Journal of American Studies of Turkey
40 (2014): 75-94

Illness as Capital in *The Wings of the Dove*

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Abstract

Milly Theale, the heroine of Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), gains a lot of power in the fictional reality of the novel, a power which relies on her financial wealth as well as her unnamed fatal illness. Critics usually see Milly's character as either that of an innocent victim or that of a cunning manipulator. This article proposes to read Milly's situation and her decisions as determined by her accumulation of different forms of capital in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of the term in order to move beyond this dichotomy and towards an understanding of the socio-psychological constraints of symbolic power at work in the novel. Since Milly's money as well as her physical frailty contribute to her social eminence, both become sources of what Bourdieu calls symbolic capital on which depends the exercise of symbolic power. For capital to function as symbolic capital, its power-generating properties need to be denied. This article argues that Milly's unnamed illness is one such misrecognized source of symbolic power. Tracing the process by which Milly is defined as socially deserving by other characters as well as the crisis-induced alteration of her self-image, this reading reveals the limitations that class and gender division impose on the (self-)perception of the novel's characters. Focusing on the function of Milly's illness and death, her final act of leaving her money to those who deceived her can then be read as an exertion of symbolic domination that works independently of allegedly conscious vengeful intentions.

Keywords

Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, Milly Theale, symbolic capital, symbolic power

Critical assessments of Milly Theale, the heroine of Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), range between assertions of her innocence (Conger) and condemnation of the "ultimate manipulation" (Cameron 124) that Milly performs when she leaves all her money to Merton Densher. In this article, I want to propose a reading that allows for some reconciliation of these seemingly contradicting views. Milly Theale gains a lot of power in the fictional reality of the novel, and her last will does effectively break up the relationship of the two people who deceived her, Kate Croy and Merton Densher. If one considers Milly's situation as determined by her accumulation of different forms of capital following Bourdieu's conceptualization of the term, the opposition of innocent victim and cunning manipulator begins to dissolve. Milly's considerable wealth as well as her physical frailty contribute to her growing power, which makes both sources of what Pierre Bourdieu calls symbolic capital. As a "being-perceived" (Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* 242), symbolic capital—on which depends the exercise of symbolic power—is an "invisible force" (Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* 164) that can only operate when it is denied as a means of power. I argue that Milly's unnamed illness is one such denied—"misrecognized" in Bourdieu's words (*The Logic of Practice* 118)—source of symbolic power that shapes "the basis of a relationship of practical knowledge and recognition that is profoundly obscure to itself" (*Pascalian Meditations* 171).

Although Milly's state of health is much talked about within the text, exactly what illness she suffers from remains unclear. As Nicola Ivy Spunt notes, even Merton Densher's eager inquiries only lead to a zero-sum exchange in which Kate at once "names and unnames" Milly's illness and therefore "frustrate[s] the acquisition of certain knowledge" (164). This uncertainty stems not only from Milly's unnamed illness but also from the character herself, as her new friends repeatedly point out during a conversation about Milly. They emphasize that Milly is not "easy to know" (James, *Wings* 208). "You know nothing, sir – but not the least little bit – about my friend," Susan Stringham tells Densher, and Maud Lowder reminds her in turn that she cannot "know […] how far things may have gone" between Milly and Densher (207). Kate also confirms Milly's "not being easy to know" and adds: "One sees her with *intensity* – sees her more than one sees almost any one; but then one discovers that that isn't knowing her and that one may know better a person whom one doesn't

'see,' as I say, half so much" (208). As the subject of conversation, Milly is overly visible yet unknowable; her visibility even obscures her and renders her less knowable in Kate's representation.

There is a subtle ironic undercurrent to Kate's description since the dinner guests can only talk about Milly so freely precisely because one does *not* see her among Maud Lowder's dinner guests. During the scene in question, to "see" Milly means to exchange views about her, to interpret her, and therefore to take possession of her in a certain way, which is possible only in her absence. As the narrator notes Densher's observation, "[t]here was of course more said about the heroine than if she hadn't been absent" (206). When he notices how Milly's absence leads to an increase of talk *about* her, Merton Densher instantly "found himself stupefied at the range of Milly's triumph" (206). Being talked about approvingly or even with admiration is a sure sign of social success.

