some of the same characteristics as Flora's: a strong will used to being obeyed and an independence from the adult world, coupled with a knowingness born of looking on from a distance. Like Mary, Flora the charming infant can also seem "an old, old woman" (James 370, 377).

Both *Kim* and *The Secret Garden* were written after *The Turn of the Screw*, although Kipling was thinking about the germ of his story in the last pages of *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888) and again in sketches of Kim O'Rishti (Mason 179; Wilson xiv-xv). He had already published *Wee Willie Winkie* (1889), with its tale of the cheerfully omniscient colonial child of the regiment, and *The Jungle Book*. Although the possibility of a direct source in Kipling is tantalising, all that needs to be claimed from these facts is that there was an established trope of the isolated, indulged, and precocious colonial child who had to be somehow reincorporated into human or British

society. This trope was available to James, and he used it to turn the screw in yet another way on the generic ghost story.

The colonial child is precocious because more worldly wise and less constrained by conventions of gentility than the cloistered middle-class English child. This precocity could include greater sexual knowingness than was deemed proper within Victorian norms. It was acquired from contact with “pagans” who lacked Christian self-restraint, and through climatic determinism. Caroline Levander notes James’s interest in child psychology and reads the precocity of the children in *The Turn of the Screw* as a reference to American notions of Black sexuality post-Beecher Stowe, but she neglects to mention the direct textual hint about India. The extreme racism of those colonies underpinned by white enslavement of Africans tended to play out in more complicated ways in India. If Indian males were screens on which white anxiety was projected, they were not (with the exception of the special category of the “military castes”) as consistently credited with the aggressive masculinity some critics claim was generally attributed to “Negroes” (Shilling 49-52). Likewise, Indian women (at least those not of the peasant classes) were not figured as hyper-sexual. Nonetheless, missions and modernising reformists represented “pagan” customs such as child marriage as debauching childhood innocence, and Westerners saw Indian clothing as a form of nakedness. Similarly, the sexual activities of Hindu deities and tantrics were depicted as shameless and corrupting of morals, and the unbridled power of “the oriental despot”—generally an Indian ruler who sought to maintain some independence from British “protection”—was associated with harems and sexual depravity.³ In moments of high colonial anxiety such as the Indian Mutiny, the “not a white woman safe” mantra became indistinguishable from the rhetoric that circulated in slave colonies. One has only to glance through Ethel Anderson’s tales of colonial India to see how ideas of rapine and mutiny percolate through colonialism’s culture during her residence in India in the 1920s and even up to her recounting of them in Australia in 1948.

Peasants in India, like peasants everywhere, were seen to breed like rabbits and to need lessons in self-control. Yet it was these pagan, child-marrying underclasses, steeped in stories of divine sexual activities, who had daily contact with colonial children (McMaster 34). Kim hobnobs with prostitutes and puts his precocious sexual knowledge to use in placating and distancing the predatory polyandrous Woman of Shamlegh. The colonial and the British child alike had to learn to “look not touch” (Shilling 144) as part of civilised individualization. However, as we can see from books like Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) or, in *A Passage to India* (1924), E.M. Forster’s satiric portrait of police officer McBryde—who believes anyone born below latitude 30 is a potential criminal, despite having been born in Karachi himself—there was a widespread colonial convention that the tropics inclined people of all colours to lethargy and emotional extremes.⁴ Hot colonial climates and tropical colours were sensuous, demanding an excess of looking, and inviting to the touch (think of Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s *Heat and Dust*). One might “go

troppo,” just as one might “go native,” succumbing to self-indulgent dramatics manifest in either mental instability or transgressive sexual excess.

