

“The Turn of the Screw on the Turntable”

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What happens when you try to read Henry James with the ears instead of the eyes? The question might seem a whimsical one to ask of an author long associated with schools of close reading, not close listening. Yet listening was the only way of reading James for an audience whose vision impairments prevented them from accessing texts in more conventional ways. Although blind and partially sighted people had few options when James’s fiction was first published, the development of sound-recording technologies after James’s death made it possible for all people with vision impairments, including those who could not read braille, to read for themselves. The invention of talking books—recordings of literature made by voice actors—enabled audiences to hear literature read aloud. Blind people no longer needed to rely on volunteer readers as the only option once the use of assistive technologies allowed them to read by other means. Such newfound independence raises questions, of course, about the precise relationship between the two methods of reading. This essay takes up those questions by investigating what difference it makes listening to an author who reportedly “talked like a book” on an actual talking book (“Talk” 241).

Books did not begin “talking” until after James’s lifetime. The American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) and Britain’s Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) established the world’s first talking book libraries in 1934 and 1935, respectively (Rubery 59-85). Blind people

had few options before this point. Access to books had been a longstanding problem for people with visual disabilities since only a small percentage of them (fewer than 20%) could read braille. The majority lost their sight midlife, after the age of fifty, when it was difficult to learn a new language, especially one requiring manual dexterity. The return of hundreds of soldiers who had lost their eyesight during the First World War renewed the push to find a technological solution to the issue of blind literacy. The plight of war-blinded veterans aroused patriotic sentiments that would be crucial to securing federal support to improve the lives of blind veterans and civilians alike through the provision of books. In 1931, Congress approved funding measures to support the publication of books in alternative formats besides inked letterpress that would enable all blind people to read for themselves.

Talking book libraries pioneered the use of long-playing records to record entire novels. Previously, records had been able to hold only a few minutes of speech, little more than light verse or the occasional Shakespeare monologue—nothing close to an entire novel. The breakthrough came with the development of discs played at 33 1/3 revolutions per minute (significantly slower than the standard rate of 78 rpm) that held approximately fifteen minutes of speech per side, enough to capture the average novel on a set of around ten records. There was no need to visit talking book libraries to check-out those titles, either. Discs went out to patrons in the mail, protected by sturdy containers, for playback on specially designed turntables that could be operated by blind individuals in the privacy of their homes.

Advocates described the talking book as the most significant advance in literacy among blind people since the invention of braille. Helen Keller endorsed it as a “new blessing to the blind” that would be of interest the entire country (178). The first titles released included the

Bible, Shakespeare, and patriotic documents like the Declaration of Independence (a symbolically appropriate choice for people with disabilities who no longer had to depend on other people to read to them). Fiction came next, beginning with works by Gladys Hasty Carroll, Cora Jarrett, and Rudyard Kipling before branching out to other authors, including, eventually, James. The first James title selected for recording was his most popular ghost story—henceforth, blind people could read *The Turn of the Screw* on the turntable.

James's experimental narratives and the Modernist ones influenced by them posed formidable challenges to the recording studios responsible for converting printed books into talking ones. Whereas turning realist texts into sound recordings was a relatively straightforward task, modernism proved far more difficult owing to its elliptical storytelling, shifting perspectives, emphasis on psychological interiority, and other medium-specific features that resisted translation into other formats. Simply reading modernist narratives straight from the page frequently left audiences bewildered about what was happening. According to the German media theorist Friedrich Kittler, literature's formal complexity emerged in response to competing media including the phonograph, radio, and cinema that now rivaled the novel's capacity to represent everyday life. Writing screenplays was the easy way out after Hollywood's triumph. But, for Kittler, serious writers had only one path open to them at the turn of the century: becoming "word producers" who created literature out of words, just as sculptors used stone or painters used color as raw materials (249). The word art produced by them had the distinction of being awkward, if not impossible, to adapt into film. Of course, the same techniques used to make stories unfilmable frequently made them unrecordable, too. Such

ambitious storytelling clashed with the talking book library's aspirations to make literature accessible to everyone.

