

Having it all and “The Great White House” of Matcham in Henry James’s Last Novels

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by Priscilla Roberts

This paper explores the significance of the mansion of Matcham in Henry James’s two final major novels, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Golden Bowl* (1905). In many ways, these works represent variations on a theme, the first a tragedy, the second—especially if one accepts one classic definition of comedy as tragedy in which nobody dies—a comedy. In each, two impecunious lovers who cannot afford to marry each other encounter the possibility of massively improving their own lives by their ability to attract and charm the possessors of colossal American wealth. In each case, the fortunes involved prove a profound source of danger to their American owners and to those who would exploit them, distorting the lives of everyone involved. And in each story, the same exclusive English country house—dazzlingly charming, luxurious, even sybaritic, and ultimately sinister—is the fulcrum of the plot.

Matcham symbolizes the pinnacle of worldly social success to which—accompanied by wealth and love—leading characters in each novel aspire. It is these combined ambitions that make Milly Theale, the “dove” of the first book’s title, so vulnerable to manipulation by the attractive British friends who will seek to exploit her. Fanny Assingham, the often under-rated *dea ex machina* of *The Golden Bowl*, likewise uses the social aspirations of that novel’s American characters to precipitate its central situation. After key protagonists in each tale visit Matcham, nothing is ever the same again. By the time each book ends, the major protagonists have been forced to recognize that none of them will succeed in gaining and keeping the ‘everything’ that their voracious appetites for life, love, money, and status led them to seek.

A few scholars have noted how Matcham recurs in both novels (Woolf 140–41; Paulson 185; Kventsel 91). The eponymous image of each title—in the first the gentle but magnificent Dove that becomes emblematic of Milly Theale, in the second the flawed Golden Bowl that represents the marital fissures among the central quartet of characters—has tended to dominate efforts to explain the symbolic iconography of each book. But the mansion of Matcham, the epitome of worldly sophistication where Britain’s political, financial, imperial, social, and hereditary elites intersect and foregather, arguably features almost as significantly as either. Most major characters in both novels unite in coveting social success, together with love and wealth. Their quest to storm the ramparts of British high society that Matcham represents is a major force driving each novel’s plot. The accomplished Charlotte in *The Golden Bowl* speaks for all when, on a perfect spring morning at Matcham, she boldly proclaims: “I’ve wanted everything.” To which the Prince, her once and probably future lover, responds: “You shall *have* everything” (295). But, as both discover by the novel’s end, neither of them—nor anyone else in either novel—can satisfy this comprehensive ambition.

In both novels Matcham represents the apogee of worldly success. It is not a closed society, but as with many of the best clubs, the entrance fee is high. In *The Wings of the Dove*, the American Milly Theale's millions will win her the access that remains frustratingly elusive to poorer, less exotic British aspirants. At Matcham, wealthy and cultivated American newcomers (and Italian princes of distinguished ancestry) congregate with and move among Britain's VIPs. When Fanny Assingham urges the Ververs of *The Golden Bowl* to add Charlotte Stant to their family unit in order to win themselves a "greater" and "grandier" (164–65) social presence, weekends at Matcham finally come to epitomize the opportunities she feels they had been missing. But entrants to this charmed circle can find the price extremely exacting. For everyone in both novels, a visit to Matcham—a gathering place for those at the pinnacle of British society, where Milly believes she encounters "civilisation at its highest" (138)—is pivotal in ensuring that love and even friendship prove short-lived, flawed, treacherous, and deceptive.