The “my dear” language that precocious Miles employs in more intimate moments with his governess is that of the rake seducing a maiden (352-4). Kipling catalogues such sexual escapades in the colonial context of *Plain Tales from the Hills* and the racial crossing of “The Man who would be King” (in *The Phantom Rickshaw*). Climatic determinism stultifies Mistress Mary’s intellect in *The Secret Garden*, but its ghost hovers behind Miles and Flora in *The Turn of the Screw*, notably in the children’s air of sexual knowingness. They are already “touched” by their surroundings and are too open to being “touched” by others, including possible malign ghosts. They also touch the governess, emotionally and physically, in a manner she can only interpret as precocious and threatening. Their willingness to transgress the boundary that should, in accordance with English social mores, exist between child and adult is, however, prepared for us by colonial discourses of sensuality invoked by their Indian upbringing.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said tracks the literary explorations of whites in the Middle East, noting how they include the beginnings of sex tourism based on sadomasochistic and erotic fantasies (180-90, 311-16). Moving from the Levant to India, of course, we have the instance of E.M. Forster’s homoerotic friendships and dressing up in “native costume” (as he recounts them in *The Hill of Devi*). Intertextual connection to Forster highlights the fact that Miles—described suggestively as “exquisite” (361)—“says things” to school mates he likes and is expelled as a result (James 392-3). If he has taken on some aspect of transgressive sexuality, whether that be simply knowing too much about sex of any kind, or tempting other boys into sexual “perversity,” the colonial Indian origins of James’s children provide a discursive context in which this makes sense and allow us to infer other elements of threat to the English status quo than mere accidental personal deviance. The governess says of Miles, “they are not of your own sort” (James 354). It is primarily his colonial origins that make this true: Miles is not quite child or adult, not quite gentry but belonging to it, too exquisite to be simply masculine but too male to be seduced by his governess. Ultimately, he is not quite child and not quite “white.”

Flora’s Bad Language

The most debated question of *The Turn of the Screw* so far has been whether or not the governess is delusional. It has been taken for granted in the story itself and amongst critics that Mrs Grose is a reliable figure, who, even if convinced by the governess, maintains a steady hold on reality.⁵ If we are prepared to accept this, then there is the problem that Flora, when finally brought to the limit of being indulged, spouts a torrent of unacceptable language—language so shocking that the reliable Mrs Grose is driven to tears at her “horrors . .

. beyond everything for a young lady; and I can't think wherever she must have picked up—" (James 380-1). While we might suspect that the low-class seducer Quint would teach Miles a few vulgarities, the young girl is associated with the unfortunate governess Miss Jessel, who, whatever her failings, is shown as a fallen gentlewoman and is, therefore, unlikely to have taught Flora unseemly speech, even if now she seeks to draw the child into her own deathly realm. So where does Flora learn her bad language?

In *The Secret Garden*, the tyrannical Anglo-Indian Mistress Mary first appears swearing, calling her Ayah a "Daughter of a Pig" for not responding immediately to her call (Burnett 7). This is a direct translation of a common invective picked up from the Indian parlance of Mary's servants and suggests an answer to the question of where Flora gets her bad language from. Mary, through her contact with wholesome English housekeepers and gardeners, is brought to a self-reflective civility (Phillips 177, 179, 187), at which point she loses some of her more "Indian" characteristics. But we recall that the dialect-speaking Yorkshire folk in *The Secret Garden* are likened to "native" Indians (Phillips 185), and that children raised abroad learned vernaculars before English (McMaster 27). Bad language, then, takes on added meaning. From a postcolonial viewpoint, we can see the Master as a distant Prospero; the governess, perhaps, as a dangerously innocent Miranda; Miles as an Ariel killed for playing both sides; and Flora as a Caliban, hauled away cursing like a native (380-1).

