

# “All the voices and light footsteps”: *Macbeth* and the Incantatory Power of Speech in “The Aspern Papers”

CARMINE G. DI BIASE  
Jacksonville State University

When he wrote “The Aspern Papers” Henry James was inspired, at least in part, by Alexander Pushkin’s “The Queen of Spades,” which first appeared in 1834 but which James read in Prosper Mérimée’s 1849 French translation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Neil Cornwell for James’s use of Mérimée’s translation of Pushkin’s story (2004: 193–210). “The Queen of Spades,” unlike “The Aspern Papers,” is told by an omniscient narrator, but the similarities between the two are striking. Pushkin’s central character, Hermann, overhears the story of an old countess who possesses the secret to fate: she knows the identity of three cards that will allow a gambler to defy chance and win whatever sum is wagered. Driven by greed and lust for such power, Hermann begins a disingenuous courtship with the countess’s young waiting maid, Lizaveta, who is flattered by him. Thinking that she is planning a secret encounter with him, Lizaveta inadvertently reveals to him how to reach the countess’s sleeping chamber. Hermann stows himself there, hiding quietly until the countess enters, whereupon he emerges and demands that she reveal to him the secret of the cards. Sensing her resistance, he draws his pistol and threatens her, and the terrified old woman collapses in fear and dies. Later, her ghost appears to the badly shaken and drunk Hermann and tells him to play the three, the seven and the ace, and to wait twenty-four hours before playing the second and the third. Afterwards, she warns him, he must never play again, and he will be forgiven for having caused her death. Soon, he finds himself at a card table. He wagers a stunning sum on the three and wins, and the next night he wins twice as much with the seven. On the third night he thinks he has

In both stories, a male villain seeking “esoteric knowledge” (255),<sup>2</sup> as James’s narrator calls it, attempts to steal it from the vulnerable, aged owner, whose death is hastened as a result. Both villains believe their fate is determined by women who in some way are associated with witches. And A.D. Briggs, who was the first to suggest Pushkin as a source,<sup>3</sup> identified a shared “architecture,” consisting of three climactic moments: “infiltration, confrontation and aftermath.” This architecture “seems custom made for the theatre,” he added, noting that Pushkin’s story had inspired an opera by Tchaikovsky and James’s story a stage play by Michael Redgrave (57). All of this, however, could also be said of *Macbeth*, which I believe might be the most profound of all the literary influences on “The Aspern Papers,” an influence rooted in James’s fascination with the incantatory power of human speech and Shakespeare’s dramatization of it.<sup>4</sup>

There is no evidence to suggest that Pushkin himself drew from *Macbeth*, but these similarities, and others, suggest that his story and *Macbeth* could have lived side by side in James’s mind.<sup>5</sup> Hermann, for example, at a climactic

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played the ace and proclaims victory before he even looks at the card he has played. When he finally looks down at it, he realizes, to his horror, that it is not the ace but the queen of spades, one eye winking at him mockingly, the expression looking eerily like that of the old countess. After this defeat he loses his mind and spends the rest of his days in an asylum, speaking to no one, rehearsing to himself, over and over, his fatal mistake.

<sup>2</sup> All references to “The Aspern Papers” will be to the first book edition of 1888, as published by The Library of America, unless otherwise specified. When variants are significant, references will be made to the serialized edition, which appeared earlier that year in three installments in *The Atlantic Monthly* and to The New York Edition (NYE) of 1908.

<sup>3</sup> See also Neil Cornwell and Joseph O’Leary, whose more recent studies confirm Briggs’s discovery.

<sup>4</sup> James was so steeped in Shakespeare that it is often difficult to know whether he wants his allusions to the poet’s works to be noticed or, especially in subtle cases, James is writing under Shakespeare’s influence quite unconsciously. Peter Rawlings, who has examined James’s use of Shakespeare in “The Birth Place” and “The Papers,” says quite rightly that “the practical and methodological difficulties of distinguishing between allusion and suffusion, say, are immense” (96-97).

