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Cyndy Hendershot  
*Texas Tech University*

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**THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED IN  
M. R. JAMES'S *MARTIN'S CLOSE***

Cyndy Hendershot

*Texas Tech University*

In "Dialectic of Fear," Franco Moretti suggests that within the literature of terror, the repressed memory of the imaginary phase returns "disguised as a monster."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, terror literature, or Gothic literature, "expresses the unconscious content and at the same time *hides* it" (Moretti 103). Moretti further argues that to represent the monster as a female means little distortion of the unconscious content (104). Within the imaginary phase it is the mother who represents the values which the symbolic order forces the subject to repress. Thus "the return of the repressed" Moretti discusses is the return of the imaginary mother (98). Moretti discusses this theory in relation to *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*: I submit that this theory may be applied to most supernatural beings which haunt Gothic texts. "The return of the repressed" may thus be applied to ghosts as well as to the monsters which manifest themselves in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*.

In this essay I will examine M. R. James's ghost story *Martin's Close* as an example of "the return of the repressed." Within this story imaginary experience is embodied in Ann Clark, a woman who returns from the dead after being murdered by her lover, George Martin. I propose that both Ann and her ghost represent imaginary experience repressed by both Martin and the seventeenth-century English society in which he lives. Although the story reveals imaginary experience in Ann, Ann's ghost, and Ann and Martin's relationship, it also conceals the threat posed by imaginary experience to the symbolic order because the imaginary mother is portrayed as a threat only to those who attempt to transgress symbolic law.

Several aspects of Ann Clark's character make it possible to read her as a representative of the imaginary order. Ann is described as retarded, "one to whom Providence had not given the full use of her intellects."<sup>2</sup> In Lacanian theory, the imaginary phase is an experience prior to language, an experience dominated by identification and duality. The imaginary is a time when the libidinal flow is directed towards everything, and the child is incapable of making distinctions between itself and its mother's body, or itself and any objects around it. The imaginary order offers an alternative to symbolic culture because it posits a radical androgyny and bisexuality. The imaginary infant has no concept of sexual difference, or any type of difference. Because the imaginary continues to coexist along with the symbolic when the

infant enters the symbolic, it continues to exist as an alternative to phallogocentric culture.

Although the imaginary continues to exist, it is repressed in the subject and, as Juliet Mitchell notes, "can only be secondarily acquired in a distorted form."<sup>3</sup> Thus if we read Ann Clark as a representative of imaginary experience, her mental retardation may be read as a symbolic interpretation of the imaginary. To the symbolic order, which is structured by language and institutions, Ann may appear retarded. Because psychoanalytic theory describes the imaginary in the trope of a "prehistoric era" which exists prior to the culture of the oedipus complex, Ann Clark's inability to express herself in appropriate symbolic language links her with the imaginary order.

The inability of Ann to express herself in symbolic terms extends to the story itself. The story of Ann's murder and return as a ghost is something which seems to defy language. At the beginning of the story, the narrator asks what he should be told about Ann's story. His friend, the rector, replies: "I haven't the slightest idea" (72). Furthermore, the account of Martin's trial is not published until a century later, and even then only in longhand form. Therefore, the difficulty of expressing the story in language is emphasized and links Ann's story to the imaginary because imaginary experience is pre-language and can be only unsatisfactorily expressed in language.

Ann's appearance further links her with the repressed memory of imaginary experience. She is described as being "very uncomely in her appearance" (78). Furthermore, a boy called to testify at Martin's trial describes Ann in monstrous terms: "she would stand and jump up and down and clap her arms like a goose...she was of such a shape that it could not be no one else" (87). Ann's monstrous appearance, both before her death and after, connects her with Moretti's theory of "the return of the repressed." Because the imaginary order poses a threat to the symbolic, it must be portrayed as monstrous. It must, as Moretti argues, literally frighten the reader into accepting the dominant values of the society (107). Thus Ann's monstrous appearance combined with her supposed retardation provoke fear and disgust in the reader rather than attraction and identification.

