

**Power Games in *The Wings of the Dove*—the “Worker”
IS the “Worked”**

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Abstract

Within a multidisciplinary framework that focuses on the concept of reciprocity in Henry James’s fiction, this article’s point of departure is that in James’s fictional world society is a battlefield and social interaction a series of power games. The focus is on *The Wings of the Dove*, where James’s understanding of the dynamics of “give and take” can be gleaned when looking at his depiction of the system of the “worker” and the “worked.” The aim here, however, is to show that these power games yield a far more balanced exchange than critical opinion has hitherto claimed; they move along the lines of *Do ut des*—a Latin phrase meaning “I give so that you may give”—which beautifully corresponds with the Maussian tenet of the impossibility of a free gift. This is to say that Milly Theale’s is not a story of victimization but that of triumphant counter-manipulation; Aunt Maud (the mistress of Lancaster Gate), Lord Mark, and Lionel Croy are less exploitative and therefore morally less reprehensible.

Keywords

Henry James’s late novels, multidisciplinary, capitalism, victimization, fragmentation, manipulation, free gift

In James’s fictional world society is a battlefield and social interaction a series of power games. As Winfried Fluck puts it, “James’s fiction abounds in constellations of dominance and dependence, deception and duplicity” which bring about “states of imposition and coercion ranging from victimization to triumphant counter-manipulation” (23, 25). In this article, I propose to concentrate on *The Wings of the Dove*, where James’s

understanding of the dynamics of “give and take” (developed by Georg Simmel and Peter Blau) can be gleaned when looking at his depiction of the system of the “worker” and the “worked” (James, *Wings* 333). I aim to show, however, that these power games yield a far more balanced exchange than critical opinion has hitherto claimed; they move along the lines of *Do ut des*—a Latin phrase meaning “I give so that you may give”—which beautifully corresponds with the Maussian tenet of the impossibility of a free gift. This is to say that, to paraphrase Fluck’s statement concerning power games in Jamesian fiction in general (23, 25), Milly Theale’s is not a story of victimization but that of triumphant counter-manipulation; Aunt Maud (the mistress of Lancaster Gate), Lord Mark, and Lionel Croy are less exploitative and therefore morally less reprehensible.

My approach to Jamesian fiction is sociological, with a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that draws upon such various thinkers as Lawrence C. Becker, Robert A. Emmons, George Simmel, Peter M. Blau, Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jacques Lacan. To put it briefly, along the lines of Becker’s moral theory (74-5, 149-51) and Emmons’s observations concerning gratitude (7-10), the dispositions to reciprocate and to be grateful are fundamental moral virtues to be acquired by every individual in order to become a responsible social being. According to both Simmel and Blau, every human interaction is a kind of exchange (Simmel 43-49), and socialization is a continual give and take with an eye on social rewards—be they a grateful glance or some more palpable financial gain (Blau 35-36, 92-97). Becker, Simmel, and Blau all second Mauss’s tenet according to which there is no such thing as a free gift; everybody gives with an expectation of return, and the chain of reciprocity ineluctably binds together giving, accepting, and giving back (Mauss 39). As Bourdieu puts it, human beings are so many “transactors” bent on exchanging their sets of capital, which can be of the economic, social, cultural, educational, symbolic, or sexual/erotic variety (“Forms” 241, 248).¹

In order to learn the rules of socialization, each individual has to come to terms with several facts aptly pointed out by Lacan. According

1 In fact, in his 1983 essay “The Forms of Capital,” Bourdieu attempted to clarify the difference only between the economic, social, and cultural varieties. It was a year later, in *Distinction*, when he added educational and symbolic capital as well. The erotic or sexual variety was subsequently added to Bourdieu’s types of capital first by sociologist Gary Becker, which was then followed by other sociological approaches, such as that of Catherine Hakim, Adam Isaiah Green, and Peter M. Blau, just to name a few.