<sup>5</sup> What Adeline Tintner has said about James’s use of Shakespeare and Balzac seems relevant here: “In *The Ambassadors*, which James counted his favorite of his productions, his two great masters, Balzac and Shakespeare, rub shoulders without causing any bruises and without our needing to be too much aware of specific sources. What the reader gains is the wisdom and experience that James had himself gained from his lifelong apprenticeship to those great fabulists” (321). Balzac of course was a much greater influence on James

moment, pulls out his pistol and calls the countess: "Old witch!" (215). This is the only instance of the word in Pushkin's story, but it richly informs her mysterious apparition in the end, where she gives Hermann the false knowledge that will undo him. He never masters the secret of the cards, just as Macbeth never savors the power of the crown; and both villains are driven mad, their insanity manifesting itself in hallucinations. Macbeth sees the ghosts of his victims, apparitions invoked by the witches, and Hermann sees the ghost of his victim, the "old witch" herself. The countess is "surrounded," moreover, by "three elderly maids" (213); and later, at a ball, Lizaveta, the countess's young waiting maid, is accosted by another group of three women (217). These groups of three might have evoked for James the three witches of *Macbeth*.

The three women who occupy the Bordereau household are all dark figures, and all, to one degree or another, are aligned with witches. "Perhaps the people are afraid of the Misses Bordereau," says Mrs. Prest. "I daresay they have the reputation of witches" (232). The narrator, by the time he is negotiating his rent with Juliana, agrees: "She was such a subtle old witch that one could never tell where one stood with her" (287).<sup>6</sup> A little later, after her disturbing meeting with the narrator, who refuses her offer of Aspern's portrait for a thousand pounds, Juliana lies in her bed, asleep and exhausted, looking indeed like a witch:

Miss Bordereau had been divested of her green shade, but (it was not my fortune to behold Juliana in her nightcap) the upper half of her face was covered by the fall of a piece of dingy lacelike muslin, a sort of extemporized hood which, wound round her head, descended to the end of her nose, leaving nothing visible but her white withered cheeks and puckered mouth, closed tightly and, as it were, consciously. (294)

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than Pushkin was, but in "The Aspern Papers," Pushkin seems to "rub shoulders" with Shakespeare in much the same way. Rawlings takes Tintner to task, saying that her work "exhibits many of the delights and pitfalls of hunting for allusions to and uses of Shakespeare in James's fiction" (97).

<sup>6</sup> O'Leary observes that Hermann, in "The Queen of Spades," also calls the countess an "old witch." See also Amy Green's compelling argument that, in creating Juliana, James might have had an aged Juliet in mind (20-54). James's narrator, pondering "Romeo's vows," wonders if "Juliana, on summer nights in her youth, might have murmured down from open windows at Jeffrey Aspern, but Miss Tita was not a poet's mistress any more than I was a poet" (260).

She and her niece are “mysterious” (228), and the narrator wonders “what mystic rites of ennui” they “celebrated in their darkened rooms” (256). Olympia, too, the “white-faced” maidservant, wears “a shawl in the fashion of a hood” and “flitted” into the house’s “impenetrable regions” (236).

This common element of witchcraft, because it involves the power of incantation, or naming, is what makes *Macbeth* resonate in “The Aspern Papers” more consistently, and more poetically, than any other literary source. The most compelling resonances occur on the level of diction. James’s use of the word “what,” for example, is suggestive. “You speak the language so beautifully,” says the narrator when he first meets Miss Tita: “might I ask what you are?” (238). In *Macbeth*, when Banquo first sees the witches, he asks, “What are these, / So withered and so wild in their attire?” and Macbeth is more direct: “What are you?” (I.3.39-40, 47).<sup>7</sup> Especially striking, however, is James’s use of “weird.” This word is rare in his work. Consider first its occurrence in *The Bostonians*:

It wasn’t a party—Olive didn’t go to parties; it was one of those weird meetings she was so fond of.

“What kind of meetings do you refer to? You speak as if it were a rendezvous of witches on the Brocken.”

