

## Making Love Public: The Paradoxes of Intimacy in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the paradoxes pertaining to romantic love in Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove*. Drawing on love sociology (Luhmann, Illouz) it explores the ways in which James places the love and courtship of his protagonists Merton Densher and Kate Croy in a complex and shifting relation to the private and the public. As sociologists and cultural historians inform us, "romantic love"—a notion that links love and marriage—emerged only in the late 18th century as an ideal advocated by sentimentalism and romanticism and then gained popularity throughout the 19th century. Its emergence was concomitant with the rise of the middle class, the rise of the novel, and the growing separation of the private and the public spheres. Indeed, as Niklas Luhmann argues in his seminal study *Love as Passion*, the differentiation of the private or intimate sphere—a sphere defined by personal/intimate relations as opposed to impersonal ones—begins with the cultural codification of love. It was only after love and marriage became linked that marriage gained its status as a private affair and the family came to be regarded as the sphere of privacy. This already suggests a paradox built into the idea of romantic love: while love came to be understood as the most intimate relation between two people and as central for the demarcation of the private sphere, it also needed to be made public in order to remain what it was. This paradox is reflected in one of the major ironies of James' novel: Kate's decision neither to publicly acknowledge their relationship nor to conduct it in secret, but rather to appear publicly and act privately as if there was nothing to disavow in the first place, leads to the disintegration of their intimate bond. Suggesting that the performative effects of Kate and Merton's *public* actions eventually render their *intimate* bond nonexistent, James exposes the paradox at the heart of romantic love.

**Keywords:** Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, Niklas Luhmann, love, romantic love, private sphere, intimacy, courtship in the 19th century

- 1 When, in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), the renowned London physician Sir Luke Strett prescribes the novel's deadly ill heroine Milly Theale nothing else than to be happy, there is little doubt among the friends who "enlist [...] for her happiness" (490) on how to interpret his advice: to achieve happiness means "to marry the man one loves" (492). Indeed, this becomes the central premise informing the different characters' course of action, allowing them to believe that they are serving Milly's well-being even while following their separate agendas. However, as indicated by Mrs. Lowder's initial puzzlement at the thought of love "by the doctor's direction" (491), the very notion of romantic love is at odds with conscious decision-making. It is equally evident to all those concerned with Milly that, like the exact nature of her illness, her romantic feelings are an intimate and private matter, to be treated with the utmost discretion and tact. And yet, it is quite remarkable how easily it is turned into a matter of public concern: not just as an object of scrutiny and deliberation but also of actions taken with a shared social realm in view.
- 2 Taking the insights of love sociology and in particular those of Niklas Luhmann as a point of departure, this essay explores the ways in which James's novel unfolds the paradoxes arising from the placement of romantic love in relation to the intimate/private sphere on the one hand and the public sphere on the other hand. Interestingly, though James saw Milly (the dove of the title), as the ultimate heroine of his novel ("Preface" 197–203), it is not her romantic life that receives the most narrative attention in *The Wings of the Dove* but rather the love of its two other principal protagonists, Merton Densher and Kate Croy. It is here that the paradoxes pertaining to romantic love are explored in greatest detail. While James's literary sensibility is particularly attuned to such paradoxes, they are themselves inherent in the very notion of romantic love as characterized by sociologists and cultural historians.

### **Romantic Love as Intimate and Public Matter**

- 3 The equation between romantic love—which in the understanding of the long nineteenth century is a love that leads to marriage—and happiness, so easily drawn by the characters in James's novel, had certainly been well established as a novelistic topos and as a cultural ideal by the time *The Wings of the Dove* was published. Historically speaking, however, the tie between love and marriage is a relatively recent phenomenon. The idea that a union of two people should be founded on mutual affection rather than duty or economic interest emerged in the late eighteenth century first as an ideal advocated by sentimentalism and romanticism, and then became widespread throughout the nineteenth century. The emergence of this idea is concomitant with the finer distinction between the public and the private sphere of intimate family life, a process in which the private sphere came to be associated with happiness. Both phenomena are linked to the rise of bourgeois or middle class culture and its need for distinction from the aristocracy as well as from the lower classes (Aries, et al.; Stone).