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to Lacan, it is of fundamental importance to accept the fragmented nature of both the self and the world surrounding it, which is part and parcel of growing up and becoming an autonomous human being. His approach goes against the concept of the Cartesian self and posits a fluid self instead, which is always in need of being constructed according to the current circumstances the individual finds her- or himself surrounded by. This means that selecting roles, wearing masks are not so much signs of duplicity, but necessary devices of everyday human existence (Lacan, *The Ego* 54, *Écrits* 93). Following in the wake of Lacanian theory, Virginia Fowler argues that James’s American girl is the epitome of this predicament (11, 32-33). To give a few examples, there is Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* and Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*.

Within this framework, I will now focus on *The Wings of the Dove*. The novel starts out by showing Kate Croy amid the shabby knick-knacks of her moneyless shameless father, Lionel Croy. Firstly, this opening scene drives home to the reader where Kate comes from, as well as how devoid of prospects her life would be without rich Aunt Maud’s backing. Furthermore, it conveniently sets the tone of give and take, which will permeate the whole story and will prove to be less exclusively a characteristic of such unscrupulous mercenary characters as Lionel Croy or Lord Mark, for instance. Mr. Croy’s version of people’s value and his calculations concerning the likelihood of how well one can work them is undoubtedly in bad taste, but it is perfectly in character and not surprising amongst the attenuating circumstances made up of hopelessness and poverty.

Mr. Croy makes no secret about his intention to accept his daughter’s offered assistance, and he is even more outspoken about his specific understanding of the nature of the assistance he has in mind. Kate should not “come to him” and give up Aunt Maud—on the contrary (James, *Wings* 15). His younger daughter would not only be a nuisance by being both in his way and representing yet another mouth to feed, but she would cut herself off from the very source he wants so eagerly to get at. Mr. Croy is proud of his daughter’s handsomeness and sizes her up with the knowing eye of the merchant who is pleased to see how undoubtedly profitable his merchandise is going to be in the marketplace (221-22).

Lionel Croy is the first one to formulate the maxim of working a person for all (s)he is worth; he plans to work Aunt Maud through working

his own daughter. This is the only use he has of his own flesh and blood, a bond that he actually declares to be binding and pregnant with duties. Indeed, Kate is surrounded by kin bent on reminding her of her family duties and the *tangible value* that her own beauty constitutes, which can be used as a tool or weapon on the battlefield of Lancaster Gate—or Life with a capital L, if you will. Apart from her father, there is Kate's penniless widowed older sister with her numerous offspring, as well as her sister's in-laws, the Condrips—and even the memory of Kate's dead mother, who had been repudiated by her rich older sister Maud as soon as she had made such a disadvantageous match with Lionel Croy (226-27, 239, 241, 255).

As for Aunt Maud's motives for assisting Kate and her possible gain from the whole matter, it is something of a riddle. To Kate's initial query as to "what importance therefore did she [Aunt Maud] really attach to her, what strange interest could she take in their keeping on terms," the answer suggested by the poverty-stricken money-hungry Croy clan is their telltale admiration of their flesh and blood as "one of the belated fancies of rich capricious violent old women" (254).

Aunt Maud's own explanation to Densher at their very first meeting consists of two rather contradictory reasons. The first actually seems to fall in with the Croy clan's idea. She tells her niece's penniless admirer that "Kate's presence, by good fortune, I marked early. Kate's presence—unluckily for *you*—is everything I could possibly wish. Kate's presence is, in short, as fine as you know, and I've been keeping it for the comfort of my declining years" (270). As a source of comfort, entertainment, and adornment, Kate Croy seems to possess both erotic and cultural capital worth her aunt's attention and effort. A mere sentence later, however, her plan to savor the charming young woman's presence suddenly metamorphoses into an "investment" that deserves the "highest bidder" (270-71), only to be instantly transformed from that grossly materialistic plan into something much more idealistic: "I want to see her high, high up—high up in the light," she says (271).² What that entails, however, is to see her married to "a great man" (271), which, once again, sounds more entrepreneurial than noble, but not as sordid as if she had said "a rich man."