“Well, so it is; they are all witches and wizards, mediums, and spirit-rappers, and roaring radicals.” (805)

The weird sisters of *Macbeth* come to mind here, as they do in “The Aspern Papers,” where “weird” occurs only once, and in connection with Juliana: “in my heart,” says the narrator, “I thought the old woman capable of any weird manoeuvre” (293). It is conspicuous that this single instance of “weird” only came in with the first book edition.<sup>8</sup> The word is also rare in Shakespeare’s works: there are only six instances—all of them in *Macbeth*, and all in reference to

<sup>7</sup> Even the porter, imagining himself tending to “hell gate,” uses this construction: “What are you?” he calls out, to those who are knocking on the other side of the castle gate, the morning after the king’s murder (II.3.2, 15). And it is notable that James, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, uses the construction “what are you?” in connection with “horror”:

*It was not that Madame Merle had at last thought it the right time to be insolent; for this was not what was most apparent. It was a worse horror than that. “Who are you—what are you?” Isabel murmured. “What have you to do with my husband?”* (723)

<sup>8</sup> In *The Atlantic Monthly* “weird manoeuvre” had been “such a manoeuvre” (577).

the witches<sup>9</sup>—and the word, which in his time meant fatal, aligns the witches with the three fates. Lady Macbeth refers to the prophecy of the witches as "fate and metaphysical aid" (I.5.28); and Macbeth calls the mysterious dagger, a delusion brought on by their prophecy, a "fatal vision" (II.1.37).<sup>10</sup> This too is how James used the word. His narrators, wondering if Tita will hand over the papers, says, "I expected her now to settle my fate" (309). O'Leary observes that this moment echoes perhaps "The Queen of Spades," in which, again, Hermann's initial encounter with Lizaveta "decided his fate" ("Pushkin in 'The Aspern Papers'"; Pushkin 210). Here, however, the influence of Pushkin could have operated on James in perfect harmony with that of Shakespeare.

Absent from Pushkin's story is any suggestion of the witches' brew and their elusive power to charm their loathsome ingredients. This is subtly evoked by James's narrator, to whom Aspern's papers are "crumpled scraps," as "odious" to him (317) as the "finger of birth-strangled babe" or even the king's crown are to Macbeth (IV.1.12, 30). What both characters want, and never achieve, is the power to animate the things of the world—organs, limbs, crowns, love letters—which have been severed from their life source. The theme is more explicit in "The Turn of the Screw," where the governess gloats over her ability to sway Mrs. Grose, whom she makes "a receptacle of lurid things"; indeed, "had I wished to mix a witch's broth and proposed it with assurance, she would have held out a large clean saucepan" (689). This power to animate is verbal; it is poetry. It is what Othello demonstrates in his mesmerizing monologue on "the anthropophagi" and the "men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (I.3.144-45). The irony of Othello's conclusion—"This only is the witchcraft I have used" (I.3.169)—left a deep impression on James.<sup>11</sup> It dramatized for

<sup>9</sup> The witches call themselves the "weird sisters" once (I.3.32); Macbeth calls them "weird" three times (I.5.8, III.4.134, and IV.1.158) and Banquo does twice (II.1.21, III.1.2).

<sup>10</sup> In Holinshed's account of Macbeth, which was Shakespeare's source, there are "a sort of witches" (209), but they are different and separate from the "three women in strange and wild apparel": these are "the *weird sisters*," the "goddesses of destinie," who meet Macbeth and tell him his fate (210-11). In *Macbeth*, however, witches and "weird sisters" are one and the same. Shakespeare, according to Jacqueline Simpson, might have been the first to conflate the two (17-18).