- 4 In his seminal study *Love as Passion*, Niklas Luhmann argues that the differentiation of an intimate or private sphere—a sphere defined by personal/intimate relations as opposed to impersonal ones—begins with the cultural codification of love. Luhmann understands modernity as a process of functional differentiation, which brings about a growing differentiation of highly personal, intimate relations and those that are impersonal and externally motivated. Furthermore, while in modern, functionally differentiated societies impersonal relations proliferate, personal, intimate relations become more intense. As Luhmann argues, the structural differentiation of family life on the one hand and political rule and economy as the sector of production on the other generated a semantic difference that prompted the evolution of the code for intimate relationships (131). The differentiation of the intimate and the impersonal requires forms of communication that mark those relations as either one or the other. In other words, the distinction between the intimate and the public is above all a matter of communication. Seen from this viewpoint, love is a specific way of coding highly personal or intimate relations.
- 5 According to Luhmann, a code for love or love semantics developed first with regard to relations outside marriage. It was only after love “entered” marriage that marriage gained its status as a private affair and the family came to be regarded as the sphere of private intimate relations. Luhmann explains that the older idea of love in marriage in the sense of “solidarity with one’s spouse” gradually gave way to a tendency to regard passionate love as “the very principle upon which the *choice* of a spouse should be based” (129). In the course of the nineteenth century love came to be regarded as the only truly legitimate reason for the choice of a partner and bound up with the promise of individual happiness (cf. Aries, et al.; Illouz 18–40).
- 6 If love as a medium of communication gradually expanded and became universalized, it nevertheless remained a “highly selective idea in terms of the attitudes it presupposed” (Luhmann 139). In the long process in which the semantics of love evolved, love came to be understood as a world unto itself, in which each partner immerses him- or herself in the intimate individuality of the other (47). Moreover, its “self-referential closedness” (141) meant that love needed no justification other than love itself: within the logic of romantic love, the reason for love is the particular uniqueness of the individual rather than any objective criteria, be it intelligence, beauty, or social status. In line with this logic, the element of chance or unlikelihood enhanced rather than diminished the significance of the love relationship, since absence of an external design served to confirm that it occurred in and of itself.
- 7 It is important to note that the link established between love and marriage not only transformed the institution of marriage, but it turned love into a public concern. If love was to become the foundation for the social institution of marriage (and the modern family), it had to be durable, that is differentiated from forms of passion that were likely to expire. Thus, romantic love as the outcome of a long evolution of

the semantics of love is characterized by the combination of sexual attraction, emotional closeness or friendship, and durability, which at least in the nineteenth century meant that true love must lead to marriage. As Luhmann writes, “a declaration of love, if it were to be absolutely convincing, always called for a second declaration [...] the declaration of one’s intention to marry” (148; cf. Illouz 18–40). This, however, already suggests a paradox built into the idea of romantic love, namely that love, while being the most intimate relation between two people and one that is central for the demarcation of the private sphere, also needs to be made public in order to remain what it is (cf. Cott 1–2).

- 8 Before it can be made public by marriage, romantic love has to prove itself in a process of courtship. Courtship can be described as a form of intimate communication, including an array of gestures, looks, and words that mark the relation as both intimate and authentic while simultaneously being restricted by a set of rules and conventions. In the bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century, with its growing separation of the domains of work and leisure, courtship had its designated time and place: the time was marked as leisure time and included leisure activities like reading, taking walks, and dancing. It took place in spaces destined for leisure. The prototypical place for courtship was the parlor or drawing room—a space devoted to receiving visitors in the Victorian middle-class household, which remained half-private, half-public. While the parlor was demarcated as private, public norms and social conventions had a stronghold over the individual here (cf. Shamir 38). In the second half of the nineteenth century, the range of spaces where lovers could legitimately spend time together included public parks and museums—spaces characterized by social visibility rather than anonymity. Thus, while allowing for the forging of intimate bonds, such spaces put intimacy under public scrutiny.