Hence, Milly's physical indisposition provides her friends with an opportunity to acknowledge her ascent on the social ladder of London's society. I propose to view this recognition of Milly's rising social position as an expression of symbolic capital in Pierre Bourdieu's sense. Bourdieu notes how a person's social visibility is one way to describe the effect of that person's symbolic capital (*Pascalian Meditations* 241). What is visible to Kate when she describes how intensely one "sees" Milly is in fact Milly's potential as an aspiring member of the social group around Maud Lowder. To believe in this potential means to accredit a social value to Milly's material as well as economic resources. As Bourdieu explains, "symbolic capital is credit, but in the broadest sense, a kind of advance, a credence, that only the group's belief can grant those who give it the best symbolic and material guarantees" (*The Logic of Practice* 120). In reading Milly's illness as a source of symbolic capital I mean to highlight the efficacy of the curious connection of pathology and economy that runs through the entire novel and allows for Milly to acquire a power that outlasts her death.

When she leaves her fortune to Densher, Milly's gift to all appearances terminates the relationship between Kate and Densher. Through her ostensible generosity, Milly thus gains symbolic power over Densher, and consequently also over Kate. Paradoxically, it is a power she can only exert after her physical obliteration. The ambiguous force of the inheritance therefore depends on her death. The sick, dying woman with

a paradoxical power is a stock character in Victorian literature.[1] In *Wings*, the obvious interdependence between Milly's illness and her money, and the curious power she draws from both, highlights the economic principle that determines this form of empowerment that needs to obscure its own efficacy. Not naming the illness and making characters go out of their way to avoid mentioning it mirrors this obfuscation that functions according to "the logic of [an] economy of denial" (Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* 128)

Capital in Disguise

Spunt refers to the peculiar unknowability of Milly's illness as "a matter of cognitive reticence" (163), an observation that aptly describes the result of a process which Bourdieu terms "misrecognition." All relations of power rely on acts of recognition (*reconnaissance*) through misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) according to Bourdieu's theory of symbolic domination (*The Logic of Practice* 140-41). A form of false consciousness, misrecognition renders power relations and, more importantly, their sources invisible. In order for power to receive the legitimation it relies on, which means nothing more and nothing less than to be recognized as legitimate, it needs to be misrecognized as a social construction based on the arbitrary distribution of capital. Since the exertion of power is always to some degree a matter of symbolic domination, which requires the complicity of the dominated in so far as they recognize the existing power structure while misrecognizing its arbitrary roots, the opportunity to exercise power depends on a symbolic foundation (*Pascalian Meditations* 168-78).

To account for this cognitive mechanism, which he also terms "*common miscognition*" (*Pascalian Meditations* 192), Bourdieu introduces the concept of symbolic capital. It represents the recognition of all other forms of accumulated capital as legitimate signs of social worthiness which requires the simultaneous denial of its qualities as capital, i.e. as a power source. "Symbolic capital is an ordinary property […] which, perceived by social agents endowed with the categories of perception and appreciation permitting them to perceive, know and recognize it, becomes symbolically efficient, like a veritable *magical power*" (*Practical Reason* 102).

1 From the vast body of works that deal with feminized illness and the at times ambiguous influence accredited to the ailing female body in Victorian literature and culture, see e.g. Bailin; Byrne; Gilbert.

Milly's wealth constitutes such an "ordinary property," as do her cultural identity and her sexual allure. She has a large quantity of economic capital at her disposal that becomes a vehicle for the accumulation of social, cultural, and eventually symbolic capital. Her money gives her the opportunity to travel to Europe, which entails the accumulation of cultural capital in the form of experiences, knowledge and also, with her move to Venice, of valuable cultural objects with which she equips her home. She can even afford to take a friend with her who proves to have precisely the prestigious acquaintances, i.e. social capital, that Milly lacks. Susan Stringham is hence a valuable asset in Milly's portfolio and vice versa.

Symbolic capital in Bourdieu's definition mainly exists as an abstraction; it originates solely in the perception of others and is therefore a measurement for "*the symbolic effects of capital*" (*Pascalian Meditations* 242). According to relational sociology, different forms of capital determine a person's social status and the acknowledgement of what is perceived as someone's "social importance," their honor or authority (241). This esteem is what expresses symbolic capital in Bourdieu's terms. It shapes the basis for all exertion of power and domination since both rely on the seemingly paradoxical process of recognition through misrecognition. To recognize the social world and one's own as well as other persons' position in it as self-evident or quasi-natural, it is necessary to deny without being aware of one's denial the forceful submission that relations of power extort. Comparable to a magic trick, the secret to this form of miscognition is the "production of belief" that is unaware of itself (*Practical Reason* 103). "[It] is not an explicit belief, possessed explicitly as such in relation to a possibility of nonbelief, but rather an *immediate adherence*, a doxical submission to the injunctions of the world" (103, emphasis added). Doxic belief in the "social games" and the confidence that what is at stake is worth playing (or fighting) for prevents one from uncovering one's own "learned ignorance" of the conditionality and arbitrariness of the social world (*Pascalian Meditations* 185).