Milly's appearance on the scene complicates matters for better *and* for worse. The chosen suitor, Lord Mark, prefers the rich dying American

2 This, of course, rings a bell for any reader of *The Portrait of a Lady*: Ralph's (frustrated) desire to see Isabel soar above the heads of men is echoed here (546).

girl to small fry such as Kate Croy, whom he strongly suspects to have an attachment already anyway. Yet Aunt Maud does not despair. She sees great things to come to her niece from a friendship made with the stupendously wealthy Miss Theale. When Lord Mark is repulsed by Milly, and Densher is said to be the object of her timid affections, we can suspect Aunt Maud to be very much pleased; *any* combination involving Milly would surely entail generously gilded relationships. Be it Milly Theale as a friend of Kate’s and at the same time the happy wife of Densher, who is thus comfortably out of the way, or be it a tragically deceased Milly leaving all her money to Densher the bereaved widower, or leaving a thumping sum to him as to a friend—Aunt Maud knows that where Milly is involved, money and power are also always involved. Nevertheless, the mistress of Lancaster Gate does play fair; the cards are put on the table at the outset and Milly Theale is made aware of her role in the big drama of “conquering the world” as the supplier of “her helpful force,” which she willingly accepts:

Aunt Maud had said to Milly at Matcham that she and her niece, as allies, could practically conquer the world [...]. On this basis of being dealt with she would doubtless herself do the share of conquering: she would have something to supply, Kate something to take—each of them thus, to that tune, something for squaring with Aunt Maud’s ideal. [...] Milly knew herself dealt with—handsomely, completely: she surrendered to the knowledge, for so it was, she felt, that she supplied her helpful force. (398)

Milly is further enlightened by her sister-in-arms. Kate also talks shop with her, thereby supplying “a lesson, for our young American, in the art of seeing things as they were”³ (399). Firstly, Kate talks of herself

3 This sentence sounds a bit like an ironical paraphrasing of Walter Pater’s maxim concerning the task of the critic in his preface to *The Renaissance*: “To see the object as in itself it really is, has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly” (3). This, in turn, is an echo of Matthew Arnold’s remark concerning the exemplary skill of the ancient Greeks in his *Culture and Anarchy*: “To get rid of one’s ignorance, to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty, is the simple and attractive ideal which Hellenism holds out before human nature” (563).

as being put either “on the counter” or “in the shop-window; in and out of which [she is] thus conveniently, commercially whisked” by her aunt, always according to the latter’s plans concerning the best buyer/husband (400). Kate candidly admits that she knows the soon-to-be proprietor was supposed to have been Lord Mark, until Milly made her appearance on the scene. This initially caused some vexation to her aunt, which the latter solved with admirable quickness by deciding to recruit the apparent obstacle. Thus does Kate tell Milly of Aunt Maud’s first position: “The bore is that if she wants him so much—wants him, heaven forgive her! for *me*—he has put us all out, since your arrival, by wanting somebody else. I don’t mean somebody else than you” (400).

This is then followed up by Milly’s remonstrance that “if your aunt has been, as you tell me, put out by me, I feel she has remained remarkably kind” (402). By way of a response, Kate explains her aunt’s brilliant modification of her original plans: “Oh but she has—whatever might have happened in that respect—plenty of use for you! You put her in, my dear, more than you put her out. You don’t half see it, but she has clutched your petticoat” (402). Kate, in fact, continues in the vein of Aunt Maud’s style of playing with open cards to such a degree that she warns Milly as to the unbalanced exchange the latter might fall victim to; she opines that neither she herself nor Aunt Maud are of any use to Milly and that she had better drop them (402). Milly is equally candid in her response and points out to Kate that she has *her*—a dubious entity in return, according, at least, to the very person in question: “Oh, you may very well loathe me yet!” (402).