### ***The Wings of the Dove as (Almost) a Love Story***

- 9 The intricacies of love and courtship are of course the material of most nineteenth-century novels, from the sentimental novel through the domestic novel to the realist novel. They are also the subject matter of most novels by Henry James. Nowhere, however, are the paradoxes pertaining to romantic love and its entanglements within the private and the public explored in more detail than in his penultimate novel, *The Wings of the Dove*. In a letter to William Dean Howells, James describes the novel as a “‘love-story’ of a romantic tinge, and touching and conciliatory tone” (Anesko 371). It seems that James, for a long time bemoaning his lack of commercial success, had high hopes for the novel’s appeal to popular taste (Anesko 372). In a letter to his friend Mrs Humphry Ward, he describes *The Wings of the Dove* as “the result of a base wish to do an amiable, a generally-pleasing love-story” (Letters 242). James’s commercial ambitions may to a certain degree account for the outline of the plot, which numerous critics—most famously Peter Brooks (179–80)—refer to as melodramatic. Given the immense popularity of the genre in the nineteenth century, the

melodramatic plot structure may be understood as an attempt to reach a wider audience. But *The Wings of the Dove* is by no means “a generally-pleasing love-story.” Rather, the novel counts among the principal examples of “thwarted love” in James’s oeuvre (cf. Graham; McWhirter).

- 10 Though love is one of his principal topics (Sicker 4), James is notorious for denying his protagonists the experience of fulfilled passion (Graham 1–4). James scholarship has long pointed this out: Biographical studies, most famously Leon Edel’s work, have addressed James’s “indifference to passionate concerns” (Graham 4), whereas Michael Moon and Eve Sedgwick have paved the way for readings that explore queer desire in James’s novels (cf. Moon; cf. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Tendencies*).
- 11 But not only does the novel withhold the fulfillment of love, it more generally withholds the fulfillment of concretion. An example of James’s “late style,” the novel is notorious for being particularly difficult and opaque due to the multiple centers of consciousness and a style that is elusive and evasive (cf. Ohi). It abounds in secrets that are never revealed, including the exact nature of Milly’s illness and Kate’s father’s disreputable behavior. Some of the novel’s most crucial scenes are not represented directly. Moreover, while the characters are under constant scrutiny by others and are aware of their visibility, their innermost feelings or even the most crucial details about their lives remain vague, inaccessible to both the readers and the other characters. Concerning the literary representation of the paradoxes of romantic love, however, James’s strategy of indirection has an advantage, since it is particularly well suited to explore the demarcation lines between the private/intimate and the public as communicatively drawn.
- 12 As I will argue in the following paragraphs, in *The Wings of the Dove*, the theme of thwarted love can be pursued from a perspective that places neither James’s proclivity for celibacy nor his explorations of queer desire but rather his investigation of the notion of romantic love at its center. The romantic love of Kate Croy and Merton Densher has to remain unfulfilled because of the paradoxical structure of romantic love: secrecy and publicity become short-circuited in a manner that finally ends up destroying all possibilities for fulfillment. It is this incapacitating effect of romantic love’s paradoxical structure that James stages by way of his literary technique of withholding and indirection. Rather than putting the analysis of James’s late style at the center of this essay, I will reconstruct the thwarted love plot that James’s discourse all but withholds from the reader in order to demonstrate how the paradox of romantic love disables the realization of romance.

### Romantic Love and Its Paradoxes

- 13 We learn from flashbacks focalized through Kate that she and Densher were first introduced at a party in a gallery, recognizing immediately that “something between them had [...] come [...] something for each of them had happened” (*Wings* 251).

This first encounter is rendered as a synesthetic experience: “They found themselves regarding each other straight, and for a longer time on end than was usual even at parties in galleries; but that in itself would have been a small affair for two such handsome persons. It wasn’t, in a word, simply that their eyes had met; other conscious organs, faculties, feelers had met as well” (251). The image that best represents this occurrence in Kate’s recollection is that of two people, who, after reaching the top of a garden ladder and peeking over into the neighboring garden, remain “perched, facing each other” (251). Consistent with a state that Luhmann refers to as “interpersonal interpenetration” (153), both parties recognize the other as a world unto itself, neither transparent nor penetrable, to which they remain open (cf. Ian 117).