Only those who are excluded from the game and could only take part vicariously can see through this process of unconsciously self-imposed ignorance, as Bourdieu explains so lucidly in his reading of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* ("Der schöne Geschmack" 13-15; *Masculine Domination* 69-80). During the dinner at Lancaster Gate at which Milly fails to appear due to her illness, Densher observes the other guests from his particular position as a social outsider to Maud Lowder's prestigious

circle. He perceives himself as "relegated to mere spectatorship, a paying seat in the front, and one of the most expensive" (James, *Wings* 205). From this passive position of someone who is largely banned from their games of power because of his lower social status, he sees through the evaluative process behind Milly's "success" (*Wings* 209). His insight does not go as far as that of Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay a quarter of a century later, but Densher also "seem[s] to go round the table unveiling […] these people" to a certain degree (Woolf 125):

> The little American's sudden social adventure, her happy and, no doubt harmless flourish, had probably been favoured by several accidents, but it had been favoured above all by *the simple spring-board of the scene*, by one of those common caprices of the numberless foolish flock, gregarious movements as inscrutable as ocean-currents. *The huddled herd had drifted to her blindly – it might as blindly have drifted away*. (James, *Wings* 209, emphasis added)

Densher easily understands the arbitrariness behind the social laws that determine who is regarded as a "success" and who will be deemed a "failure." Kate might think she "sees" Milly with "intensity," but Densher's observation reveals how the whole group, the "foolish flock" of Maud Lowder's entourage, is blind to the cause of their American friend's "triumph." They have provided the "spring-board" from which Milly leaps to her sweeping success. That they "might as blindly have drifted away" and chosen another subject to keep them occupied only occurs to the outsider Merton Densher.

Milly's general capital—economic, social, cultural, sexual—as well as the peculiar value attributed to her illness happens to be such that some of London's dominant social players decide qua their normative power that Milly Theale is a "success," in other words that her symbolic capital and with it her symbolic power are to be rated very highly indeed, but without any awareness of the process of rating that creates as a reality what it evaluates. For this decision to take place, no vote is needed; it does not even require any conscious decision in the narrow sense. On the contrary, Milly's success appears as the inevitable result of her personality, not as

the outcome of an unreflected collective assessment of her as eligible for social ascent. For this "symbolic alchemy" (Bourdieu, *Practical Reason* 102) to work, the powerful Londoners must not realize that their evaluation of Milly follows an economic principle of profit and loss. The seemingly magical process that transforms capital into power relies on its own concealment.

A similar process takes place when it comes to the way in which Milly's physical health, or lack thereof, is perceived. When we consider Milly's situation as determined by the way in which others, including many readers, view her, it becomes obvious how her illness is just as much subject to misrecognition as her peculiar capital. Milly enjoys high esteem among her new friends from the beginning, which is an expression of the symbolic effects of her capital. Yet when it becomes common knowledge that she is terminally ill, Milly's prestige skyrockets, as her increased value as a subject of conversation shows. Maud Lowder "[makes] dear Milly the topic" for her dinner party and the guests speak of her "rarity" as though she were an exotic animal that has been "caught in her native jungle" to be displayed for their pleasure (James, *Wings* 205).[2] What is actually on display, though, is not Milly herself, but the dinner guests' conception of her.

Consumptive Speculations

By not naming Milly's illness, James more or less entices his readers to perpetually misrecognize it. Since the readers never get to know Milly's diagnosis, some, like Susan Sontag in her 1977 critical essay *Illness as Metaphor*, feel the need to speculate. Even though Sontag specifies tuberculosis as the only possible diagnosis of Milly's symptoms—thereby treating the illness as a riddle to be solved by the reader—, the text of the novel does not provide us with a reliable signified for Milly's mortal illness. I believe this omission of a definitive diagnosis to be essential for the illness's narrative objective within the novel. Nonetheless, a number of critics come to a similar conclusion as Sontag when they assume that the undisclosed disease must be a case of tuberculosis. Dorothea Krook as well as F. O. Matthiessen point out the

2 In her discussion of this scene, Spunt also emphasizes how Milly is served as a conversation topic by Maud just as she serves food to her guests. Milly is the conversational main course of Maud's dinner whose guests "consume" Milly while they eat their food (Spunt 173).

striking parallels between the character of Milly Theale and James's cousin Minny Temple after whom Milly's character was modeled and who died of tuberculosis in 1870 (Krook 220; Matthiessen 67).