The Wings of the Dove

Several literary critics have noted how central encounters at Matcham are to the plot of *The Wings of the Dove*, constituting the novel's turning point (K. Graham 190–95; Tintner 100–03; Fisher 80–88; W. Graham 229–30, 239; Cameron 126–31; Freedman 210–19; Boudreau 44–45). We first view Matcham through the eyes of the youthful American millionaire Milly Theale, recently introduced to British high society. Visiting Matcham in late July or early August, as the London social season ends, Milly sees the house, with its terrace and garden, as "the centre of a grand Watteau composition" with "a tone as of gold kept 'down' by the quality of the air, summer full flushed but attuned to the general perfect taste" (132). Watteau's most celebrated painting is the *Embarkation for Cythera*, a pastoral scene of elegant and carefree eighteenth-century ladies and gentlemen returning from the fabled island of love, that can be read as symbolizing the transience of that passion. The very name Matcham superficially suggests a place where matches are made and people matched with others. In *The Wings of the Dove*, the theme receives an additional twist when two leading characters—whose efforts at exploitation will eventually help to kill Milly—proclaim how closely she resembles a stunningly gorgeous Renaissance portrait displayed within the house.



Fig. 1: Antoine Watteau, *The Embarkation for Cythera*, 1718–1719, oil on canvas, 51,2 x 75,6 in. Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten, Schloss Charlottenburg © Bilddatenbank Prometheus

Twenty-two, slim and pale, with flaming red hair and usually dressed in deepest black, the stupendously wealthy Milly comes from a prominent New York family whose members had “engaged [...] in a high extravagance of speculation and dissipation that had left this exquisite being” (*Wings of the Dove* 114) their sole survivor, “a striking apparition” who is fundamentally “alone, [...] stricken, [...] rich, and in particular [...] strange” (77). Perhaps most strange is the way this “potential heiress of all the ages” (79), whose financial status allows her a social independence denied most girls her age, has premonitions of impending doom. Touring Switzerland before she reaches London, her apprehensions of early death make her “wonder” whether “I shall have much [...] of everything. Of everything I have.” When Susan Shepherd Stringham, the widowed New England novelist, who is Milly’s devoted companion-cum-duenna and considers Milly “my princess,” responds she already has “everything,” Milly again asks: “[S]hall I have it for long? That is if I have got it” (90). Demurring that “I don’t think I’ve really *everything*,” Milly then proclaims: “I’m only too happy! [...] That’s the matter—that I can scarcely bear it.” She lacks, she claims, “[t]he power to resist the bliss of what I *have!*” (91).

However blissful her present, Milly knows what might improve it. She decamps to London, impelled not least by hopes of re-encountering Merton Densher, a young English journalist she recently met in New York. Milly is invited to Matcham as an indirect consequence of her association with Maud Manningham Lowder, a long ago British schoolfriend of Susan Stringham with a mansion in London’s Lancaster Gate. Lowder, a wealthy bourgeoisie widow—“Britannia of the Marketplace”—views her stunningly beautiful, sophisticated niece Kate Croy as the instrument necessary in attaining the social heights that would otherwise remain inaccessible to her. Milly is likewise promptly enlisted in this cause: a charming, striking, and unattached American millionairess

represents another high card in the status game, one whose value boosts Mrs. Lowder's own prestige and standing. On Milly's arrival in London in July, the social season's tail end, Mrs. Lowder has nonetheless over three weeks "improvised a 'rush'" (133) that suddenly makes the young American heiress a sensation, lionized by polite society. "Aunt Maud" hopes that Milly will remain in Britain, preferably making the grandest possible marriage, an alliance that will permanently boost the American girl's standing and with it that of her British sponsors, Maud Lowder and Kate Croy.

For the somewhat naïve Milly, unconscious just how valuable an asset others find her, this speedy passage into English society engineered by Mrs. Lowder resembles a "fairy-tale" as she finds herself in "a situation really romantic" (98). The beautiful Kate, almost invariably termed "the handsome girl," immediately becomes her best friend. Dazzled by her new experiences, Milly ignores warnings from both Kate and Lord Mark, an aristocratic protégé of Mrs. Lowder, that everyone in London society—themselves included—is fundamentally mercenary or self-interested. In Lord Mark's words: "Nobody here, you know, does anything for nothing" (107). Several critics have explored the competitive and exploitative nexus of the social relationships centering on Lancaster Gate (Hadley 132–37; Krook 202–14; Sears 155–59; Williams 94–102; Freedman 94–95, 215; Geismar 230–38): "Culture [...] is anarchy; civilization is barbarism; aestheticization is exploitation; imaginative freedom is the will to control; beauty is ugliness; love—even the most radiantly sacrificial love—is indistinguishable from cruelty" (Freedman 227). Kate bluntly warns Milly that in recompense for her patronage, Aunt Maud will expect and almost certainly receive some kind of return from each of them.