Conclusion

If we carry out a postcolonial reading of *The Turn of the Screw* with this figure of the precocious colonial child in mind, then the many other readings of the text are not necessarily negated, but rather, they make more sense. Admitting Shoshana Felman's thesis about the indeterminate nature of the text and of reading, we might suggest that one area that a psychoanalytic reading of James "*understate*, leave open" (Felman 119) in focusing on ghosts, madness and sexuality, is the *political* unconscious. In *The Turn of the Screw*, as in *The Secret Garden*, the country house can be read as a figure for British empire, and the Indian reference allows us to extend the metonym and read its master as an absentee colonial ruler (whose general attitude is for his agents to "get on with the job and don't bother me with details"). The governess is the agent of colonialism, civilising the Anglo-Indian "native," supposedly so he can realize his "whole title to independence" (James 352) while also desiring "the chance of possessing him" (365). In this process she fears being overwhelmed ("carried away" [293]) by the allure and the threat of the exotic. In the end, desperate to protect her own reputation as a reliable agent for the master and the children's "good native" innocence from the revolutionary Quint (who is "too free with everyone" [315-16]), she exiles Flora and "dispossesses" Miles in a pyrrhic victory over possibly imagined dark forces of otherness.

The governess, however, is also, as a young woman vulnerable to her master's charms and as a more genteel kind of servant, subaltern. Her country house is accordingly an unstable frontier between nature and culture, colony and centre. As a kind of Anglo-Indian herself, the governess almost "goes native" and is saved by an act of violence that sacrifices the "native" children she is there to protect. As Anglo-Indian "white natives" (or even as half-natives), the children are at first insulated by their "free" colonial upbringing and then caught in the Creole trap the Caribbean Jean Rhys later encountered: they can be neither native nor wholly English.⁶ From a class point of view, the governess begins in such a "creole" position: she is a "civilised" daughter of the clergy but now a wage-earner, so not a real "gentlewoman" or "lady." We might in fact see the dangerous intensity of her investment in the children as arising from the threateningly familiar indeterminate status of her child and colonial charges mirroring her own uneasy gender/class condition. James's governess is a more troubled version of another "governess of empire" whose final words turn to India: Jane Eyre.

The governess at Bly is more troubled because her world is more troubled. Since Brontë created her 1840s view of the pure heart of England as a working-class school in Yorkshire, as opposed to a corrupting France and a far distant heathen India, India had undergone radical change and its people, both white and brown, were entering English space. The stories of James, Kipling, and Burnett can all be read as expressions of colonial anxiety that the model of extending civility to colonial peripheries results in the centre being turned itself into a colonial space in which the "natives" (provincials, servants, Anglo returnees, children) are internal and disruptive elements. James, as an American "colonial" who is also a "distant relation" of the British colonial "family" (Levander 270), moves into the European cultural centre with the ability to see its careless indifference, its ruthless assimilative regimes, and its internal contradictions. His knowingness, however, is offset by his ambivalent inside-outsider status (Wilson 119). The Anglo-Indian child, whether real, as with Kipling, or fictional, as with Miles and Flora, serves James as an ideal figure of monstrous precocity, the uncanny disturber of the imperial status quo.

In his useful edition of *The Turn of the Screw*, Peter Beidler includes a set of texts on governesses and parents' concern that children left with "servants"—Maria Edgeworth's catch-all label (Beidler 123-6)—will acquire all sorts of low habits and bad language.⁷ What Edgeworth's writing does not spell out is the extra dimension of her own concern as an Anglo-Irish landowner that such class contamination will also entail ethnic corruption of the English language by colonised peasant Irish such as the family retainer, who supplies the central voice to her satiric fiction *Castle Rackrent* (1800). Edgeworth also wrote some of the first literature for children, literature that was grounded in parental pedagogy on right conduct. Edgeworth's child, however, crossed with her figuring of the Irish as child-like, and her ambivalent position as Anglo-Irish, spreads across into her

attempts to control her own ambivalent position as heiress and governess to her father, and the divide between adult and child (Shilling 139-41). This is accompanied by anxiety that difference relies upon mutuality. Landowners, after all, depend on their dependent workers; adults are big children, and children are adults in training.