Whether it turns out to be true or not is not to the point here. The thing in focus now is Aunt Maud’s ambiguous attitude; she never expects financial gain for herself through Kate. Whether she looks to Milly as a source of riches or not, and whether she looks to eligible young men as great or rich enough for her handsome niece, it is not for herself that she is ambitious, apart from the glory it would indirectly shed on her by way of being so closely associated with her valuable charge. This, in turn, brings us back to Kate’s role as the supplier of adornment, entertainment, and comfort to her benefactress: “[S]he was indeed a luxury to take about the world” (354), an expensive asset to show off, the keeping of which is nothing short of a status symbol and an added attraction to Aunt Maud’s own person or house. One may, in fact, quote Mrs. Stringham who similarly muses about her former schoolmate’s motives and eventually also reconciles herself to

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accept them as inscrutable; “[...] with Mrs. Lowder there might have been no reason: ‘why’ was the trivial seasoning-substance, the vanilla or the nutmeg, omittable from the nutritive pudding without spoiling it” (326).

Let me now turn from the riddle of Aunt Maud’s motives to the representation of her abode, Lancaster Gate, which, for many readers, is the epitome of the mercenary attitude of the marketplace. One reason for this is that it is shown through the points of view of “the Kate and Densher of the beginnings,” and the ever-sordid Croys and Condrips. The picture of Aunt Maud goes through some amelioration through the novel: especially Densher’s opinion takes on a less somber hue as the story unfolds. Likewise, two other ladies undergo a change in Densher’s estimate: Kate is to fall, while Susan is to rise, along with Aunt Maud and Milly.

The other reason why Lancaster Gate (mistakenly) remains the synonym for the commercial mindset is Lord Mark’s famous remark to the uninitiated Milly: “Nobody here, you know, does anything for nothing” (321). Not only do I find this true of the whole world and less reprehensible than many would like to make out, but I also deem it crucial to bear in mind *what* sort of a person Lord Mark is and how his point of view of Lancaster Gate should not be taken as carved in stone. His mindset may very well be sordidly mercenary, making his “reflectorship” highly suspicious—or not commendable at the very least. Even so, I am actually inclined to defend him from the charge of being a deliberate “brute” (595) later on. Mercenary or not, the charge of his “crime” against Milly cannot only be attenuated by taking into consideration his hurt pride due to being rejected by two ladies because of the same man, but first and foremost by *his lack of imagination*. It is Milly herself—during the very dinner at which Lord Mark lets fall that pithy remark of his—who realizes how devoid he is of imagination (322). This may very well be termed a “moral failing” in the Jamesian universe, but not a sign of conscious wickedness (Nussbaum 157). In fact, it explains why “obtuse” (157) Lord Mark turns out to be incapable of taking his share in that “general conscious fool’s paradise,” that “conspiracy of silence” kept up by all those around Milly eager to help her to live, which was only possible if “a kind of expensive vagueness made up of smiles and silences and beautiful fictions and priceless arrangements” was kept intact despite its being “strained to breaking” (James, *Wings* 618).

“Nobody *here* does anything for nothing.” When I raised the objection that Lancaster Gate’s attitude is not much different from the

whole world's, I was actually not stating anything that is not spelled out in the novel: Densher, intimidated by the sumptuous surroundings of Lancaster Gate on his first interview with Kate's aunt, likens that personage to her appurtenances,⁴ which he further equates not only with "Britannia of the Market Place," but also with "London," which, in turn, he identifies with life itself (236-37). This symbolic significance of Lancaster Gate is what makes it the most typical Jamesian field of all. It represents James's concept of reciprocity.