It does not matter, I argue, what Milly's diagnosis is, but it matters that it does not matter. If Milly Theale were just another tuberculosis patient, her author could have named her illness. There is, however, an aspect of Sontag's reading that ties in with my own take on the meaning of Milly's illness and her subsequent death. Sontag raises an important point in her essay when she emphasizes the omnipresence of tuberculosis in late nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture. The parallels between contemporary depictions of tuberculosis and Milly's illness are in fact striking. Sontag therefore points out one of the very likely contexts in which the illness has been read by many readers and the images and connotations this context has invariably stirred up.

Sontag refers to Milly Theale's assumed tuberculosis as an example of how nineteenth-century culture constructed the illness as a curiously powerful one that gave the person suffering from it a supernatural aura. It was believed to be the result of certain deficiencies in one's life and the manifestation of a person's repressed desires. Sir Luke, the physician who diagnoses Milly in London, "advises," as Sontag points out, "a love affair as a cure for her TB" (22). Representations of tuberculosis typically feature resignation and passivity as either the cause or the result of the disease. It is therefore perceived as a feminine affliction, "the prototypical passive death" in Sontag's words (24). This matches the way in which the text mentions—or, rather, avoids to mention—Milly's death. All we learn is that "[s]he has turned her face to the wall" (James, *Wings* 331).

Milly's character is equipped with a preternatural appeal from the beginning, illustrated through the perspective of Susan Stringham who remains the focal figure for most of the early chapters of book 3 where Milly makes her first appearance in the novel. Susan labels Milly "romantic" and "abysmal," a "rare creature" with a "dim charming ambiguous oddity" as well as "the freedom of the wind in the desert" (81). Everyone she meets in London seems equally impressed by her, as the dinner at Lancaster Gate proves. As the plot unfolds, Milly's frailty, her innocence and chastity, her unrequited love for Densher, and her role as the subject of Kate's scheme emphasize an ideal of supernatural feminine virtuousness tinged with victimhood.

Sontag reminds us that "fatal illness has always been viewed as a test of moral character, but in the nineteenth century there is a great reluctance to let anybody flunk the test" (41). According to her reading, Milly Theale does not flunk but is instead elevated to an even higher stage of moral greatness. As Sontag puts it, "the virtuous only become more so as they slide towards death. […] Even the ultravirtuous, when dying of this disease, boost themselves to new moral heights" (41-42). Milly's decision to will her fortune to Densher even though she knows how he and Kate deceived her serves as a perfect example of this. Yet, Milly's money constitutes a burden for Densher and becomes a point of contention between him and Kate. In fact, Milly's will cannot be read as unambiguous generosity as it induces Kate and Densher to ultimately end their relationship.

James was certainly not ignorant of the many parallels between his heroine and the famous female tuberculosis patients in the literature of his time. Sontag convincingly shows how the character of Milly Theale does in fact share many features of the typical nineteenth-century tuberculosis patient. The novel therefore creates tuberculosis as an intertextual reference that most contemporary readers probably picked up on and that, as Sontag's and other readings show, was easily reactivated decades after the novel's publication.

When considered in view of the peculiar appeal that comes with a metaphorically overdetermined illness such as tuberculosis, the disease—or, rather, the way in which it is perceived—is revealed as a source of feminine and therefore ambivalent sexual capital that leads to an increase in symbolic capital. Instead of searching for the most probable diagnosis I want to reverse the argument here. These numerous parallels to a dominant stereotype of James's time give Milly the allure of a literary tuberculosis patient, which, precisely because it is not a certain diagnosis but an uncertain allusion, creates the same effect of recognizing said allure by way of misrecognizing it as a literary expression with a psychological and a social force.

Cognitive Reticence

Such an effect mirrors the intradiegetic discussions about Milly and her health that mostly add to concealing the facts rather than disclosing them. One of the few dialogues that reaches a certain degree of explicitness

takes place between Densher and Kate towards the end of Milly's life. In this conversation, Densher, who is the only character asking for explicit details about Milly's state of health, insists on an unequivocal assertion from Kate who eventually gives in and commits herself to a clear statement that merely phrases what everybody seems to know already. "And he had just to insist – she would say as little as she could. 'She *is* dying?' 'She's dying'" (James, *Wings* 356).