Yet Milly may easily prove a wild card. Maud Lowder has designated Lord Mark, the cash-strapped but aristocratic scion of a ducal house, believed to have an outstanding political or public career ahead of him, as a potential husband for Kate, who will receive a generous dowry from her aunt should she accept his suit. On encountering Milly, Lord Mark—admittedly aware that Kate may well prefer the poor and prospectless Densher to himself—temporarily transfers his affections to the infinitely wealthier Milly and tries to enlighten her on Lancaster Gate's limitations. He regards Matcham, an extremely exclusive private mansion to which only society's *crème de la crème* are ever invited, as a key asset in furthering his courtship. While his precise connection to Matcham is never specified, he enjoys the entrée to its "illustrious host and hostess, all at once so distinguished and so plain, so public and so shy" (132). Beyond visiting Matcham at will, Lord Mark can also bring a party of friends with him. Milly realizes that Mrs. Lowder has for some time sought an invitation to Matcham, a coveted favor that—despite his eagerness to win the politely obdurate Kate—Lord Mark has declined to bestow. However, Milly's advent makes the difference. Lord Mark asks her, together with Kate and Mrs. Stringham, to Matcham in a party ostensibly headed by the matronly Mrs. Lowder. Tacitly, he lets Milly understand "that he wouldn't have launched them at Matcham—or whatever it was he *had* done—only for Aunt Maud's *beaux yeux*" (135). Milly is his real guest of honor and focus. As Lord Mark escorts her around, she realizes that his unspoken message to her is: "Do let a fellow who isn't a fool take care of you a little" (139).

According to Anna Kventsel, the visit to Matcham, as “the archetypical English country House, embodies something like a Platonic idea of society” (227) and becomes the rapturous zenith of Milly’s social conquest of Britain. Strolling through the house and grounds with Lord Mark, their progress marked by “introductions of charming new people” and “walks through halls of armour, of pictures, of cabinets, of tapestry, of tea-tables,” she experiences “an assault of reminders that this largeness of style was the sign of *appointed felicity*” (*Wings of the Dove* 132). Almost overwhelmed with happiness in a setting she finds magical and romantic, Milly experiences an afternoon in which all her “impressions [are] gathered [...] into a splendid cluster, an offering like an armful of the rarest flowers” (131). Her feelings reach their highest pitch when Lord Mark takes her inside the house to view a magnificent portrait by the Venetian painter Agnolo Bronzino of a woman whom Milly closely resembles. Thereupon “[o]nce more things melted together—the beauty and the history and the facility and the splendid midsummer glow: it was a sort of magnificent maximum, the pink dawn of an apotheosis coming so curiously soon” (139).



Fig. 2: Agnolo Bronzino, Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi, 1541–1545, oil on canvas, 40.2 x 33 in. Uffizi Gallery, Florence © Bilddatenbank Prometheus

Bronzino’s mannerist figures are unsettling, described by Viola H. Winner as possessing an “air of strain, reserve, containment” so that, “elongated and distorted; his subjects appear overgraceful and ascetic, worldly and spiritual, elegant and sad” (83). Confronted by the three-quarter length portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi (around 1540), transplanted by James from the Uffizi Museum in Florence to Matcham, Milly responds with tears, through which she views

the face of a young woman, all splendidly drawn, down to the hands, and splendidly dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair, rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michael-angelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. (*Wings of the Dove* 139)

Though her own hair is more vividly red, her hands larger, and her pallor still more intense than that of “her pale sister” (140), Milly immediately “recognise[s] her exactly” (139). Milly later recalls her encounter with “the great portrait at Matcham” as “the moments that had exactly made the high-water-mark of her security, the moments during which her tears themselves, those she had been ashamed of, were the sign of her consciously rounding her protective promontory, quitting the blue gulf of comparative ignorance and reaching her view of the troubled sea” (266).