Talking book libraries nevertheless helped make James's writing accessible to people with disabilities, ranging from vision impairments and other physical disabilities to, eventually, learning disabilities such as dyslexia. Sound recording enabled those who struggled to read in the conventional way to apprehend narratives in alternative media. Such initiatives reflect a profound change in attitudes toward physical disability since James's lifetime. Making James and other authors accessible to people with impaired vision represented a step forward in the public understanding of physical and cognitive disabilities once thought to be inseparable. Nevertheless, the availability of recorded books forced audiences to consider whether literature written for a specific medium risked losing something in translation when reproduced in other media. Could texts renowned for their inaccessibility be made too accessible?

James's fiction was written (or at least dictated) with the page in mind. Disability rights advocates might therefore concede that auditors were getting a slightly different version, or even edition, of James without conceding that they were no longer getting James at all. My thinking on this matter has been influenced by Charles Bernstein's contention that every text leads a "plural existence" made up not only of various print versions but also of subsequent performances contributing to our overall understanding of the work (9). (Hearing too many mediocre recordings has led me to part ways with Bernstein, however, in elevating the writer's authority over that of other performers.) Moving beyond constrictive measures of fidelity opens up more productive questions about how sound reproduction transforms texts—often for the better. It seems to me that there are both advantages and drawbacks to hearing James's

fiction read aloud. After all, plenty of people with 20/20 vision choose to listen to James despite being perfectly capable of picking up a paperback.

From the American Foundation for the Blind's perspective, a successful recording needed to make literature available to people with impaired vision while simultaneously safeguarding the text's original wording—a condition that set unabridged audiobooks apart from adaptations (including the splendid films, operas, and ballets made of *The Turn of the Screw*). No alterations to the text's wording allowed. Making James accessible meant treating the recordings as replicas of the original texts instead of watered-down versions of high culture for the masses—as commercial labels like Caedmon Records would later be accused of doing. Despite liner notes written by James's biographer, Leon Edel, Caedmon's 1970 recording of *The Turn of the Screw* hardly remained faithful to the original anyway. The title of James's text emblazoned across the album cover is undercut by the miniscule disclaimer "(abridged)."

Figure 1. The album cover for the Caedmon recording of *The Turn of the Screw*. © 1970 by HarperCollins Publishers. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

James may strike some admirers as a perverse candidate for audiobooks. His labyrinthine sentences, privileging of psychology over plotlines, and characters who sound suspiciously like the author are hardly meant for campfires. As the audiobook narrator Flo Gibson once complained of James, "When I read some of his work I think, 'Why don't you punctuate? Why do you put five 'however's' on a page?'" (Qtd in Stevens 304) And this from one of James's admirers. The most difficult book ever recorded by Gibson was *The Golden Bowl*. Nor

is Gibson alone in her wariness. A review of Anne Flosnik's 2008 recording of *The Turn of the Screw* warned audiences: "Readers, beware—this is not an easy listen" (J.A.H.).

Anyone who finds James difficult on the page might seem unlikely to have more success off it. Yet the case can be made that James's fiction works as well—maybe even better—off the page than on it. That claim, at any rate, will be tested out here by examining the first-full length recording of *The Turn of the Screw* in order to show that we are still reading James when we listen to his fiction—even if we are simultaneously getting an interpretation of James when we do so.

James would have welcomed audiobooks, I like to imagine. We know from the biographical record that he enjoyed reading aloud under the right circumstances. Edith Wharton recalls James being part of a group that recited memorable examples of prose and verse. James himself chanted a poem by Emily Brontë on one occasion and on another read from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (Wharton 185-186). We also know that James was emotionally susceptible to other people's reading. The following anecdote offers a glimpse of the role played by reading aloud in James's family life:

His mother had told him it was bedtime. But the small boy was as reluctant as all small boys are to obey when there is a visitor in the house. An Albany cousin had arrived and the elders were gathered in the library; the cousin was to read aloud the first instalment of Mr. Dickens's new novel, *David Copperfield*.

Henry feigned a withdrawal upstairs but retreated instead to cover in the library, “the friendly shade of some screen or drooping table-cloth.” Behind this protection, doubled up and hugging the carpet, he listened.