<sup>11</sup> "These words," says Adrian Poole, "are vital to James's imagination" ("Henry James, War and Witchcraft" 302). In a letter of 1880, James speaks of his Daisy Miller as precisely such an innocent as Desdemona is. "The whole idea of the story," he wrote, "is the little tragedy of a light, thin, natural, unsuspecting creature being sacrificed, as it were, to a

him the power of poetic creation, which in “The Art of Fiction” he describes thus: “when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into reverberations” (52). The “man of genius” in “The Aspern Papers” is dead, and so are his papers: “but the situation,” says the narrator, “had been different when the man’s own voice was mingled with his song. That voice, by every testimony, was one of the sweetest<sup>12</sup> ever heard. ‘Orpheus and the Maenads!’ was the exclamation that rose to my lips when I first turned over his correspondence” (231). Aspern’s lover, Juliana, is the only living person who can resurrect that voice: “I think I had an idea,” says the narrator, “that she read Aspern’s letters over every night or at least pressed them to her withered lips. I would have given a good deal to have a glimpse of the latter spectacle” (249).<sup>13</sup> Her refusal to utter Aspern’s name accentuates the authority of her voice.

As a character in his own story, the narrator fancies himself capable of summoning the spirit of Jeffrey Aspern: “I had invoked him and he had come; he hovered before me half the time” (254). There is a certain pathetic vanity about this, as there is when he utters Jeffrey Aspern’s name for the first time to Tita: “I watched her well as I pronounced that name but I saw nothing wonderful. Why should I indeed—was not Jeffrey Aspern the property of the human race?” (267). What the narrator lacks is the power to charm. In James, “charm” and its variants “slip off his pen,” says Adrian Poole, “with surprising and even irritating frequency,” but “something is always *at work*,” he stresses, “when the epithet ‘charming’ is deployed, or the noun and the verb, to charm and be charmed” (“Henry James and Charm” 115). In short, the word often carries in James the same dark meaning it carries in *Macbeth*<sup>14</sup>: incantation or spell. In “The Aspern Papers,” which Poole never mentions, James uses

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social rumpus that went on quite over her head,” and, alluding to Othello’s monologue, he assures his reader: “This is the only witchcraft I have used” (122-23).

<sup>12</sup> Significantly, in the NYE “sweetest” became “most charming” (7). As is discussed below, “charm” and its variants are charged, in “The Aspern Papers,” with the sense of incantation.

<sup>13</sup> In the NYE “the latter spectacle” becomes “those solemnities” (35), suggesting a dark ritual.

<sup>14</sup> James’s use of “charm” also evokes Hawthorne, who “reminds us,” says Poole, “of the deeper, darker meaning of ‘charm’, its associations with magic, with witchcraft, with the occult. These are the only meanings that Shakespeare and his first audiences would

the word in precisely this way. The narrator, for example, attempting to gain control over Tita, "poured treasures of information about Venice into her ears, described Florence and Rome, discoursed to her on the charms and advantages of travel" (276). The passage might evoke Lady Macbeth's plot to corrupt her husband: "Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear" (I.5.24-25). Only when the narrator becomes the teller of his tale, however, will he acquire what James would call, in his "Introduction to *The Tempest*," the "power of constitutive speech": this, he says, echoing Lady Macbeth, is what allowed Shakespeare "to make of our poor world a great flat table for receiving the glitter and clink of outpoured treasure" (1211).<sup>15</sup>

This crucial distinction, between the narrator as a character in his own story and the narrator as the teller of it, has been most insightfully addressed by Philip Horne, who has unearthed an important allusion to *Macbeth*. In the 1888 version, the narrator, pondering Tita's unsettling proposal, describes his gondola ride thus: "He rowed me away and I sat there prostrate, groaning softly to myself, with my hat pulled over my face" (315). For the New York Edition, James changed "face" to "brow" (136), which, as Horne notes, echoes Malcolm, in the England scene, urging Macduff to express his grief: "What, man, ne'er pull your hat upon your brows. / Give sorrow words" (IV.iii.209-10). This moment speaks to how James's "publishing scoundrel" (303) will become the eloquent teller of his own story. Horne suggests that, "if the narrator behaves badly in the action of the tale his conduct in the telling of it is a different matter and that the meanings in this allusion (if we choose to take it) are not beyond the range of his narration" (*Revision* 225-66). This allusion to the England scene (I do choose to take it) may not be the only one. In discussing his plot with Mrs. Prest, the narrator is self-incriminating: "Hypocrisy, duplicity are my only chance. I'm

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have recognised, most notably in plays where magic is overt such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*" ("Henry James and Charm" 120).