The painting distills all Milly’s fears that her current exalted happiness will prove transitory and that, in another character’s subsequent words, someone will “say to her that she can’t have everything” (216). The American girl’s first response is to cry out “in words that had nothing to do with her”—one cannot be sure whether the pronoun refers to the portrait or Milly herself—“I shall never be better than this.” The gallant Lord Mark promptly responds that Milly would “scarce need to be better” than the magnificent painted woman, “for surely that’s well enough. But you *are*, one feels, as it happens, better; because, splendid as she is, one doubts if she was good” (139).

Milly, however, is referring not to the portrait, but to her own happiness in “perhaps as good a moment as she should have with anyone, or have in any connexion whatever.” Seeking to explain, she tells her cavalier: “I mean that everything this afternoon has been too beautiful, and that perhaps everything together will never be so right again” (139). Slightly bemused, Lord Mark nonetheless responds gently to this confidence, but insists that Milly acknowledge that she and the painted woman so resemble each other that they are indeed “a pair.” Milly tries to deny this, whereupon Kate appears. She, too, has noticed Milly’s striking likeness to the historic painting and enters the room intending to display the picture to an aristocratic couple. As the new arrivals seek to entice Milly to accept yet another invitation she would rather decline, Lord Mark expertly heads them off, leaving Kate alone with Milly.

At this juncture, Milly discloses what underlies her response to the “dead, dead, dead” woman in the portrait, devoutly displaying an open prayer-book but grim-faced and without “a joy.” Milly, whose health we have already learned may be precarious, fears that she too will soon be “dead, dead, dead.” Disclosing to Kate her secret suspicions that she is seriously ill, Milly asks her to come along to an appointment with Sir Luke Strett, a highly qualified London physician. Her long-dead doppelgänger—a woman who, ironically enough, wears a necklace bearing the motto *Amour dure sans fin* (Love lasts forever)—watches mournfully as Milly sets in motion the events that will lead to her own betrayal and death. Another reading of the motto that will prove equally apposite, however, is

Amour dure—Dure amour (Love lasts—Love is cruel). In “the presence of the pale personage on the wall, whose eyes all the while seemed engaged with her own,” Milly wins Kate’s ready agreement (146).

Kate soon learns that Milly is desperately ill with some unspecified malady, possibly leukemia. Shortly afterwards Merton Densher, to whom Kate is secretly engaged, returns to London after several months in the United States. Almost immediately, he and Kate accidentally encounter Milly, from whom they conceal their attachment, initially simply not wishing to alert Mrs. Lowder. Densher himself is fascinated and intrigued by how Milly has so quickly become London’s latest social sensation. Yet, given her health, conceivably Milly “has nothing” (217). While deliberately leaving herself ignorant of the precise medical nature of Milly’s malady, Kate tells him “that if she’s ill at all she’s very ill. [...] She’ll really live or she’ll really not. She’ll have it all or she’ll miss it all. Now I don’t think she’ll have it all.” (217) Milly, says Kate, “has so much to lose. And she wants more.” (216) Foremost among the “more” or “everything” Milly seeks is love, specifically that of Densher, with whom the young American was decidedly smitten when he visited New York, even coming to London partly in hopes of meeting him again. By encouraging her fiancé to pay court to the ailing girl, Kate, however, seeks to use Milly’s probably terminal ailment to benefit herself and Densher. Kate’s intention is not simply, as she rather disingenuously says, “to make things pleasant” (217) for Milly; rather, she wants the dying heiress to leave Densher a fortune, which will in turn allow him to marry Kate over her aunt’s opposition.