He listened holding his breath as the story unfolded. Finally the tense cord “snapped under the strain of the Murdstones” and the elders assembled in the room became aware of a loud sobbing.

This time he was effectively banished to his bed. (Edel 1953 100)

The key detail here is neither the boy’s exposure to Mr. Dickens, formative as that may have been, nor his sobbing, touching as that may be. What stands out to my eye is that reading aloud serves as entertainment for the adults, commenced after the children have gone to bed, not to prepare them for it. The notion of adults listening to stories would have been unexceptional to James.

The Turn of the Screw’s plot was itself passed along by word of mouth. According to James’s notebooks, it was during a conversation in front of the fireplace one winter evening that Edward White Benson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, shared the gruesome tale of orphaned children left to the care of predatory servants at a country house. Like most ghost stories, the tale had been transmitted orally, and, in this case, not without distortion. The Archbishop’s retelling offered a “faint sketch of it,” scarcely an improvement over the original source, a woman who told it “very badly and imperfectly” (109). The tale lacked detail. As James would later put it, conversations imparted the “vague essence” of the plot: “some dead servants and some children” (*Letters* 286). James was left with the task of transforming the

twice-told tale into a taut psychological study capable of withstanding the scrutiny of Freudians and other hermeneutically-minded literary critics.

We should likewise note that the tale's first audience was an auditor. James told friends that he wanted "to scare the whole world" with the spectral tale. Dictating it to William MacAlpine gave him an opportunity to test out whether he had succeeded:

When I wrote it, I was too ill to hold the pen; I therefore dictated the whole thing to a Scot stenographer. I was glad to try this experiment, for I believed that I should be able to judge of its effect on the whole world by its effect on the man who should hear it first. Judge of my dismay when from first to last page this iron Scot betrayed not the slightest shade of feeling! I dictated to him sentences that I thought would make him leap from his chair; he short-handed them as though they had been geometry, and whenever I paused to see him collapse, he would enquire in a dry voice, "What next?" (Phelps 794)

Today this would count as a one-star review on Audible. But in all seriousness, note how James did not call into question whether the stenographer was reading the tale or merely listening to it—just as he did not object to other people, like Ivan Turgenev, listening to his fiction read aloud to them (Phelps 787). No, the auditor represented a satisfactory proxy for the world at large here. We could go a step further by noting how James treats the exchange without reference to shorthand, either, as if the two men were reciting verse to one another in ancient Athens. Technology's presence changes the dynamic, of course. MacAlpine's poker face anticipates the modern audiobook consumer for whom listening is a privatized experience

rather than an interpersonal one in which storyteller and audience feed off one another's body language. The Scot might as well be listening to the story on headphones.

James's switch to dictation midway through his career makes him a singular case study for audiobook historians—it is as if he were narrating books before the technology was in place to record them. Or at least to record them in their entirety, for authors had experimented with sound technology as early as 1890, when Tennyson recited “The Charge of the Light Brigade” onto a set of wax cylinders using a phonograph manufactured by Thomas Edison. Mark Twain even tried—unsuccessfully—using one of those machines to record an entire novel (Picker 126-27). But, for whatever reason, James's fascination with having words pulled out of him by the typewriter never extended to the phonograph—despite Edison's tireless efforts to promote the device as a means of taking dictation. Consequently, there are no recordings of James's voice, only secondhand accounts of how James spoke. We are left with the iconic painting “His Master's Voice” but without “*The Master's*” voice.

It is well-known that James's later work was almost entirely dictated to secretaries. In 1897, James began dictating instead of writing fiction because of chronic wrist pain or “writer's cramp.” Ever since, critics have sought to attribute the author's late style to this move toward dictation. One of James's typists, in fact, was the first to propose the connection. As Theodora Bosanquet wrote of James's late style, “The different note was possibly due more to the substitution of dictation for pen and ink than to any profound change of heart” (39-40). Her memoir likened James's style to “free, involved, unanswered talk” after the switch to dictation (34). Her verdict was not exactly enthusiastic; Bosanquet complained about James's wordiness and windiness or what she privately called his “jawbation” (79). James felt the difference

between the two methods of composition, too. "I know," he once told Bosanquet, "that I'm too diffuse when I'm dictating" (34).