Consider how this anxiety might play out in families serving Empire in India. As in Ireland, servants were an unavoidable feature of domesticity and colonial rank, but were from entirely different linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Kipling mentions being told to speak English to his parents at dinner and having to mentally translate from the Hindustani in which he normally thought (*Something* 4); Hodgson Burnett has Mary sing Hindustani songs learned from her Ayah to the invalid Colin to curb his anxieties (118-19). Different languages may not only contaminate the dominant “pure” mother tongue; linguistic belonging can be feigned: Hodgson Burnett’s Mary learns to speak broad “Yorkshire”; Kim is multilingual; Miles and Flora can speak “adult” and English fluently. It is difficult to know who is who when such knowledge is vital to one’s being and social position.

As with language, dress can be just as revealing and deceptive. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess knows that Quint is not a gentleman, and in fact is termed “a nobody” (311) because he is too casually familiar in that he has no hat (304, 312). Yet he wears the master’s waistcoats (313). Later in the story, we see the governess in a state of emotional upset, going out without her own hat—“with nothing on,” thereby becoming “a nobody” herself, and losing her hold over Flora (369, 372). Later, we see Miles, the child gentleman under attack from the governess, pick up his hat and twirl it, almost undoing her resolve (389). Here is one indication of the story’s interest in barriers and rules and how they can be threatened by people who “pass” as others. What makes a true gentleman or gentlewoman (or colonial master) if anyone can put on a hat or remove it? Courts once had sumptuary laws preventing the merchants from adopting the velvets of the aristocracy (Emberley 43-72); Victorian England had a code of trilbies, homburgs, bowlers, boaters and toppers, as well as a finely tuned scale of bonnets by which one could tell the class of another and adjust behaviour accordingly (Byrde 110-29). But anyone could put on another’s clothes. Quint, with his borrowed fancy waistcoat, disturbs this stable system when he does just that.

In India, racial difference notwithstanding, clothes made the man (or woman). Much energy in ethnographic surveys, books of photos and paintings went into recording the different dress of tribes, castes, regional ethnicities, and occupations to catalogue and thereby police Indian life.⁸ The “civilising mission” entailed teaching Indians to adopt a more “efficient” and “modern” Western dress, but when that began to happen along with successful entry into the modern professions, colonial rulers became uneasy. In *Kim*, Hurree Babu, as Macaulay’s successful colonial product, has to be mocked to maintain colonial hierarchies. Gandhi took a more oppositional role by rejecting Western dress, and the English press fixated on his “naked fakir” nativeness as

valid reason not to surrender imperial rule (Tarlo 70-82). *Kim* shows how colonial surveillance relied on a taxonomy of “uniforms” and “costumes” separating out groups of people, but it also demonstrates how one might disguise oneself by exchanging clothes. Where then, was the genuine Englishman or the authentic native? And where was the Anglo-Indian child, raised by Indians but dressed in skin and clothes like a “real” European? Where in fact was *the child*, at home or abroad, if he or she was being dressed in sailor suits, safari jackets, and dresses like an imitation adult? James’s unruly darling children are constantly acting out roles in the classroom, disguised as animals and historical figures (James 331). Miles’s bid for freedom from the governess’s smothering company begins on a Sunday when he has been decked out for church by his uncle’s tailor so that his “whole title to independence, the rights of his sex and situation were so stamped upon him” that she is disarmed (352). The clothes of the adult English gentleman, however, are a cover for other possible identities and independences, but no protection ultimately against powers of adult darkness. That does not mean that adult authority is undisturbed in its victory.

Under this particular pressure of reading, one of the ghosts haunting *The Turn of the Screw* is the ghost of the colonial repressed, or the unwanted heirs of empire, returning to inhabit the centre of British story. The children are the uncanny disruptors of English placidity because they seem to portray all that England stands for, that is, all that it strives to protect in the name of civilisation; and yet, as precocious colonials freed of parental control, they flout the dreams of innocence the Victorians sentimentally sought to attach to childhood. Colonially precocious, Flora and Miles are the dark forces already lurking within the body and the body politic: sexuality, colonial difference, independence. They have to be taken into the social fabric of the imperial home because they are part of it; they even justify it by their difference as children and colonials in need of civilising. But the machinery of civilisation and empire kills them by denying them their colonial knowingness and autonomy.