Irresolutely, Densher does nothing, effectively lending himself to Kate’s scheme. Kate tells Milly that his feelings for herself are merely a one-sided attachment which she does not return and successfully convinces her aunt that any past love she may have felt for Densher is now over. Maud Lowder, distinctly regretting the grand alliance to a duke or prince she had contemplated for Milly, and Susan Stringham, bearing in mind Sir Luke Strett’s advice that the best treatment for Milly’s illness is simply “to live” (172), both see Milly’s infatuation as a means of prolonging or even saving her life. The two widows therefore befriend the personable Densher, endorse his growing involvement with Milly, and encourage him to seek consolation from the young American woman for Kate’s ostensible rejection of him. The entire party—Densher included—moves to Venice, where Milly hires the magnificent Palazzo Leporelli and holds court, rarely emerging from its confines but living in great splendor within.

Kate and Densher are not alone, however, in seeking to profit from Milly’s illness. With knowledge of Milly’s precarious health percolating throughout their social circle, Lord Mark sees his opportunity and arrives in Venice in October, intent on pressing his suit. He deliberately invokes the memory of their time at Matcham to highlight the prospective alternatives to her current rather bourgeois associates that are open to her, suggesting that he himself represents a far better match for her. For Milly, Matcham has retrospectively lost nothing of its enchantment. The memory of their shared time and “how kind he had been, altogether, at Matcham” (267) and “the pleasure of their remembrance together of Matcham and the Bronzino, the climax of her fortune [...] mak[e] it suddenly delightful that he had thus turned up.” Yet even when most bedazzled by Matcham, she

had wished to be “matched” with neither the Bronzino portrait nor Lord Mark himself. Far from entertaining her visitor’s marriage proposal, Milly recognizes the grim and unpalatable truth that “any prospective failure on her part to be long for this world might easily count as a positive attraction” to “a man in whom the vision of her money should be intense” (270). Although Lord Mark expatiates on the social advantages marriage to him would bring, his pleas are unavailing. The heiress urges him to turn instead to Kate Croy.

Rejected by Milly, Lord Mark immediately leaves Venice. Soon afterwards, Kate and her aunt do likewise, hoping to give Densher a free hand in winning and perhaps even curing the desperately ill heiress. The question of what Kate and Densher would do then is left politely vague. Lord Mark, it seems, takes Milly’s advice and finally proposes to Kate, only to be rejected. He now is not only convinced that Kate, too, prefers Densher to him, but also that Densher and she are secretly engaged while conspiring to win the journalist a huge bequest from the dying woman. Lord Mark has one further part to play in the drama: Apparently still intent on persuading Milly to marry him, he promptly returns to Venice, sees her again, and divulges his suspicions to her. While Milly rebuts them so convincingly that Lord Mark is left believing his conclusions were wrong and Densher’s love for her is sincere, the shock of learning of the duplicity of the man she had thought was returning her love suffices to destroy Milly’s fragile hold on life, prompting her to “turn her face to the wall” (334) and cease her fierce battle to survive. Densher, suddenly excluded from the Palazzo Leporelli, waits unavailingly for two weeks before finally granted one last 20-minute meeting with Milly. He later tells Kate that Milly never asked him whether or not Lord Mark’s claims were true, thereby sparing him any need either to confirm or deny them. After his return to London, Densher waits for word of Milly’s inevitable death, which finally arrives on Christmas Day.

Yet, the devastating machinery set in motion at Matcham has not ended. Lord Mark, who has been staying with Mrs. Lowder during Kate’s absence, defers his planned departure for Matcham so that Aunt Maud will not have to spend Christmas alone, a courtesy that Kate believes will gratify her aunt. Invited to Maud Lowder’s for supper, Densher realizes that Lord Mark will shortly decamp back to Matcham, the house where the grim processes began that had within six months precipitated Milly’s death and destruction. Milly, however desolated by Densher’s treachery, remains generous, leaving him a substantial fortune after her death, news carefully timed to arrive on Christmas Eve. Although this inheritance would allow him to marry Kate, Densher tells his fiancé that he will not accept Milly’s bequest. Should Kate insist on him accepting the inheritance, he would be prepared to give her the money; however, if he did so he would not marry her. Kate will thus have to choose between Milly’s fortune and the man she loves, a man who is now, she suspects, in thrall to Milly’s memory. Seeking everything, just as Milly had done, she is left with almost nothing. And whatever she does, Kate knows, in her bleak words to Densher that end the book: “We shall never be again as we were!” (407).