Furthermore, the threat of Ann's ghost is presented as being a threat only to Martin, a subject who attempts to transgress symbolic law in his relationship with Ann. The story links Martin and Ann's relationship to imaginary experience in several ways. Martin and Ann communicate through music rather than spoken language. The prosecuting attorney at Martin's trial comments that Martin and Ann

had a signal for their meetings. He states that Martin "should whistle the tune that was played at the tavern: it is a tune, as I am informed, well known in that country, and has a burden, '*Madam, will you walk, will you talk with me?*' " (78). Thus even though the content of the song has symbolic signification, Martin and Ann rely on music to communicate. This coincides with Silverman's contention that music "images the fusion of mother and child" and thus recalls imaginary experience.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Martin and Ann's relationship may be said to invoke imaginary pleasure in that it eschews language, the cornerstone of the symbolic order.

Martin and Ann's relationship further suggests the imaginary because it undermines conventional hierarchical relationships. In the symbolic the subject is encouraged to identify with one position; in the imaginary the infant identifies with a variety of positions. Martin and Ann ignore class hierarchies in their relationship. Within the symbolic their relationship would be one of master/slave. Martin, a gentleman, would never meet Ann, a poor, retarded woman, on equal terms. The story, however, suggests that Ann and Martin's relationship is one of equals. Martin asks Ann to dance at a public party, and their meetings appear to be well known to everyone in the village. Therefore, their relationship undermines the master/slave hierarchy and posits equality between men and women and between people of different social classes.

Ultimately, however, Martin succumbs to the pressures of the symbolic order. He ends his relationship with Ann in order to enter into an arranged marriage with "a young gentlewoman of that country, one suitable every way to his own condition...such an arrangement was on foot that seemed to promise him a happy and a reputable living" (79). Martin thus decides to abandon his desire for imaginary pleasure (embodied in his relationship with Ann) for a position fully within the symbolic. He gives up his notion of woman as equal and opts for woman as commodity, the view of woman encouraged by the symbolic order. The arranged marriage posits a woman as "pure exchange value," what Luce Irigaray calls the virginal woman in phallogocentric society.<sup>5</sup> In Martin and Ann's relationship, the phallogocentric economy does not intrude on their pleasure, but with Martin's decision to be a "respectable citizen," he begins to view women only as commodities.

Martin tries to murder his attraction to the imaginary through the murder of Ann. However, his repressed desire for imaginary experience comes back to haunt him. Ann's ghost does not threaten him physically, it only reminds him of his desire by singing the song which served as their signal. Ultimately, however, Ann's ghost does destroy

Martin because it is used as evidence in his murder trial. But although other people see and hear Ann's voice, its threat is directed only at Martin. Martin is thus condemned by the symbolic order for flirting with imaginary experience. His executed body is interned in "Martin's Close," a bit of land "with quickset on all sides, and without any gates or gap leading into it" (72). Martin is thus presented as an example of what flirting with imaginary desire will lead to, death and isolation from the community. The story to some extent supports this interpretation of Martin and Ann's story through its title: *Martin's Close* suggests the "moral" lesson to be learned from Ann and Martin's actions.

*Martin's Close* thus both reveals and cloaks imaginary experience. The imaginary returns, but in a monstrous form. Although, as Moretti suggests, the supernatural female is more threatening because it recalls more directly the imaginary mother, the subversive qualities associated with Ann are undermined because they threaten only Martin. The danger of Ann's ghost lies in the "evidence" it provides for symbolic law. Thus, to a certain extent, the radical alternative posited in the imaginary is co-opted by the symbolic. This co-option is evident in the judge's pronouncement to Martin that "I hope to God...that she [Ann's ghost] will be with you by day and by night till an end is made of you" (89). Ann returns embodying repressed imaginary experience, but ultimately she is transformed into a weapon in the arsenal of symbolic law.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Franco Moretti, "Dialectic of Fear," *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, et al. (New York, 1988), p. 103.

<sup>2</sup>M. R. James, "Martin's Close," *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (New York, 1988), p. 77.

<sup>3</sup>Julliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and Women* (New York, 1974), p. 404.

<sup>4</sup>Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Indianapolis, 1988), p. 96.

<sup>5</sup>Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter. (Ithaca, 1985), p. 186.