<sup>15</sup> What Nadia Fusini says with regard to "The Birth Place" applies equally to the narrator of "The Aspern Papers": "it is part of our human, all too human nature, to want to pry into the affairs of others, to look too closely and curiously and impertinently into the lives of others—perhaps because we are dissatisfied with our own" (155). And perhaps the narrator can only become a writer when he realizes that Jeffrey Aspern is not in his private letters to Juliana but in the poems that have been available all along. The name of "the creator," says Fusini, "is the name of the work," and it is the work that "names the creator" (159). This observation is perfectly in keeping with James's own view, expressed in his introduction to *The Tempest*, that Shakespeare is "effectually locked up and imprisoned in the artist" and can only be known through his works (1209).

sorry for it, but for Jeffrey Aspern's sake I would do worse still" (234). That last clause would become, in the New York Edition, "but there's no baseness I wouldn't commit for Jeffrey Aspern's sake" (12), another echo of Malcolm, perhaps, who enumerates Macbeth's vices only to incriminate himself: "But there's no bottom, none, / In my voluptuousness" (IV.3.60-61).

The theme that informs this scene, and indeed all of *Macbeth*, is, as I have written elsewhere,<sup>16</sup> the power of naming. It is most vividly dramatized of course in the scene with the witches at their cauldron, chanting the names of their ingredients and establishing their power over them. This scene responds to the England scene, where in similar catalogue fashion, Malcolm accuses himself of being capable of unspeakable crimes. He is testing Macduff to see if he, like Macbeth, will embrace such criminality as well; but Malcolm is not merely pretending: he is peering into the cauldron, or "cistern" (IV.3.63) that is his own soul and naming every crime of which he too is capable. Thus, he gains control over them, "charming" them in the same way that the witches do the ingredients of their "charmèd pot" (IV.1.9). Like the names of his vices, however, or of the brew's ingredients, proper names and titles—such as Glamis, Cawdor and King—also have an incantatory power. Macbeth's real desire is not to be king but to have the power to determine his own identity, to name himself; hence the deep irony that, by Duncan's authority, he inherits the name, and treasonous character, of Cawdor. And this power to name oneself is exactly what James's narrator wants.

This relationship between Macbeth and Cawdor echoes that between James's narrator and John Cumnor. The narrator's name might already be known to the Misses Bordereau because, like the rebuffed Cumnor, he has published his studies. Mrs. Prest tells him, "you will have to change your name" (235), but he has already seen to the problem: "I drew out of my pocket-book a visiting-card, neatly engraved with a name that was not my own" (235).<sup>17</sup> When he first enters the Bordereau house, he presents his card to the maidservant thus: "I took my false card out of my pocket and held

<sup>16</sup> See "I am as I have Spoken": The Act of Naming in *Macbeth*."

<sup>17</sup> When, for the NYE, James changed "a name that was not my own" to "a well-chosen *nom de guerre*" (13), was he perhaps recalling, with some irony, Macbeth the soldier, whose sword "smoked with bloody execution," and of whom the bloodied captain says: "brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name" (I.2.16)?



it up to her, smiling as if it were a magic token" (236).<sup>18</sup> The feeble power of this card becomes clear when he reveals his real name and that he had been Cumnor's colleague. Tita seems willfully naive: "Gracious, gracious!" she says. "I feel as if you were a new person, now that you have got a new name" (299, 300). Tita seems to know that, like Macbeth, who inherits both the title and the treasonous character of the former Thane of Cawdor, her tenant inherits, at this climactic moment, a similarly dreaded title—"publishing scoundrel"—from his own predecessor. One might even hear, in the name Cumnor, an echo of the name Cawdor.<sup>19</sup>