Christine Brooke-Rose pays close attention to rhetorical devices of narration in *The Turn of the Screw*. Nonetheless, she misses the one datum that lends additional meaning to the governess’s possessiveness and connects her story with that of the children and the ghosts. At first, the country house seems a “castle of romance” that is also “a big ugly, antique, but convenient” amalgam of past constructions, and “a great drifting ship” of which the young woman sees herself as captain (Brooke-Rose 196; Felman 169-73; James 294). If she is, she is but newly in command and is being guided around by Flora, the precocious “cabin-girl.” The governess’s progressive loss of command and navigation matches the switch from solid castle to drifting ship and in the wider context of Britain’s relationship to India, reflects a *fin de siècle* sense of Empire coming undone and the creation of “the Victorian child” turning precociously on its creators. A turn of the screw on this aspect of the inversions and doubling reflections (Brooke-Rose 167-70) in the story might be that Quint and Miss Jessel

reconfigure the original “too familiar” relations of colonial and native hinted at in the children’s forebears, both directly and indirectly (in the menial Quint’s “rape” of the English gentlewoman). Anxiety over unsteady class barriers carries with it the colonial fear of contamination lingering on from the horror stories of the Indian Mutiny and ambiguously manifest in the Anglo-Indian, or Eurasian, uncannily adult child.

I am not suggesting a new final code-breaker for James’s mystery here. Lustig sees *The Turn of the Screw* as an “extensive study of the high price involved in constructing and enforcing rigid interpretations” (xii), and Christine Brooke-Rose clearly shows how it consistently resists a singular, definitive reading. But the story’s structure of “loss, omission and silence” (Lustig xvii) allows for at least one more possible interpretation. In the preface to “Sir Edmund Orme,” James expressed his concentration on “the strange and sinister embroidered on the very type of the normal and easy” (Lustig xlvi). Lustig points out that the later James was interested in “the crumbling edges of the Victorian edifice” (viii), and if *The Turn of the Screw* does nothing else it brings the uncanny of the colonial into the heart of that edifice so that “the very type of the normal and easy” is made to seem entirely abnormal and uneasy. As with Freudian sexuality, which is not the key to interpretation because of its own inherent ambiguous contradiction, colonialist discourse is “*knowledge which cannot know itself*” (Felman 112, 193). As a result, colonialist discourse may inform without entirely resolving our understanding of the story. Even so, given a postcolonial turn, the unfamiliar familiarity of Englishness for James—the ambiguous American—is reflected in his unsettled and unsettling colonial children, whose revenant presence queers the relations upholding English and imperial familial gentility. The precocious colonial children instigate an hysteric excess of govern(ess)ing on the part of the representatives of empire that makes the centre of civilization appear horrifically savage to itself.

Notes

1. See also Maureen Evers, “Lower Orphan School Calcutta.”
2. For a sustained discussion of how children’s literature engages discourses of imperialism, see Clare Bradford, “The End of Empire? Colonial and Postcolonial Journeys in Children’s Books.”
3. For more information about the supposed debauchment of childhood innocence in India, Western views of Indian clothing, and the ways in which colonialism’s culture represented the sexual activities of Hindu deities and tantrics, see Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*; Daphne M. Kutzer, *Empire’s Children: Empire and Imperialism in Classic British Children’s Books*; and Jyotsna G. Singh, *Colonial Narratives, Cultural Dialogues: ‘Discoveries’ of India in the Language of Colonialism*, respectively.

4. For a sustained discussion of Rhys's work, see Sue Thomas, *The Worlding of Jean Rhys*.

5. Aldrich is perhaps the only critic who sees Mrs Grose as more than an innocent bystander. He sees her as jealous of the governess and impelling her into madness. (Aldrich 176-7).

6. A similarity also noted by Martin 402.

7. Noted also by Masui 168.

8. For more on the colonial politics of dress, see Bernard Cohn, "Cloth, Clothes and Colonialism: India in the Nineteenth Century," and J. Forbes Watson and Kaye, *The People of India*.

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