The alleged link between speech and style still has a hold over the popular imagination even though the supporting evidence has always been flimsy at best (Hoover 260). Everybody's favorite media guru, Marshall McLuhan, would even cite the example of "Henry James dictating interminable sentences to Theodora Bosanquet" to support his contention that mechanical devices like the typewriter "changed the forms of English expression by opening up once more the oral world to the writer of books" (175). McLuhan's technological determinism works better as sound bite than sound history, however, since it would be difficult to defend the position that the oral world had been closed to writers before the typewriter came along. The notion that writers could not imagine speech's rhythms in their heads would have come as a surprise to Mr Dickens and those of his contemporaries who pitched their novels to be performed in front of an audience.

So, we should be wary of making too much of this shift to dictation in terms of orality. Let us recognize instead the extent to which James's fiction challenges any firm boundaries between speech and writing. His written texts contain traces of speech, just as his spoken ones contain textuality's imprint. There is not even a clear separation between the dictated and handwritten manuscripts since James frequently edited the transcripts by hand or, in some cases, wrote the stories out *before* dictating them. Edel proposed that, after the shift to dictation, "the spoken voice was to be heard henceforth in James's prose in a way that it had never been heard before" (1969 169). Allow me to reverse this formulation: James's prose can be heard in the spoken voice.

On that note, let's turn to the recordings. The research for this essay began with the question: when was James's fiction first recorded? The talking book library catalogs published by the American Foundation for the Blind reveal three things of interest to James scholars. First, blind people were able to hear about James's life before they could hear any of his actual writings. The earliest mention of James is found not under "Fiction" but in the "Biography" category, where Gamaliel Bradford's *American Portraits, 1875-1900* includes an entry for James alongside other notable writers of the time. Blind people therefore had the opportunity to hear about a writer whose work they could not yet read. The irony would no doubt have appalled an author who guarded his privacy and wrote some of his best fiction on the theme of overzealous biographers.

Second, Henry was not the first James recorded by talking book libraries. The earliest James entry is William James's *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, which was recorded in 1936, followed four years later by *The Philosophy of William James*. We should resist the temptation to read too much into the precedence given to philosophy and biography over fiction in these instances, however. As I've discussed elsewhere, the talking book library's paternalistic selection committee chose books thought to be morally elevating rather than merely entertaining (Rubery 109-128). The reading list therefore bore little resemblance to the tastes of actual readers, who largely wanted the same contemporary fiction being read by everyone else. It is thus hardly surprising that a life would be recorded before a fictional tale about a boy wanting (to quote Miles) "to see more life" (42).

Still, James is conspicuously absent from the list of titles recorded before 1942—nearly a decade after the first talking books went out to readers. The catalogs feature plenty of

nineteenth-century writers, including Dickens, Twain, Jane Austen, Honoré de Balzac, George Eliot, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Robert Louis Stevenson, since they were considered classics and, better yet, out of copyright. But contemporary titles populate the list, too: Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay*, and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. The eighty records required to hold Mitchell's novel suggest that something other than James's habit of being "too diffuse" kept him off the list.

The American Foundation for the Blind and Britain's Royal National Institute of Blind People teamed up to produce books since their collections were far smaller than those of other libraries. Funding from the federal government enabled the Library of Congress to record approximately seventy books per year, a fraction of the total number of books published in print. Blind people had fewer choices than the average citizen as a result: you could hear every volume of John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*, say, but nothing by James Joyce, Marcel Proust, or Virginia Woolf. Experimental fiction ranked low on the talking book library's list of priorities since the genre appealed to relatively few people. Who among its patrons would listen to those books when so many people found them impossible to read in print?