- 14 By the very logic described by Luhmann, their next, accidental meeting six months later in a crowded compartment of the London subway seems fateful exactly because it is so random: “They had on neither part a second’s hesitation; they looked across the choked compartment exactly as if she had known he would be there and he had expected her to come in” (*Wings* 252). When they finally have the chance to sit opposite one another, without having the opportunity to speak, “this very restriction perhaps made such a mark for them as nothing else could have done. If the fact that their opportunity had come round for them could be so intensely expressed without a word, they might very well feel on the spot that it hadn’t come around for nothing” (252). Once Kate and Densher leave the subway together, it is clear to them that this constitutes the starting point of an intimate relation: “the real beginning – the beginning of everything else; the other time, the time at the party, had been but the beginning of that” (253).
- 15 Their ability to understand each other intuitively, almost telepathically, is reflected in James’s narrative choice of practically “fusing” their consciousness in the first two books of the novel, as he explains in the preface to the New York Edition of *The Wings of the Dove* (“Preface” 207). The “practical fusion of consciousness” (207) James refers to does not mean that Kate and Densher perceive everything in unison, as it soon becomes clear, but that being very different individuals with their distinct outlooks on the world, they simultaneously perceive the world through the eyes of the other. Whatever passes through their individual consciousness is also put in relation to the other’s consciousness. This, we may assume, is the meaning of Kate’s words when she tells Densher, “I exist in you. Not in others” (*Wings* 458).
- 16 The fact of their intimacy is established through the particular way they communicate with each other, which is characterized by exclusivity and sincerity; by saying things “for each other, for each other alone” (*Wings* 259), and by saying “whatever they liked about whatever they would” (259). Significant elements of their intimate communication are the “long looks” they exchange and the long moments of silence they share. If their intimacy is a world unto itself from which others are excluded, it is nevertheless far from being invisible to others. Kate in particular is alert to the

way they may be perceived. Upon their encounter in the subway, she wonders how much of what is visible to others is also visible to Densher and vice versa: "she was so occupied with a certainty that one of the persons opposite, a youngish man with a single eye-glass which he kept constantly in position, had made her out from the first as visibly, as strangely affected. If such a person made her out what then did Densher do?" (253). Once they step out of the subway into the street, Kate is also mindful of how their walking together may appear to "all the world" (253).

- 17 It is as if their appearance in a publicly shared space rather than the spaces reserved for upper middle class courtship testifies simultaneously to the uniqueness of their relation and its generic quality. Kate is strongly aware of the contrast between a subway car and a drawing room; their walking the streets together may very well put her and Densher on the same plane as "a housemaid giggling to the baker" (*Wings* 253). The same logic that makes their relation both unique and generic—the logic, we may say, of romantic love—requires at the same time that it be both privately and publicly acknowledged. While at first "keeping company" seems to Kate the most fitting designation for a relation neither official nor secret, at some point the question of marriage inevitably poses itself: "Densher had at the very first pressed the question. [...] They had accepted their acquaintance as too short for an engagement, but they had treated it as long enough for almost anything else, and marriage was somehow before them like a temple without an avenue" (255).
- 18 The obstacles standing in their way to the "temple of marriage" are disclosed within the first pages of the novel, even before Densher makes his first appearance. The novel's opening scene, in which Kate visits her disgraced father, reveals the financially perilous situation of the Croys (including Kate's widowed sister) and the demands this puts on Kate, who has been taken in by her rich maternal aunt Mrs. Lowder upon the tacit condition that she follow Mrs. Lowder's advice with regard to a future husband. Kate is acutely aware of her position within a larger family constellation. Her prospect of marrying rich with the support of her aunt constitutes "the value – the only one they have" (*Wings* 263), calling into question her claim "to personal happiness," as she puts it (264). Kate's hesitation to marry Densher stems from her sense of family obligation as well as a need to redeem her family name stained by her father's disreputable behavior (which is never explicated in the novel), and, last but not least, her dread of being poor. As Densher painfully grasps when meeting Mrs. Lowder, he is, though highly educated and a gentleman, out of the question as a suitable candidate. Moreover, his unsuitability is not just a matter of his lack of money, but of what he represents to Mrs. Lowder: a journalist without any prospects of ever becoming rich and, above all, unlikely to distinguish himself in any way.
- 19 In a way emblematic of James's fiction, *The Wings of the Dove* presents the realm of the personal or private as embedded within a larger social fabric—a perspective that is deeply invested in exploring not only how one's actions impact others, but also