Brief as it may be, Kate's response still signifies a stronger personal engagement in the matter as well as a firmer acknowledgment of her interlocutor than the mere confirmatory "yes" or an equivalent gesture that might have sufficed as an answer. Earlier in the same scene, Densher asks her three times whether Milly is dead or alive and Kate responds only with looks and gestures. "'Is Miss Theale alive?' Kate's look at this was large. 'Don't you *know*?' […] And he himself stared as for light. 'She's dead?' Then as with her eyes on him she slowly shook her head he uttered a strange 'Not yet?'" (355).

The dialogue then slowly approaches its moment of truth in which Kate finally gives Densher the certainty he is asking for. Her spelling out the fact by paralleling Densher's inquiry counts as a valuable gift in their verbal exchange whose value for Densher partly derives from the effort it costs Kate to make such an overt factual statement. It also has a narrative value that transcends the personal relationship between the two characters. As the one and only instance in the novel that openly and unambiguously announces Milly's imminent death, Kate's utterance bestows a new level of reality upon the ominous case. Bourdieu describes how "every speech act, as an incorporeal meaning expressed in material sounds, is nothing short of a miracle, a kind of transubstantiation" (*Pascalian Meditations* 133). Kate transfigures verbal obfuscation and taboo into a palpable (or, rather, utterable) fact.

However, Kate does not perform this miracle of her own free will. It takes some forceful assistance by Densher. When it comes to Milly's state of health, he has been the one to ask for clarification before. When Kate first suggests he woo Milly, he asks her twice what "the matter" with Milly is and then inquires, "Is it a bad case of lungs?" (James, *Wings* 212). The word "consumption" occurs only once in the novel when Kate answers Densher's question by denying that the lung disease is the cause for their friend's suffering (212). It seems that a direct acknowledgment of the tragic

state of Milly's health is only possible between Kate and Densher; it is never mentioned by any other characters, nor by the narrator. Even her physician Sir Luke is never explicit with Milly about his diagnosis.

It is in this single moment between the former conspirators, Kate and Densher, that Milly's imminent death is straightforwardly enunciated without any euphemisms or elusions on either side. With the utmost brevity ("'She *is* dying?' 'She's dying.'"), the narration hurries through this simple avowal that condenses into three words what throughout the rest of the novel is mostly treated like the elephant in the room. Milly is dying and she has, in a way, been dying for a long time, but the text works its way around any such explicitness with remarkable effort. Passages that render characters' speech or thoughts about Milly's state of health avoid any form of ascertainment, but they do so verbosely (cf. 149-51; 158-59; 267-68). Sir Luke's statements during Milly's visit are as evasive as they are extensive and achieve little else than to "duly ke[ep] up the vagueness" (150). Milly herself claims that she has "absolutely […] nothing to tell" about her visit to the doctor (158), whereupon she assures Kate of this "nothing" in various different verbalizations (158-59).

Yet, the effect this inarticulateness aims at is not so much to keep the reader in suspense regarding Milly's health. Rather than sparking investigative curiosity, it highlights the gap between Densher's linguistic habits and those of most other characters. His repeated requests for clarity are characteristic of his journalistic profession; moreover, they form a striking contrast to the typically upper-class way in which Milly's other acquaintances tiptoe around uncomfortable or possibly ungenteel issues of illness and death. The wish to protect their frail "princess" from such troubling information, which also guides Sir Luke's objectifying manner towards Milly, only conceals how much this strategy of concealment protects everyone else from being too directly exposed to the unbecoming issue, while at the same time allowing them to treat it as the current spectacle of interest that occupies everyone's attention. "How could I help," Milly asks Densher, "being the feature of the season […]?" (229).

Another issue treated with similar reticence in the novel is money. To speak of money is considered a characteristic of the lower classes as Lionel Croy blatantly demonstrates during Kate's visit in the first chapter when he repeatedly explicates financial matters. Kate only speaks openly of Milly's

money with Densher, for instance when she calls Milly an "angel with a thumping bank account" and professes that "[h]er fortune is absolutely huge" (214) and "a real fortune" (223). Among the other characters, money and disease are regarded as equally inappropriate conversation topics, but to *have* both an immense fortune and a fatal disease makes Milly an ideal subject of conversation.

As noted, this connection between Milly's wealth, the allure of her illness, and the social significance that is expressed in how much she is being talked about is vaguely discernible to Densher. To the other characters, by contrast, it is concealed by the collective belief that assumes the cause in Milly herself and not in the appreciation with which they perceive her. Her capital is recognized as her appeal and therefore misrecognized as the actual basis of her "success." At the same time, this pre-cognitive compound of economics and disease is not only a matter of others perceiving Milly; she performs a corresponding amalgamation in her mind.