James's fiction represented a luxury to talking book libraries constrained by budgets limiting the number of books that could be recorded. Nominations faced rejection for any number of reasons. Long books were simply too expensive to record, whereas other books faced charges of indecency. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Joyce's *Dubliners*, for example, both had been rejected because of their frank treatment of modern life. Still other narratives were passed on because of their difficulty rather than indiscretions. British librarians recorded James's *The American*, for example, but rejected *The Wings of the Dove* as too

difficult. Although BBC radio occasionally read excerpts from James's fiction over the airwaves in accordance with its mission to support those arts with minority appeal, talking book libraries had no such mandate (Whitehead 17-18). One librarian worried that *The Portrait of a Lady* would be too challenging for auditors even though that title had been nominated in the first place because it was one of "the earlier, more straightforward" novels compared to James's late style. As the librarian's report concludes,

James's style is of course not easy to read aloud, and "the Lady" and most of the other characters being "various types of American character transplanted into and influenced by a European environment" will make it difficult to "put over" successfully the individual, mannered, style – plus the unmodern, fin-de-siecle background. (Ashton)

The very style that made James appealing to the book selection committee made him a problem for the recording studio. The nominator of *The Portrait* compromised by agreeing to test out narrators on an employee's personal copy of the novel before making a final decision. But, despite his enthusiasm for James, even that librarian agreed that "the later Henry James is practically unrecordable" (Bell).

The catalog's final revelation: *The Turn of the Screw*, the first of James's fiction made into a spoken word recording, was issued on nine records in 1942. At last blind veterans could experience the pleasures of James's prose for themselves. "A psychological horror story" is how the original catalog entry describes James's tale (*Catalog* 106). However, subsequent entries elaborated on the nature of the plot and point toward difficulties faced by the editors in

classifying a tale that does not fit within genre constraints. The American Foundation for the Blind's monthly magazine described the tale as a "terrifying ghost story," for example, before reassuring audiences that it was "a thrilling drama, which ends in victory for the governess"—an unusual choice of words in that they are both a spoiler and a questionable way to describe a story ending with a child's death ("New" 8).

Evidently, the frame narrative within James's tale was insufficient for the Library of Congress's recording studio. *The Turn of the Screw* is unusual, at least among the recordings that I have heard, in inserting a prefatory note to be read aloud before the main narrative, in this case warning auditors not to expect a typical ghost story or even a reliable narrator:

This book is a work of fiction which has been variously interpreted by readers and critics. To some, it is a ghost story; to most, however, it is a psychological study. Outwardly it is the story of a young Englishwoman who goes to an isolated estate to take charge of two children. The reader must decide for himself whether certain events in this tale were actual or whether they were hallucinations.¹

In other words, the framing tale within *The Turn of the Screw* was given a framing tale of its own. The recording thereby replicates the text's own anxiety about interpretation by providing instructions to a blind audience who might otherwise listen in the wrong way. To repeat Douglas's warning: "The story won't tell . . . not in any literal, vulgar way" (9).

The obvious difference between audiobooks and printed ones is the presence of another person's voice. John Brewster joined the American Foundation for the Blind's roster of

narrators in 1941 and went on to record over a dozen books, predominantly British titles such as George du Maurier's *Peter Ibbetson* and W. Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, before taking on James. The American Foundation for the Blind's Executive Director, Robert Irwin, placed Brewster on a list of elite narrators who were as popular among blind people as movie stars were among sighted people. According to Irwin's memoir, "The voices of these readers are as well-known in the homes of thousands of blind people as are the voices of their most intimate friends" (1955 100). Fan mail that I came across in the American Foundation for the Blind archives confirmed Brewster's popularity.

Brewster's reading style epitomizes the neutral delivery favored by the American Foundation for the Blind. According to that logic, keeping interpretation to a minimum helped make the experience of listening to a book resemble that of reading one in print. *Recording Books for the Blind*, a guidebook to which Brewster contributed, summed up this approach by warning narrators not "to overdo things, particularly in the matter of dramatization" when it came to reading fiction out loud (Helms 10). A fan from California complimented Brewster's voice for being pleasant without being distracting – a hazard of today's vogue for celebrity narrators. By contrast, Brewster's measured tone and inflections present the text in a distinctive way while at the same time, according to the Californian, "he reads with such complete sympathy and accord with the author's meaning that after the first recognition the listener is not conscious of his voice but only the significance of the words. Which, I suppose is a standard of perfection" (qtd in Irwin 1948). The American Foundation for the Blind's narrators were left with the task of figuring out the appropriate balance between entertainment and self-effacement.