Some critics have viewed Milly as a generous, benevolent, and loving innocent whose last bequest of a fortune to Densher is selflessly and altruistically intended to help the man she loves marry Kate. Dorothea Krook, for example, suggests that Milly triumphs “by injecting into [the world of Lancaster Gate] its first knowledge of an order of goodness

and power greater than any this world by itself can show" (220). Merle Williams, too, states: "Milly endeavours to pass on the spark of life to those closest to her, even though her own capacity for joy has been lost" (130). Nicola Bradbury (95–122) highlights Milly's "strength which will adopt weakness as policy" (100) and her protean ability to "move from one kind of existence to another" and conquer successive different worlds, "Boston after New York, London after Switzerland" before embarking on "a triumphal progress to Venice." (101) Moving "between romance and naturalism, the symbolic drama and the social," she displays a talent that "is not based on a lack of worldly wisdom." Milly's "intuitive understanding," her "imagination" and "awareness," confer on her "a distance from her own experience through the power to appreciate it: a control which is not manipulative." This, in turn, allows her to transcend the "constraints" of her inevitable death and even to dominate the survivors left behind (97). Sharon Cameron posits:

Milly, in her correct assumption that she can will what she thinks, can make Densher the beneficiary of her will (which in this context means she can bequeath to Densher not simply her riches but also her image of him as it dictates what he is, as if involuntarily, to do), performs the novel's ultimate manipulation. She refuses to countenance the evil of the world. She will not say she believes in it. So the character who is supposed to be exempt from thinking as manipulation is the most successfully engaged in it. [...] Milly's death inspires, empowers, enriches, saves—like its Christian analogue. (149–51)

Or does it? One potential irony is inherent in Henry James's identification of Milly with the Lucrezia Panciatichi portrait. Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), a writer James knew well, wrote a ghost story, "Amour Dure" (1887), featuring an adapted version of this painting. Its subject is transformed into Medea da Carpi, a fictitious wicked Italian duchess of the sixteenth century, who killed both her ducal husbands and a subsequent string of lovers before falling victim herself to a murderous brother-in-law. The hero, a young Polish historian, Spiridion Trepka, falls in love with the long-dead Medea, who soon comes to haunt him, even sending him letters instructing him how to wreak posthumous vengeance on the man who killed her. Eventually, on Christmas Day, Trepka is found stabbed to death in his study (Tintner 95–104). Arguably, this alternative version of the Bronzino portrait provides a rather different and potentially more sinister perspective upon the ostensibly unworldly Milly Theale. So does her almost classically pre-Raphaelite appearance: pale, slight, haggard, haunted, with brilliantly red hair, she might be either a doomed virginal heroine or an incarnation of the *Belle dame sans merci*. In Jonathan Freedman's words, she "possesses to a considerable degree the most important characteristic of the *Belle dame*: a considerable amount of power," forcing other characters to "revolve around her" in "a nervous orbit" (210). Even her posthumous generosity inflicts upon Kate and Densher "precisely the cruel blow it is the *Belle dame's* mission to impart. [...] Milly is to be understood as a character capable of deploying the powers of victimization even as she is victimized by power" (221–23). To cite the critic John Bayley: "Milly's forgiveness, if that is what it is, destroys from beyond the grave the relationship of Kate Croy and Merton Densher. [...] Was her generosity a species of revenge?" (x).



Fig. 3: Alessandro Allori, Portrait of Eleonora di Toledo, 1572, oil on slate, Palazzo Vecchio (Palazzo della Signora), Florence © gogmsite.net

Portrait sometimes misattributed to Agnolo Bronzino. This is another potential model for the portrait in both stories.