My stance is to view the fact that in *Life* or Lancaster Gate "nobody does anything for nothing" as less a cause for lamentation than the sentimental (bourgeois) outlook on the whole issue of reciprocity (gift-giving) would like to make out. Yet it is of equal interest to notice that Densher's observation anticipates the eventual synthesis of the material and the spiritual (Freedman, "What Maggie" 98-99, 112), the ultimate similarity between London and Venice, thereby echoing John Ruskin's own observation in the tellingly entitled chapter of *Modern Painters*, "The Wings of the Lion," that the two can exist side by side (283). Indeed, neither of them is necessarily reprehensible when not in excess due to the accompaniment of its counterpart making up a harmonious whole. If London is *Life*, then London's materialistic attitude permeates the whole globe, and Venice, which had hitherto been exalted as the epitome of spiritual beauty, is not excluded from its influence. Consequently, not only does London (that is Lancaster Gate and/or Aunt Maud) take its share of spiritual tendencies, but Venice (that is Palazzo Leporelli and/or Milly) also shows itself as materialistic or commercial-minded to a certain degree.⁵

Another way to come to the "defense" of the ethos of Lancaster Gate is simply to read on and not stop at the ever-quoted "Lord Markian"

4 Densher's equation of one's personality with one's appurtenances would find favor with Serena Merle in *The Portrait*, while it would surely make Isabel Archer frown.

5 This dualism can be traced all along, resulting in such contrasting pairs as London-Venice, Aunt Maud-Mrs. Stringham, Lord Mark-Densher, Kate-Milly, with the first of the couples always standing for the materialistic and the latter ones for the spiritual. Still related to the synthesis of this duality is, on the one hand, the issue of the fitness of Venice as the setting complementing London, as well as the question of the title finally opted for by James. Apart from the fact that coupling London and Venice as a contrasting pair was a widespread nineteenth-century notion, James's choice of the two settings in his work—which is finally to bear a title so very similar to Ruskin's chapter—is certainly suggestive; title, setting, and the issue of the synthesis of the seemingly irreconcilable dualism of the Spiritual (Religious) and the Material (Worldly) come together in the two works.

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comment; Kate, who surely does have imagination, presents the system of the workers and the worked in a much pleasanter light, and her point of view is thus much closer to—even if not the same as—the one I embrace:

Kate did explain, for her listening friend [Milly]; every one who had anything to give—it was true they were the fewest—made the sharpest possible bargain for it, got at least its value in return. The strangest thing furthermore was that this might be in cases a happy understanding. The worker in connexion was the worked in another; it was as broad as it was long—with the wheels of the system, as might be seen, wonderfully oiled. People could quite like each other in the midst of it [...]. (333)

Kate’s emphasis on it being a “wonderfully oiled” system that produces cases of “a happy understanding” departs from my version of it in so far as it puts more emphasis on the worker coinciding with the worked in other relations; thus it is not between A and B that both are workers and worked at the same time but between, say, A and C or B and D. Or, to put it differently, if Kate (A) is worked by Aunt Maud (B), the former may easily be the worker in her relation with Milly (C), while Aunt Maud (B) may be the one who is worked by, say, Lord Mark (D). The accent does not fall on reciprocity, but on every individual’s possibility to get her or his share as a worker within the system. Both my and Kate’s approach is supported by that of Blau, who likewise holds that although “the rewards individuals obtain in social associations tend to entail a cost to other individuals, this does not mean that most social associations involve zero-sum games in which the gains of some rest on the losses of other. Quite the contrary, *individuals associate with one another because they all profit from their association* [...] [even if] they do not necessarily profit equally” (15, emphasis added).

In this closing part of the article, I have to point out that I have nothing against accentuating Milly’s Christ-like goodness, forgiveness, generosity, and whatever positive attributes we can attach to her behavior towards those around her. What I would like to demonstrate here is that she is neither a saint nor a victim, and her being worked by others does not exclude her working her own workers at the same time. As always,

everybody gives with the expectation of some sort of return and Milly is no exception to the rule. As Blau would have it, the apparent altruism that pervades social life conceals self-serving motives: people are often “anxious to benefit one another and to reciprocate for the benefits they receive. But beneath this seeming selflessness an underlying ‘egoism’ can be discovered; the tendency to help others is frequently motivated by the expectation that doing so will bring social rewards” (17).