what one represents to others. As Marcia Ian succinctly puts it, “a Jamesian self achieves identity by ‘representing,’ without actually presenting, oneself” (117). Kate and Densher’s relation is cast as a personal matter, in the sense that it is granted a degree of privacy and tactful treatment that remains nonetheless under public scrutiny giving rise to interpretation. Both feel the implications of this double-sidedness for the practicalities of their courtship: as Densher realizes at some point, they have no proper place to conduct it, he has “nowhere to ‘take’ his love” (*Wings* 418).

- 20 For the first year of their relationship, Kate and Densher’s regular meeting place is a spot in the Kensington Gardens overlooked by Lancaster Gate, the residence of Mrs. Lowder:

*[W]hen, always, in due time, Kate Croy came out of her aunt’s house, crossed the road and arrived by the nearest entrance, there was a general publicity in the proceeding which made it slightly anomalous. If their meeting was to be bold and free it might have taken place within-doors; if it was to be shy or secret it might have taken place almost anywhere better than under Mrs. Lowder’s windows. (Wings 248)*

The “slight anomaly” lies in the intangible character of their relationship status. They are neither defying social conventions by meeting in private—that is, in Densher’s rooms, which is an option that often enters his mind but that he does not want to suggest to Kate out of respect—nor fully succumbing to them by asking the aunt’s permission to conduct their courtship in her drawing room. To meet in places not frequented by members of their social class would grant them anonymity but would deceive Mrs. Lowder. In this way the nature of their relationship remains a private matter without being a secret.

- 21 By meeting in the Gardens, Kate “made the point that she wasn’t underhand, any more than she was vulgar [...] and that, if her aunt chose to glare at her from the drawing-room or to cause her to be tracked and taken, she could at least make it convenient that this should be easily done” (*Wings* 249). Thus, for Kate to let their relation linger in a space that is public, a space of visibility, means paradoxically to assert her right to privacy—to decide for herself with whom to intimately engage—and to accept that this right is restricted by rules of conduct to which she conforms:

*Of course she had been seen. She had taken no trouble not to be seen, and it was a thing she was clearly incapable of taking. But she had been seen how? – and what was there to see? She was in love – she knew that: but it was wholly her own business, and she had the sense of having conducted herself, of still so doing, with almost violent conformity. (256)*

The violent aspect of this conformity, we may infer, consists in the felt pressure of the public gaze, which forces Kate and Densher to give an air of impersonality or neutrality to their most intimate moments.