Kenneth Graham argues (160–232) that, on learning she does not have long to live, Milly effectively takes control of her own fate and learns how to “manipulate the system, giving and taking, and challenging it radically only where necessary.” (Graham 200) Even after learning of Densher’s duplicity, she is still in control: “as always, the ultimate, unseen hand on the loom has been that of the subtle dying girl in the Palazzo Leporelli” (223). And beyond and perhaps because of her death, Milly continues to dominate, routing the spectacular Kate. “It is remarkable how the magnanimity of Milly Theale produces in the end as much disruption as amelioration” (230). In Clair Hughes’s words: “Milly’s image leaves after-traces that destroy Densher’s love for Kate, for ghosts pursue the living who have wronged them” (84). David McWhirter suggests: “In truth, Milly’s legacy constitutes a

purposeful act, in some senses cruel and certainly not free from a trace of jealousy, aimed at achieving what she has wanted all along that Densher should love her as she loves him" (112). Julie Olin-Ammentorp goes further, arguing that Milly's "final bequest to Densher can be seen not as beneficent and forgiving [...] but as profoundly manipulative. [...] [I]s it not just possible that she is wreaking her revenge upon both him and Kate?" (50). In Gabriel Pearson's opinion, "James's romantic American innocents have come to look, by the time we arrive at *The Golden Bowl* a fairly predatory, even lethal lot. It is the calculators and designers who are themselves trapped and destroyed. The dead Milly works her corrosion on Kate Croy and Merton Densher" (338). A cynical interpretation might be that Milly uses both her money and her memory to emulate Medea by avenging herself, separating and wreaking retribution upon the couple who sought to exploit her. Was this ruthless malevolence conceivably instilled in her during her meteoric ascent to the social apogee of Matcham? Was it perhaps Medea's portrait, displayed at Matcham, that Milly so resembled and possibly became?

The Golden Bowl

If Matcham permeates *The Wings of the Dove*, its presence is equally potent in *The Golden Bowl*, attaining symbolic significance as the pre-eminent nexus of worldly aristocratic social encounters and the milieu they epitomize (Hadley 147–52, 158; Krook 233–34, 242–43, 287–88, 294–99). Kventsel argues that whereas it has a "localized function" in the first novel, essentially providing the setting for Milly to encounter her "painted likeness," in the second novel, "the Country House [...] is revealed in its full social luster and moral ambiguity" (338). In other respects, things have changed. New incumbents, Lord and Lady Castledean, have replaced the previous distinguished but elderly owners, whether by renting, purchasing, or inheriting the house is left vague. Undoubtedly, though, Matcham is at least as exclusive and sophisticated, if not more, as at any time in its history. Just possibly Lord Castledean, depicted as a prominent public figure, is the metamorphosed Lord Mark, ascended into the British peerage. By no stretch of the imagination, though, could his wife be the dark and striking former Kate Croy. Lady Castledean, we later learn, possesses "the biggest diamonds on the yellowest hair, the longest lashes on the prettiest, falsest eyes, the oldest lace on the most violet velvet, the rightest manner on the wrongest assumptions. Her ladyship's assumption was that she kept, at every moment of her life, every advantage" (334–35). Kate's faults—of which she was perfectly conscious—were never those of this far more arrogant but less self-aware aristocrat.



Fig. 4: Mentmore Towers 1852–54, Mentmore, Buckinghamshire, England © Tom Swain/Wikimedia. A likely Model for Matcham

In *The Golden Bowl*, two couples visit Matcham during a weekend that becomes the hinge of the book's plot. The younger couple do so fully aware that, in an inflammable situation, they are playing with fire. Prince Amerigo, an Italian aristocrat whose family has fallen on hard times, has retrieved his fortunes by marrying Maggie Verver, sole child of a vastly wealthy American businessman. To Matcham, however, he escorts not his wife but her stepmother and long-time best friend, Charlotte Stant. She is a cultured and beautiful young woman of American parentage, raised and educated in Europe and married to Adam Verver, Maggie's widowed father. Before Amerigo met Maggie, he and Charlotte had fallen in love with each other but, since neither possessed any significant financial assets, the penurious couple ultimately decided that marriage was an impractical proposition.