Such egoism is termed simply “human” by Blau, who rightly believes that those individuals who “selflessly work for others without any thought of reward and even without expecting gratitude [...] are virtually saints, and saints are rare” (16). We do not necessarily have to think of strictly “extrinsic” rewards; while “the initial attraction of individuals to others always rests on extrinsic factors that permit comparisons” (38), as the relationship gains in intimacy and importance, the sheer presence of one another may become the leading factor—the coveted benefit, if you will—that prompts the two associates to seek each other’s company. Thus, every relationship is based on extrinsic factors and in time may become the source of mixed ones or purely intrinsic ones. Even in the case of the latter, however, the one who makes sacrifices for a relationship expects the other’s commitment as a return (36).

What exactly Milly expects and gains during her association with the other protagonists, and what her motives are for her acts of benevolence, are regarded differently by critics. According to Virginia Fowler, for instance, Milly’s behavior can be regarded as a series of defense mechanisms brought about by her fear to “face the whole assault of life” (James, *Wings* 299), just like Isabel Archer in *The Portrait* (Fowler 49). Milly’s fear prompts her to welcome the roles offered to her by her companions, which she uses as masks to hide behind. Furthermore, it is this same terror of complexity and corruption that go hand-in-hand with growing up and becoming part of this world as an experienced adult that makes Milly “jump at” the relatively safe position of a girl who feels, to use Mark Fogel’s term, a kind of “mediated desire” (126), for both Densher and Kate—it is safe because it does not amount to much more risk and involvement than loving by proxy does.

If Fowler emphasizes fear as the major factor motivating Milly’s actions, Jonathan Freedman finds her characterization to be more ambivalent. Freedman, in fact, associates this emotional tendency of Milly’s

with her usually voyeuristic attitude (*Professions* 209, 218), which ties in both with Fogel’s concept of “mediated desire,” and the attitude of the typical Jamesian participant observer (who takes part in an action/emotion through watching others do/feel it. Freedman actually concentrates on Milly as a representative of the decadent phase of Jamesian aestheticism: as the ambiguous dove, we are invited to recognize in her person the already-mentioned synthesis of such contrasting pairs as the spiritual and the material or Venice and London, for instance. Or, to put it differently, we are shown how two seeming opposites are the two sides of the same coin: “aestheticization is exploitation; imaginative freedom is the will to control; beauty is ugliness; love—even the most radiantly sacrificial love—is indistinguishable from cruelty” (*Professions* 227). Hence Milly is both the “decadent *belle dame sans merci*” and the Christ-like merciful “redemptive innocent” (*Professions* 222). While giving and helping, she simultaneously aestheticizes both herself and those around her as the aesthete/collector/consumer/connoisseur par excellence.

This complex attitude of Milly outlined by Freedman supports my main argument, namely that Milly is not a mere victim but an individual who engages in the give and take of Life and who gives so that she may be given, very much in key with the principle of *Do ut des* and the Maussian tenet of the impossibility of a free gift I have referred to at the outset. Her generosity has its reward in her being put in a superior position compared to her beneficiaries; the powerful bejeweled dove who extends a protective but at the same time controlling wing over those who plan to exploit her not only feels good about her own goodness but also lives through those she thus counter-manipulates. Thanks to Kate, Densher, Aunt Maud, and Lord Mark, she uses the brief interval left to her before an untimely death due to her illness: she lives and loves intensely, thereby following her doctor Sir Luke Strett’s advice. The doctor’s wise words, in fact, are the gist of James’s own advice echoing through his oeuvre, which is so aptly put also in *The Ambassadors*, for instance: “Live all you can, it’s a mistake not to” (357). This is exactly what Milly attempts and succeeds in doing. Even her inevitable suffering is necessary as it is part and parcel of growing up and being part of this world. Milly participates in life briefly but intensely, getting what she wants. She is not, therefore, a mere victim of her fellow human beings.

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