- 22 Once Kate and Densher get secretly engaged, their situation is put into a new perspective, since there now is more to see than before and thus hiding it may well be understood as deception. Kate's aunt does not directly inquire about the status of their relationship, because she does not want to "treat them as if she supposed they were deceiving her" (*Wings* 391). She grants Kate the right to keep things to herself, just not to disobey her wishes. Mrs. Lowder's stance can be understood as paralleling the relation of the public to the private sphere, which is to respect it as long as what takes place there does not violate public norms.
- 23 Interestingly, upon meeting Mrs. Lowder for the first time, Densher regards her above all as a representative of the public. As he remarks to Kate afterwards, apart from wanting to please Mrs. Lowder personally, to him as a journalist, "her views, her spirit, are essentially a thing to get hold of: they belong to the great public mind that we meet at every turn and that we must keep setting up 'codes' with" (*Wings* 277). As Moon observes in his seminal essay on "visual terrorism" in *The Wings of the Dove*, Mrs. Lowder is considered "'potent' by virtue of the fetishization by her society of her economic and social power" (430). Kate herself remarks on her aunt's ability "to terrorize with her view any [...] other [...] view and anyone who represents such view" (428). And when shortly afterwards Densher attends Mrs. Lowder's dinner party, he perceives Kate as giving a public performance under the gaze of her aunt "living up [...] to the 'value' Mrs. Lowder has attached to her" (439). "As such a person was to dress the part, to walk, to look, to speak, in every way to express, the part, so all this was what Kate had to do for the character she had undertaken, under her aunt's roof, to represent" (439).
- 24 The issue of visibility and public scrutiny as well as privacy and deception acquires ever-higher levels of complexity as the narrative progresses, in particular when Milly Theale enters the scene. It is quickly established within the narrative that the young American takes a romantic interest in Densher, whom she met briefly in America when he had been sent there as a social reporter for his newspaper. In contrast to Kate, she is immensely rich—"an angel with a thumping bank account" (*Wings* 283), as Kate puts it—and without any familial obligations, thus free to do as she pleases. Milly is diagnosed with a terminal illness and is told by the distinguished physician, Sir Luke Strett, "to 'live'" (377) and "to be happy" (374) in the time she has left, which, as mentioned in the beginning, is taken by herself and everyone surrounding her to mean experiencing love. If the readiness with which the other characters interpret the doctor's prescription as meaning exactly that is noteworthy, it certainly reflects James's own take on the matter: "She is in love with life [...] A young man (though not in love with her) wishes he could make her taste of happiness, give her something that it breaks her heart to go without having have known. That 'something' can only be – of course the chance to love and be loved" (*Notebooks* 169).
- 25 Milly's situation, as the other characters interpret it, instigates a range of strategies that are meant to serve her as well as their own interests. The key strategists are Kate

and Mrs. Lowder, who, independent of each other and with contradictory goals in mind, commit to the idea of “putting Densher in [Milly’s] way” (*Wings* 492). To act on behalf of Milly means to give the appearance that Densher’s love for Kate is unrequited so that Milly can feel free to love him and things can take their course, possibly leading to marriage. The ultimate goal for Kate is to secure her own future with Densher, based on the assumption that Milly would leave him her fortune after she dies. Densher himself, as Marcia Ian writes, is torn “between his commitment to the ‘idea’ of securing Milly’s fortune for [his and Kate’s use] and his desire to believe that Kate wants only to be kind to Milly,” which requires that he learn “how to act and not act at the same time” (Ian 128).

- 26 If Densher is faced with the difficult task of acting and not acting at the same time, Kate’s strategy also requires a difficult balance between action and inaction, since it consists in making her and Densher’s relation seem nonexistent to Milly. According to Kate’s reasoning, if, being on intimate terms with Milly, she does not mention Densher at all, Milly can take it only as a sign that there is nothing to tell beyond what she already apprehends, namely that Densher takes a romantic interest in Kate. Though it dawns on Milly that “there was a possible account of their relations in which the quantity her new friend had told her might have figured as small, as smallest, beside the quantity she hadn’t” (*Wings* 339), it is open to speculation how much Milly knows, or intuitively, and how much she chooses not to see.
- 27 Kate’s strategy mirrors the one already taken up by her aunt. As Kate explains to Densher, the fact that Mrs. Lowder starts inviting him to Lancaster Gate is not to be taken as a sign of her acceptance but rather as an attempt “to keep all reality out of [their] relation – by not having so much as suspected or heard of it” (*Wings* 434). In that way, Kate supposes, Mrs. Lowder wants to “get rid of it [...] by ignoring it and sinking it. Therefore she, in her manner, ‘denies’ it” (434). Among the characters in the novel, Mrs. Lowder, though the one least committed to the ideal of romantic love, understands its inherent logic better than anyone else. It is therefore both fitting and ironic that Kate herself, by applying a strategy similar to her aunt’s though following a different agenda, slowly drains the reality out of her and Densher’s relation.

## The Performative Effects of Love

- 28 When Kate at an earlier stage asks herself, “But she had been seen how? – and what was there to see?” (*Wings* 256), the question posed by her is not just what others make of what they see but what there is to see, pointing at the intricate relation between essence and appearance. This question anticipates one of the novel’s major ironies: that what is seen becomes indistinguishable from what is there. In other words what is performed for others to see becomes what it claims to be. The longer Kate and Densher keep up the appearance of not being in a relationship, the more the nature of their relationship changes. Thus when Densher is asked by Kate to be

nice to Milly, even to let himself be loved by Milly, he does so at first out of love for Kate. However, he soon reaches a level of intimacy with Milly that assumes its own logic, which Densher, condemned to the inaction he feels forced upon him, is bound to follow.