All of this happens, in both works, amid an almost palpable silence. James's Venice is so quiet that it seems he took its nickname, *La Serenissima*, literally. The hushed setting of "The Aspern Papers" so heightens the incantatory potential of speech that even a character's silence is charged with meaning. James's narrator tells Tita that he "wanted quiet" (239), but what disturbs him most is reticence, especially Juliana's. His reluctance to utter Jeffrey Aspern's name points to his acute awareness of the signifying power with which the sound of that name would land on his ears, if only Juliana—the only living person with true authority to do so—would "pronounce" it: "her lips," however, "never formed in my hearing the syllables that meant so much for her" (288). For James's narrator, all experience is aural, and it is measured in syllables, as it is for Macbeth: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day / To the last syllable of recorded time" (V.5.19-21). James must have been highly sensitive to the presence of this theme in Shakespeare's play. When Macbeth asks the witches, "What is't you do?" they taunt him with a reply that suggests the ultimate silence—"A deed without a name" (IV.1.71)—as if to mock him and his wife for avoiding the word "murder" and resorting instead to "deed,"<sup>20</sup> a euphemism. James's male

<sup>18</sup> For the NYE, in a remark leading up to this passage regarding the visiting card, James changed "mentioned" and "mention" (231-32) to "name" (8), as if he wanted to accentuate this theme.

<sup>19</sup> O'Leary says that this card "echoes perhaps the losing card Hermann plays at the end of the game," and that James might have had the name Cumnor from Julius Mickle's "Ballad of Cumnor Hall" and the novel it inspired, Walter Scott's *Kenilworth* ("Pushkin in 'The Aspern Papers'").

<sup>20</sup> By the time that all three witches say, "A deed without a name," in unison, the Macbeths have used "deed" evasively eleven times: I.7.14 and 24; II.1.62; II.2. 10, 14, 36, 70, and 76; III.2.45 and 47; and III.4.145.

characters, especially during this period of his work, “control with language,” as Greg Zacharias has shown, whereas the feminine characters “control with silence” (149). In “The Aspern Papers,” the narrator’s attempt to control the Misses Bordereau with his deceitful use of language is mocked by the reticence of Juliana and also, ultimately, by the permanent silence of Jeffrey Aspern, whose papers go up in flames at the hands of Miss Tita.

The hushed setting also accentuates the villain’s fear of discovery, which in both works is embodied in the sound of footsteps on stone floors and the sound, or sensation, of his pounding heart. Macbeth, pondering his crime, asks himself, “why do I yield to that suggestion / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs / Against the use of nature?” (I.3.134-37); and he fears that the stones under his feet might “prate of my whereabouts” (II.1.59). This complex image, which occurs often in “The Aspern Papers,”<sup>21</sup> might evoke the floorboards and the wild palpitations of the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” which itself bears signs of the influence of *Macbeth*. However, the lexical and imagistic echoes of *Macbeth* in “The Aspern Papers” suggest that Shakespeare, and not Poe, was the more direct influence.<sup>22</sup> In Piazza San Marco, where James’s narrator attempts to charm Tita into complicity, speech mingles happily with the sounds of footsteps:

The whole place, of a summer’s evening, under the stars and with all the lamps, all the voices and light footsteps on marble (the only sounds of the arcades that enclose it), is like an open-air saloon dedicated to cooling drinks and to a still finer degustation—that of the exquisite impressions received during the day. (259)

The piazza forms a contrast with the Bordereau household, which, like that of the Macbeths, is closed and almost utterly silent. When he first sees the house,

<sup>21</sup> Unlike Macbeth, Pushkin’s Hermann has no palpitations. His “heart,” as he intrudes upon the countess, “beat regularly” (213).

<sup>22</sup> Burton R. Pollin points out “a slight but meaningful two-word phrase, ‘damned spot,’ linking Lady Macbeth’s guilt and would-be purgation with ‘The Tell-Tale Heart.’ Parallels at once appear, between the innocent, benevolent, father-surrogates in both plots; the need to avoid semblances of criminality; emphasis upon bloodshed and ‘washing away’ the ‘tell-tale’ signs; the madness that comes from ‘thinking on it’ (Lady Macbeth and the narrator); the evenhanded justice overtaking such dire murder. The parallel chains seem to stretch out further and further” (161). It is possible, moreover, that Poe’s life, particularly his engagement to Sarah Helen Whitman, exerted some influence over James as he conceived of Jeffrey Aspern and Juliana Bordereau (Kennedy 17-18).