Nearly everyone hears voices while reading, of course. One way of thinking about reading is as an inner voice generated by the page instead of the mind alone. To this end, the philosopher Peter Kivy describes silent reading as “a performance in the head of a story telling” (114). Psychologists have confirmed the role played by inner speech during silent reading, no matter whether that voice resembles the author’s, the reader’s, or a fictional character’s (or perhaps even that of an actor from the film adaptation) (Alderson-Day et al.). As Charles Fernyhough put it, “Silent reading is not a silent experience” (81).

Audiobooks go a step further than other books by determining what that voice in your head sounds like. While there may be tremendous variation among individuals reading silently, audiobooks ensure vocal consistency across minds. Auditors will hear John Brewster’s voice while listening to *The Turn of the Screw*, leaving little space for their own vocal preferences within a narrative that has already been interpreted, to some extent, by a third party—less inner voice than intrusive voice. (Brewster’s recording demonstrates how ideas about what count as “neutral” evolve over time, too. Modern audiences may find it impossible to tune out the actor’s received pronunciation [RP], then a standard accent among BBC radio broadcasters, as the reader from California did.) The risk is “vocal tyranny,” to borrow a phrase from the literary critic and technology skeptic Sven Birkerts, that leaves us powerless to hear the text in any other way (147). It is this third party’s voice, I’m arguing, that influences a narrative’s reception no matter how impersonally it might be read.

Casting may be the most contentious issue in the audiobook industry. Today’s studios strive to match the voice actor as closely as possible to the narrative when it comes to class, ethnicity, gender, race, nationality, sexuality, and other categories associated with audible as

well as visible markers of identity. Yet the narrator's identity is hardly straightforward in *The Turn of the Screw*, where we find not one but three speakers: the unnamed narrator who opens the story; Douglas, who reads the governess's manuscript aloud; and the governess herself. The frame narrative makes us acutely aware of the importance of point of view when interpreting the governess's manuscript. The device resembles those used by later authors, most famously Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, with the crucial difference that it is difficult to imagine that narrative being recited extemporaneously by Marlow. James sidesteps such implausibility by presenting us with a written tale being read aloud—a decision that, in terms of casting, raises complications of its own since we are left with a man reading aloud a manuscript written by a woman.

The frame narrative thereby forces the hand of audiobook producers before the recording has even begun. Whereas the book's audience can imagine any voice it desires—male, female, or some combination of the two—recording the book demands commitment to a specific gender. In response to this dilemma, audio publishers have come up with three ways of handling James's script. First, a man can read the entire script. The literal approach respects the fact that an anonymous, presumably male narrator recites the entire tale, including the governess's manuscript. Brewster's recording takes this approach. In fact, the American Foundation for the Blind recorded most of its records using male narrators until complaints from readers forced it to admit a more diverse range of voices into the recording studio. (No one wanted to hear *Jane Eyre* read by some middle-aged guy.)

Conversely, a woman can narrate the entire recording since the bulk of the tale is written in the heroine's first-person voice and the nameless frame narrator's gender is never

specified anyway (though circumstantial evidence points to a man). This relaxed approach concedes that many readers imagine the story being told in a woman's voice anyway, despite evidence to the contrary, and avoids the awkwardness of hearing a grown man ventriloquize a twenty-year old governess. (Again, the *Jane Eyre* problem.)

A third possibility takes the form of split narration in which a male narrator performs the frame narrative before surrendering the microphone to a woman to play the governess's role (or far more actors in dramatized versions with full casts). This compromise combines the benefits of the previous two approaches at the cost of departing from literal adherence to James's script—not one but two turns of the screw, as Douglas's audience would say.