- 29 The first realization of this comes when Milly, attesting to her “typical, highly American” (*Wings* 476) spontaneity, asks him to take a carriage ride with her. Something that will place them not only in an intimate relation to each other but also, by making a public appearance, will make Densher disavow Kate publicly: “he was engaged to Kate [...]. Thus ingeniously discriminating, Densher continued slowly to wander; yet without keeping at bay for long the sense of having rounded his corner” (477). While Milly gets ready for the ride, Kate comes in to visit and gives her blessing to Densher. When he demands that she first swear to him that she loves him—since he is doing it all for her—she responds: “Here? There’s nothing between us here” (480), pushing him “to round his corner” (481) and in way sealing the fate of their romantic relationship. Engaging with others as if they were not in love or for Densher, engaging with Milly as if he had no obligation towards Kate, creates new realities that pull them gradually apart, as is indicated by Kate’s last words in the novel: “We shall never be again as we were!” (689).
- 30 This final sentence may be taken in several ways, one being the acknowledgment of the moral costs of their actions, which transformed them both (as it has often been interpreted). Milly dies after learning of Kate and Densher’s engagement, but she nevertheless leaves him her money. Densher, however, is unable to take it while Kate is unable to come to terms with the fact that he does not want it. But the fact that the last sentence mirrors the one uttered much earlier—“Our being as we are [...]. So gone. So extremely gone” (*Wings* 281)—allows for a different interpretation: The very fact of behaving as if he did not have to consider Kate in his actions causes Densher’s consciousness—which was initially fused with Kate’s—to drift apart from hers. James seems to suggest that the requirement to make romantic love public is inherent in its logic. Thus, it does not suffice that Kate has given “proof” of her devotion to Densher earlier in Venice when she finally comes to his rooms (and has sex with him). As Elisa Greenwald astutely observes, “Merton’s attempt to make Kate fully present to him results in a different kind of absence” (187). Despite Densher’s wish to turn the vague status of their relation “into historic truth” (*Wings* 575), Kate’s ultimate act of “proof” fails its aim, confirming more than anything else that it is not sufficient to prove their love in secret. As Brenda Austin Smith points out, Kate’s “sacrifice” marks her slow disappearance from Densher’s life, which is reflected by the narrative’s receding focus on her (203).
- 31 As Smith notes, “in many ways the more lasting tragedy of the book is not Milly’s death, but Kate’s defeat,” as Kate is “skillfully out-maneuvered by Aunt Maude” (203). One of Mrs. Lowder’s most skillful maneuvers is to treat Densher after Milly’s

death as someone who has lost a lover. Densher seems to gradually accept this perspective for himself, since to do otherwise would mean to admit to a willful deception of Milly and to being after money. If we accept that in the end Densher “chooses” Milly over Kate, as the novel is often interpreted (cf. Moon; Greenwald; Smith; Bersani), it is because he allows his feelings to follow the role ascribed to him, as Moon’s and Ian’s readings suggest.

- 32 In the end, the only possibility for Kate and Densher to save their love by proving that it is what it has always been – at least the only one conceivable for Densher, who is the focalizer—is to get married without the money, something that in a way places them at the starting point of their journey. But the performative effects of their public actions make it impossible for them to go back in time to the moment when they were “so extremely gone” (Wings 281). From the perspective of Luhmann’s sociology, this is only logical, given that love is not a reified entity that a pair of lovers can possess, but is rather performatively produced through particular modes of communication. The irony which James teases out of the paradoxical public-private constellation of romantic love is that the public action which has forced Kate and Densher to drift out of their shared intimacy is not an action at all, but rather an in-action. Not having acted toward one another publicly in order to hide their private engagement has forced them to become disengaged. Not having spent time in public in that limbo-space between the secret and the surveilled, they have spent all their private fortune.

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