Milly's Misrecognition

When Milly sees her doctor for the second time, she assumedly learns how serious her illness really is. Even though the dialogue between Milly and Sir Luke Strett is not conclusive in this regard, and Milly tells Kate later that there is "[n]othing to worry about" (159), her emotional reaction in the following scene, during which Milly becomes the focalizer for the first time in the novel, suggests that she has been informed of her terminal condition. To adapt her self-image to this new situation requires for Milly to pre-cognitively combine her most obvious privilege, i.e. her financial capital, with her physical condition. From this merging of two aspects of herself, economic affluence and physical frailty, she generates a form of power that operates beyond her death and depends at the same time on that impending death.

Milly hence uses her affliction to what one might call a cynical advantage. In order to take possession of her illness in such a way that it can serve as a source of symbolic capital, Milly needs to acknowledge its potential without recognizing it as an opportunity to exert power. The shift in her self-image is of central importance for the way in which Milly handles her illness and capitalizes on it. Not only does her social circle master the alchemy that connects economics and illness, Milly also performs this

quasi-magical trick in her mind without consciously recognizing it.

Since "cognitive structures are not forms of consciousness but dispositions of the body, practical schemes," as Bourdieu puts it (*Pascalian Meditations* 176), Milly is not aware of the changes that happen in her mind. They are represented in the text as shifts in perception and therefore concern a practical part of her mind, the one that conceives of the world and divides it into categories. And if one regards "mental structures [as] internalized social structures" (Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* 61), then Milly's new perception is a form of internalizing the way in which society structures and constructs her illness and herself as a woman who is ill. "The social world is full of calls to order which function as such only for individuals who are predisposed to notice them, and which, as a red light causes breaking, trigger deep-rooted bodily dispositions without passing through consciousness and calculation" (Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* 176). Sir Luke's diagnosis and his suggestions for her next steps comprise such a "call to order" for Milly, who submits to his authority without a doubt in her mind.

In one of the novel's most crucial turning-points, Milly goes through a cognitive transformation right after she has been diagnosed with the mortal disease. After leaving the doctor's, she redefines herself. Strictly focalized through Milly, the text renders her thoughts and impressions with pictorial language that can often be identified as the heroine's mental images. She has gone to the doctor's office alone and decides not to go straight home but to walk through London's working-class neighborhoods, hoping to "get lost" (James, *Wings* 152). The transformation taking place in Milly's mind is at first expressed in metaphors of apparel and accessories. The "familiar flower" of her "old sense of safety" has to be "pluck[ed] off her breast" and "throw[n] away" to be replaced by a substitute costume featuring "some queer defensive weapon, a musket, a spear, a battle-axe" (152). Since it is represented by an ornament, it seems conclusive that Milly's "sense of safety" derives from her economic capital, which makes her life more convenient than if she were poor but cannot save her from the illness. Instead, she feels in need of weapons and armor to protect herself and also, as will soon become apparent, to display her capability to attack.

However, the weapons can only replace the peaceful representation of her money—the "familiar flower"—by becoming representations of it themselves. As Susan Stringham so insightfully remarks in her

characterization of Milly, possessing wealth is an essential and unalterable part of Milly herself: "She couldn't dress it away, nor walk it away, nor read it away, nor think it away […]. She couldn't have lost it if she had tried – that was what it was to be really rich. It had to be *the* thing you were" (86). Milly's wealth, in other words, is part of her habitus; it determines not only her actions, her taste, and her mind, but even reaches the very bodily level of her movements, gestures, and facial expressions. To replace the ornament that stands for the sense of safety that her economic capital gives her can thus only change the manifestation or the effect of that capital. Milly announces here that she will put her money to a different use from now on.

While her new attire to Milly seems "conducive possibly in a higher degree to a striking appearance," it is also "demanding all the effort of the military posture" (152). Much as being armed in this metaphorical way might be part of Milly's reaction to her diagnosis at first, the dictate of the military posture soon escalates from a personal bodily feature into a social issue: "[S]he might, from the curiosity she clearly excited in by-ways, in side-streets peopled with grimy children and costermongers' carts, which she hoped were slums, literally have had her musket on her shoulder, have announced herself as freshly on the war-path" (153). Being diagnosed with a fatal disease has sparked a defensive reaction that finds its expression in military images of partly archaic weapons ("battle-axe"), but it is the presence and response of other people that actually turns Milly into a warrior in this metaphor. Gradually, the weapons she felt like carrying before as signs of her new strength and meant for self-defense against her illness now seem to be aimed at the people she sees.