But wait: it so happens that there's a fourth option. At least one studio has introduced a twist on the split narration model—dual narration in which the male voice dissolves into a woman's voice. If film studies use the term "dissolve" for gradual transitions from one image to another, sound studies might borrow the term to describe similarly gradual transitions from one voice to another. In this case, the actor Ben Elliot begins reciting the opening sentence of the governess's manuscript ("I remember the whole beginning"), then reads the next segment in harmony with his female counterpart, Penelope Rawlins ("as a succession of flights and drops"), before Elliot's voice fades out and we are left alone with Rawlins's solo voice ("a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong") (12). This approach capitalizes on the different genders at play while at the same time acknowledging their derivation from a common source, evoking a single persona cleaved in two. The maneuver reflects sonically what happens in the heads of those readers who overwrite the male speaker's voice with a woman's once the

governess enters the stage. (Top billing on the Naxos album cover deservedly goes to Rawlins over Elliot.)

Audiobook narrators say out loud what the page leaves to the imagination. Just as James's story leaves the exact nature of the transgressions to the audience's conjectures, it keeps mum on other aspects of the narrative including the sound of the characters' speech. We are told that Douglas "read with a fine clearness that was like a rendering to the ear of the beauty of his author's hand." What voice actor can live up to this impossibly high standard? Conflicting interpretations of how to render this beautiful hand appear in the gulf between Brewster's frictionless delivery and the "sandpaper voice" of Flo Gibson heard on a rival recording (S.J.H.). One suspects that James's line was less a stage direction than the flourish of a script written without an embodied speaker in mind. It is a phenomenon expressed best by Keats's line "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter" (176). Unheard narration will always be the sweetest.

Making sounds audible can itself be taken as evidence of interpretation. Case in point: it is sometimes unclear whether the governess hears a sound or merely imagines it. Vocalizing these sounds tilts our understanding of the case either way. It is useful to know when the governess hears "a small faint quaver of consenting consciousness" in Miles's speech whether this quaver is, in fact, audible or wishful thinking (48). Print lacks conclusive evidence for how words should sound out loud. That ambiguity constitutes one of the pleasures of reading, according to Eric Griffiths. Yet voice actors must take a stance one way or the other when confronted by "intonational ambiguities," as Griffiths calls them, making a line susceptible to multiple interpretations on the page (123). (One's pronunciation of the name "Mrs. Grose"

leads to similar distortions.) Such decisions impose a degree of certainty on a narrative otherwise lacking conviction.

Still other risks lie in undermining a sentence's original meaning by saying it out loud. Surely the governess means to convince us of Peter Quint's solidity when she explains, "I saw him as I see the letters I form on this page" (17-18). The sentiment depends for its effectiveness on duplicating the letters beheld by the conventional reader holding a book. Hearing the same line read aloud undermines the governess's claim, however, since the letters no longer appear before our eyes as they would on the page. The medium undermines the message. And if the letters exist here only in the mind's eye (or ear), then why not the phantoms too?

Hearing James's tale shifts attention away from the visibility of evil to its audibility. Ghosts peeping through windows may be less frightening in their behavior than in their speech—words reserved for their wards alone. For everyone else, the specters' most unnerving feature may be their muteness. As the governess reports after meeting Quint, "If I had met a murderer in such a place and at such an hour, we still at least would have spoken" (32). As a result, the narrative is driven as much by the impulse to discover what the children talk about with their former servants as what they do with them. The children's reticence encourages the governess to imagine the worst; "they're talking horrors!" she decides after watching Miles and Flora read a book together (37).

Confession, not confirmation, is the endpoint toward which the narrative moves, culminating in Miles's explanation for his expulsion from school: "Well—I said things" (63). The appeal of James's story has been attributed to the way it invites audiences to picture crimes against nature, to which one's eyes may be open or shut, whereas the most incriminating

evidence comes out of the mouths of babes. Mrs. Grose's faltering attempts to describe the "horrors" spewn from Flora's mouth ("On my honour, Miss, she says things—!" and "I've *heard—!*") cannot even be completed owing to their unspeakable depravity (56). The unsaid joins the unseen in provoking audiences to fill in the blanks. If no one agrees on the existence of the ghosts, then, the governess and Mrs. Grose are united when it comes to the children's unnatural speech. The suspense ultimately comes down to acts of storytelling that take full advantage of the oral medium—a ghost story holding us breathless before the fire.