the narrator "looked at the place with my heart beating" (236); when Tita tells him that Juliana indeed has the papers—"Oh, she has got everything!" (277)—her words "caused all my pulses to throb" (277), and like the words of the weird sisters, which Macbeth often repeats to himself, so Tita's words resound in the narrator's mind: "'Oh, she has got everything!'" echoed so in my consciousness" (278), as if that consciousness had the echoing properties of stone. The scene in which the narrator makes his attempt at the papers might, indeed, evoke Macbeth as he approaches Duncan's chamber. James's villain, however, though he proceeds "with a light tread" (296), is betrayed by the floor. "I heard your step" (297), says Tita, which surprises him, and the two of them "strolled through the fine superfluous hall, where on the marble floor—particularly as at first we said nothing—our footsteps were more audible than I had expected" (298).<sup>23</sup>

When he finally does intrude, the silence is the same: "There was no sound—my footstep caused no one to stir" (302). Juliana's words then break this utter silence with the full, crushing force of truth: "Ah, you publishing scoundrel!" (303). This climactic moment is a powerful, humiliating act of naming; "neither shall I ever forget the tone" (303), says the narrator. The words are as terrifying as Macduff's outcry, upon discovering the murdered king: "Ring the alarm bell! Murder and treason! (II.3.73). There is nothing unique, of course, about this, but if this murder scene and its immediate aftermath had in fact influenced James, then surely he would also have been influenced by the ominous knocking at the gate. In fact James stressed this very moment when he wrote about *Macbeth*. Disappointed by Tommaso Salvini's production, James recalled an earlier one which had fully exploited the power of silence to intensify the sense of fear leading up to the knocking at the gate. When Charles Kean "staggered out of the castle," James wrote, "with the daggers in his hands, blanched and almost dumb, already conscious, in the vision of his fixed eyes, of the far fruits of his deed, he brought with

<sup>23</sup> This heightened sense of hearing, which is traditionally associated with witches, aligns the characters of "The Aspern Papers" more closely with those of *Macbeth* than with those of "The Queen of Spades." Pushkin's countess, in fact, is loud and coarse, and hard of hearing. Note her response to Lizaveta, who reads to her from a book: "Louder! What's wrong with you, old girl? Lost your voice or something?" (206). Juliana's hearing, by contrast, is acute. As she tells the narrator, "I hear very well" (242).

him a kind of hushed terror, which has lingered in my mind for many years as a great tragic effect" (176).<sup>24</sup> Salvini's production, however, had fallen short:

That knocking is of great importance,—that knocking is almost everything; this is what I mean by saying that everything in the scene hangs together. Signor Salvini should have read De Quincey's essay before he arranged those three or four vague, muffled, impersonal thumps, behind the back scene. Those thumps would never have frightened Macbeth; there is nothing heart-shaking in those thumps. (177)

As De Quincey had understood so well, the Macbeth household, silent and sleepless, is closed off from the temporal world, which by contrast is marked by speech and sound in general, and the knocking at the gate represents the forcible resumption of time. James was intimately familiar with the acoustical properties of a wooden theatre<sup>25</sup>—with the voices and the tympanic footsteps made by the "poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage" (V.5.24-25)—and how fully the knocking at a stage door can embody fear. In "The Aspern Papers," the word "knock" occurs only once, but in a most significant place, landing, with great emphasis, as the conclusion not only of a sentence but of a paragraph: "My door is shut," says Juliana to the narrator, "but you may sometimes knock" (275). Like Macbeth, James's narrator does not knock; both of them intrude silently, by stealth, and then fail, of course, to

<sup>24</sup> Silence, says Rawlings, is one of the features which characterize the influence of Shakespeare on James: "'Shakespeare'—constituted for James not least in terms of overwhelming and suggestive senses of absence, mystery, silence and all things enigmatic and imponderable—is to an almost unfathomable extent the allusive medium of his criticism, fiction, drama and immense epistolary *corpus*" (96).