Like a conqueror Milly senses herself marching through the streets, and soon becomes aware of the contrast between her own appearance and the street where she walks: "She found herself moving at times in regions visibly not haunted by odd-looking girls from New York, duskily draped, sable-plumed, all but incongruously shod and gazing about them with extravagance" (153). The musket on her "sable-plumed" shoulder connects her wealth to the threat of the warrior. Milly has never been in a situation where her money could have been perceived by herself as something connected to violence; but in this scene she gets remarkably close to making that connection, to understanding the symbolic violence she could—and will—exert with the help of her money.

As a symbolic practice, her walk is not oriented towards material interests but guided by a logic that aims at a form of authority.[3] Milly grapples with a new identity over which she needs to win some control. Yet, the insight she approaches here is frightening and empowering at the same time. The indicators of her wealth morph into objects that can be perceived as both bellicose and protective. In any case, they clearly isolate her from her poor surroundings and even pose a threat to the people she is at once confronted with and cut off from. In the following paragraphs, the narration is interspersed with subjunctives, highlighting the as-if mode Milly's consciousness escapes to: "But for the fear of overdoing the character she would here and there have begun conversation, have asked her way; in spite of the fact that, as this would help the requirements of adventure, her way was exactly what she wanted not to know" (153).

In this mode, the working-class neighborhood is nothing but décor. As the star on stage afraid "of overdoing the character," Milly disconnects herself from the reality around her and remains completely self-involved. In the following paragraph, the use of the subjunctive marks a climax of the mental process which alters the heroine's self-image but in which the potential for a broader understanding of her own social position cannot be realized:

> They [the poor people in the park] could live if they would; that is, like herself, they had been told so: she saw them all about her, on seats, digesting the information, recognising it again as something in a slightly different shape familiar enough, the blessed old truth that they would live if they could. (153)

What is described here as nothing but a slight difference in "shape" does, in fact, make all the difference. The line between those who could live if they would and those who would if they could is precisely what separates Milly socially from the people she observes. Her doctor has recommended she live all she can before she succumbs to death, and she could do so if she would—in fact, she will. But the idea that the poor she sees about her have the same opportunity, which Milly believes they have been told, is either ideological misbelief or a form of projection. Milly has "been told" by Sir Luke not only what to do but also what to be—a sick woman. She accepts his definition of her just as she expects those who do not have her economic means to accept what they have been told.

3 On the inherent economic logic and the aims of symbolic practices see Voirol 405-06.

When she leaves Regent's Park, Milly has acknowledged her illness as a "personal possession" (153), which puts it on the same level with her economic capital. At the same time, her mind has conjured up images that suggest violence as an aspect inherent to her wealth. To equate the status of her illness with that of her money, if only metaphorically, implicates a homology of properties and functions, hence a similar potential for the exercise of violence. When Milly's mind reveals how she combines both money and illness—and because this cognitive consolidation happens on a metaphorical level, not an intellectual, reflective one—the scene highlights how this combination can generate the symbolic capital that Milly's friends and associates will grant her. Milly recognizes as something powerful the change that has taken place in her perception of the world and of herself while at the same time misrecognizing the source of that power.

Milly's observations about a part of society with considerably less capital to dispense with than herself might seem to reinforce the classist stereotype of nineteenth-century feminine illness that Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English point out: Rich, upper-class women are the sick and frail ones in an elegant and symbolically precious way whereas working-class women are seen as "sickening" (45). Because of her money, Milly has the opportunity to draw symbolic profits from her illness; if she lived among the "grimy children" and "idle lads" (James, *Wings* 153) she observes, her disease would likely be considered infectious and impure. What prevents James's novel from merely affirming such stereotypical distinctions is the careful exposure of the mental process that at once reveals and disguises the foundation of Milly's privilege.

The vague awareness of her newly-won power, represented through the weapons with which she imagines herself equipped, never translates into an actual understanding of this power relies on both her money and her illness. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar emphasize how "nineteenth-century culture seems to have actually admonished women to *be* ill" (54). Just as being the heiress of a family fortune makes money "*the* thing" Milly is, her sociocultural reality constructs the rich woman as "ill" by definition. "[T]he 'female diseases' from which Victorian women suffered were not always byproducts of their training in femininity; they were the goals of such training" (54).