The American Foundation for the Blind's talking books circumvented numerous hazards through a neutral style of narration that left interpretive decisions to the reader. But if the studio's 1942 recording played it straight, commercial audio publishers went in the opposite direction, hiring A-list film actors to make stories entertaining. The American Foundation for the Blind's manual warned narrators that "you do not try to turn a novel into a play" (Helms 10). By contrast, commercial studios encouraged actors to, well, act—to turn the novel into a play. To take a recent example, Emma Thompson marked up James's tale for Audible's 2015 recording as if it were a film script—notes in the margins signal where to "ratchet up the suspense" (Qtd in Biedenbarn). (Incidentally, James would have been accustomed to a theatrical style. Equally dramatic cues such as "Murder Coming," "Mystery," and "Terror To The End" can be found on the scripts used for Dickens's live readings [Collins 482-483]). Those who find James's script in need of further "ratcheting up" may opt for Audible's soundtrack edition, which adds a musical score, in the publisher's words, to "enhance the listening experience" ("Publisher's Summary"). The performances fall in the gray area between audiobooks and radio drama, which, by design,

leaves as little as possible to the reader's imagination. The result is a recording faithful to James's words while straying from one of their quintessential charms: ambiguity.

Reviews posted on Audible.com suggest I am not alone in viewing Thompson's bravura performance as a mixed success. The comments are nearly unanimous in applauding the award-winning actress's prowess. No one disagrees over whether Thompson's performance is good. And yet a number of listeners protest that the acting is *too* good.

As everyone knows, the governess's voice is notoriously ambiguous in print. James's switch from his customary third-person narration to a first-person voice succeeds in raising questions about the narrator's credibility. Whether the governess is a reliable narrator is an issue that hangs over the entire narrative and a crucial one when confronting the story's supernatural elements. The governess's swings between certainty and doubt, along with tantalizing hints and gaps in the manuscript, make this a vexed issue to resolve on the page.

Thompson's theatrics, by contrast, leave little room for audiences to interpret events for themselves. According to Gillian from Texas, "Ms. Thompson's delivery kind of makes it seem as though there actually is only one way of seeing the whole story, which takes a lot of the fun out of it." Others complain that Thompson goes beyond merely reading the words. Phyllis from Tennessee bluntly states: "I think Emma Thompson's narration was an interpretation." This is what many listeners would want. But it is not necessarily what readers want—and Jamesian readers, at that. Fans who value James's voice for its subtlety, shades of feeling, and especially silences are unlikely to applaud heavy-handed recitations. They are the ones who complain that Thompson's performance prevents audiences from making judgments for themselves, as the American Foundation for the Blind's recording warned would be necessary. Another disgruntled

listener protests of the Thompson recording: “it is HER interpretation of a book that is meant by the author to be interpreted by the reader” (“Mel”). One review even advises potential listeners to read the story in print first in order to avoid being influenced by Thompson’s slant (“Carole T.”). That advice brings us back to the earlier point about how recordings of James’s tale invite frame narratives of their own to prevent misreadings—or, in this case, misreading aloud.

Personally, I find *The Turn of the Screw* entertaining no matter who reads it. We are still getting James’s exact words, after all, even if we are getting interpretations of those words at the same time. The governess’s last words have stayed with me—haunted me, even—since hearing them read aloud, just as Miles’s last words about Peter Quint stay with her. “They are in my ears still,” she tells us shortly before revealing the child’s death (64). The statement represents a final moment of ambiguity that could refer either to Miles’s voice, still because it can never be heard again, or to a voice still ringing in her ears, never to be unheard. Hearing the story made me realize that the governess’s disclosure applies to her own words, too. They are in my ears still.

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¹ This transcription is taken from the American Foundation for the Blind’s 1942 recording, which was based on Macmillan’s print edition of *The Two Magics: The Turn of the Screw, Covering End* published in 1898. All references will be to that edition.