<sup>25</sup> The quietude of James's Venice is explicitly aligned with that of a theater: *And somehow the splendid common domicile, familiar, domestic and resonant, also resembles a theatre, with actors clicking over bridges and, in straggling processions, tripping along fondamentas. As you sit in your gondola the footways that in certain parts edge the canals assume to the eye the importance of a stage, meeting it at the same angle, and the Venetian figures, moving to and fro against the battered scenery of their little houses of comedy, strike you as members of an endless dramatic troupe.* (318)

Indeed it must have been these qualities, at least in part, that led James to set "The Aspern Papers" in Venice. Briggs notes, however, that Verrocchio's bronze statue of the Italian *condottiere* recalls the statue in Pushkin's "The Bronze Horseman," which is set in St. Petersburg, the Venice of the North: "one is almost tempted to believe," says Briggs, that the Verrocchio was what prompted James to set his story in Venice (59); Cornwell seconds this view (2004: 199).

silence the truth of their motives, which arrives as involuntarily as the sounds of footsteps on stone or of the beating of a guilty heart.

One final allusion deserves attention here. Tita at one point feels "that the elements of her fate were thickening around her" (293). Was James recalling Lady Macbeth's "Make thick my blood" and "Come thick night" (I.5.42, 49)? Philip Horne has written eloquently about his discovery of the same allusion in "Daisy Miller":

The recognition was a little chilling, only partly because of the deep chill that Lady Macbeth invokes at this moment. I felt as if an abyss had opened up in the text. James, feeling the desire to enrich the suggestiveness of the language at this crucial point in his story, where the hero fatally rejects a human appeal by the heroine, looks back, consciously or unconsciously, to Shakespeare and to a speech that might be taken as the great locus in English poetry for an evocation of the hardening of heart. ("Poets" 75-76)

It is likely that the occurrence of "thickening" in "The Aspern Papers" was suggested to James by this same poetic moment in *Macbeth*, for James was, as Horne says, "extremely receptive to the language of poetry" ("Poets" 72).

Edith Wharton once described the way in which James read poetry aloud: "He chanted it, and he was not afraid to chant it" (922). When he read from Walt Whitman, whom he considered, says Wharton, "the greatest of American poets," and who, along with Byron, might have been among the poets he had in mind when he created Jeffrey Aspern.<sup>26</sup> Wharton and her friends "sat rapt" the whole evening, as James

wandered from "The Song of Myself" to "When lilacs last in the door-yard bloomed" (when he read "Lovely and Soothing Death" his voice filled the hushed room like an organ adagio), and thence let himself be lured on to the mysteries

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<sup>26</sup> The narrator says that Jeffrey Aspern, whose muse "was essentially American," was able "to feel, understand and express everything" (259). Tony Tanner, pondering what kind of American poetry—"omnivourously inclusive" and "omni-porous"—James might have had in mind, suggests: "Perhaps something like the poetry of Walt Whitman, a poet whom the younger James loudly despised, and the old James quietly adored?" (181). See also Jeremy Tambling. Although James had not met Whitman, he would no doubt have discussed him with his friend and fellow expatriate, Logan Pearsall Smith, who, as a child, had known Whitman well and who wrote an intimate account of him in his memoir, *Unforgotten Years* (69-96).

of the music of “Out of the Cradle”, reading, or rather crooning it in a mood of subdued ecstasy till the five-fold invocation to Death tolled out like the knocks in the opening bars of the Fifth Symphony. (922-23)

This James, although he is perhaps not among the Maenads, is akin to that modern Orpheus he had created in Jeffrey Aspern. And it is fortuitous that Wharton should have mentioned here the opening bars of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, which, not unlike the knocking at Macbeth’s gate, are often thought to signify fate knocking at the door. Wharton knew that James indeed had the sensibility of a poet, and that, for him, the work of the poet was to charm or enchant. Like the mocking bird’s lament in “Out of the Cradle,” which awakens the young Whitman’s poetic voice—“A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die” (392)—so too, it seems, did Shakespeare awaken the poetic voice of Henry James.

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