An Unforgivable Gift

Nineteenth-century culture defined the ailing and sick body as a feminine or feminized one, as Pamela K. Gilbert shows in her critical study *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels* (1997). In fact, the passivity that comes with physical weakness, which was often increased through doctors ordering female patients to remain alone and well-nigh motionless in bed, was seen as an ideal expression of feminine values whereas its culmination in the physical obliteration of death meant to realize the epitome of femininity and contributed to the "cult of female invalidism" that Ehrenreich and English describe (17).

With Milly Theale's money, the power it grants her, and the revealing metaphorical amalgamation of both in Milly's own mind, the novel adds a twist to this Victorian tradition when it opens a window of resistance in boosting Milly's symbolic power over Kate and Densher. The vacuum left by her death is filled with symbolic power, which relies on the acquisition of symbolic capital. Originally, Milly's money bears only little of the feminine charge of her other capital whereas the symbolic capital that derives from her illness is highly feminized. It can be used for a feminine exertion of power, which means vicarious participation in the games of power. As Bourdieu explains, "Being symbolically condemned to resignation and discretion, women can exercise some degree of power only by turning the strength of the strong against them or *by accepting the need to efface themselves* and, in any case, to deny a power that they can only exercise vicariously" (*Masculine Domination* 32, emphasis added). Milly does not exactly efface herself but is being effaced by her death. She does, however, seem to accept the need for effacement when she aims for the vicarious exertion of power that makes it necessary to appoint Densher as her envoy by leaving her fortune to him.

As a form of revenge, intentional or unintentional, for the deception she suffered, the inheritance works wonderfully. The letter which Densher suspects Milly to have left him all her money is never opened; it does not have to be. The assumption alone is enough to burden Densher with guilt beyond his capacity. Milly rises to power in *The Wings of the Dove* with the help of her illness and her money. To return to Bourdieu's terms: Milly converts her economic capital into symbolic capital with the help of her fatal illness. The esteem, honor, and respect—in other words the symbolic

capital—that her generous gift earns her depend on her death, which turns it into a gift that cannot be reciprocated.

The tragedy in Milly's fate is mainly that her illness plays a key role in determining her social rank among her friends and associates, and that furthermore she has to die in order to gain the upper hand. Only after her death can she exert the symbolic power that is represented in the unopened letter. The feminized martyrdom of selfless generosity that her gift to Densher represents brings an increase in symbolic capital that Densher cannot help but acknowledge. He refuses to accept the inheritance, refuses even to open the letter informing him of it. He finds himself unable and unwilling to live with the burden of a non-repayable gift. Milly has interrupted the circle of reciprocity that forms the basic structure according to which gift-exchange works, which makes it impossible for Densher to receive the gift without reservations. "We do not quite forgive a giver. The hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten," as Emerson encapsulates it in his essay "Gifts" (162). In Densher's case, the hand that gives has withdrawn forever. He can neither bite it nor give anything in return. Milly's power lies in turning herself into such an unforgivable giver.

This is in no way meant to accuse the character of Milly Theale for what might or might not be a calculated revenge. Milly's is a tragic death no matter how much she intends to get back at those who deceived her. It is important to bear in mind that she never acquires any conscious knowledge of the symbolic domination she exercises with her last will. Even if one were to assume that after finding out about Kate and Densher's engagement Milly would divine the power her money gives her, my reading of her walk from the doctor's office to Regent's Park shows that she does not gain any reflective insight into the symbolically effective connection between her wealth and her illness. She continues to misrecognize both as separate aspects of her life and therefore fails to recognize the potential for power that arises from symbolically combining both. Bourdieu stresses that "symbolic power is that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it *or even that they themselves exercise it*" (*Language and Symbolic Power* 164, emphasis added). The novel, however, while giving an account of Milly's consciousness as it disguises the crucial connection of money and illness in metaphors of luxury items and weapons, reveals this power potential and even its inherent violence.

Critics often circle around the question of how to tell the victim(s) from the victimizer(s) in *The Wings of the Dove* (Wakana 31). Power over and influence on other characters' decisions seems to be the main motivating force that drives most of the novel's characters. To read Milly's illness as a source of what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic capital in his theory of symbolic domination allows me to leave behind this dichotomy of victim and victimizer and to examine instead the shifts in power as symbolic profits and losses. Milly manages to capitalize on her illness by amalgamating the chance to exercise power that her financial wealth gives her with her new identity as a terminally ill woman. She even capitalizes on her death, which provides her with the opportunity to extend her influence beyond her own grave. It is not the money in itself, however, that expresses her symbolic power, but its status as a selfless gift from a terminally ill woman. The esteem that comes with such an act of generosity is the direct manifestation of symbolic capital which in turn reveals its flip-side as a means of domination.

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