Accompanying them to Matcham are the British Bob Assingham, a retired colonel of relatively modest financial means, and his middle-aged and childless American-born wife Fanny. This somewhat outrageously named woman, friend and confidante of the entire Verver family, is not, as some scholars have suggested, simply a literary plot device, a convenient *ficelle* whose main purpose is to impart useful information of which the reader would otherwise remain ignorant. Fanny's very names suggest that she embodies the disruptive powers of sexual desire. Florid and dark, with curly black hair, the exotic and overblown Fanny—depicted as the doyenne and forerunner of those American women who married into British society in the later nineteenth century—is indeed the story's Lady of Misrule. Susan Winnett considers her “the author of the marriages and the friend of all” who “mastermind[s] the Ververs' worldly exposure” (186). Nonetheless, she fails to highlight Fanny Assingham's role in provoking the novel's crisis (186–87, 193–95). Yet arguably, it is this often overlooked third American woman who—largely, it seems, for personal amusement—deliberately engineers what she knows are a highly problematic set of relationships. Once these have borne fruit, Fanny then sets in motion complications

that deftly arouse Maggie's suspicions over the relationship between her husband and stepmother.

Visiting Matcham not only provides Amerigo and his stepmother-in-law with the cover they need to spend time alone together, it also offers Fanny the pretext to alert Maggie to flaws in her marriage. Beyond this, the mansion symbolizes the "grander" (167) opportunities that Charlotte's wedding into the Verver family was expected to facilitate and that Fanny had used as inducements when persuading an intrigued Maggie to pique her father's interest in the possibility of marrying Charlotte—and the advantages and benefits in terms of social prominence and prestige these nuptials might bring.

Fanny Assingham, to whom both Charlotte and Amerigo were close (meaning she knew much of their story) originally introduced Amerigo to Maggie Verver. Seeing the heiress smitten by the handsome Italian prince, Fanny never enlightened Maggie about the earlier relationship between her fiancé and her best friend. On the eve of his wedding, the Prince even told Fanny—who did not demur—that it was she who "first [...] had the conception" of arranging a marriage between himself and Maggie and "ma[d]e [his] engagement possible" (60). Yet, as the confidante of Charlotte, Maggie, and Amerigo, Fanny went much further. A few days before Maggie's marriage to the Prince, Fanny decided she should set about finding Charlotte a suitable husband—in effect compensation for losing the Prince. When her somewhat skeptical colonel asked why she took so great an interest in managing other people's lives, she replied that "it's all, at the worst, great fun" (101). Fun for whom, one wonders. Fanny, the *Dea ex machina*, compulsively engineers potentially precarious situations and contrives to destabilize them by pressing levers that eventually set the entire apparatus in motion and bring the whole edifice close to destruction.

Two years after Maggie acquired the aristocratic husband she adores—a union that has made the bride a princess and also produced an infant son and heir, the *Principino*—the young couple were still sharing a house with her colossally wealthy father. Seemingly dwelling in great contentment at Fawns, the palatial country house the Ververs had rented, they were surrounded by the magnificent art works Adam had collected over the years. Yet, with the accommodating and grateful son-in-law eager to please his munificent and unassuming father-in-law, they were nonetheless living a somewhat secluded and uneventful existence, mingling largely with modest country neighbors. In Fanny Assingham's opinion, the Ververs were not taking full advantage of the social opportunities open to them by virtue of their wealth, not to mention Maggie's aristocratic marriage. "Dear Fanny," Maggie told her father, regretted their "social limitations" and felt "that we ought to be greater." Maggie apparently found the prospect of mingling in more refined circles decidedly alluring, remarking: "If we ought to be grander, as Fanny thinks, we *can* be grander. There's nothing to prevent" (164–65).

The solution Fanny recommended was that Maggie and Adam enlist the services of Charlotte Stant. Still unmarried and impecunious, Charlotte was nonetheless so socially adept and, in Maggie's view, "so great" that bringing her in would make them "[r]eally grander" (167). Despite or perhaps because of unspecified past disappointments in love

matters, Charlotte was, moreover, eager to contract a suitable marriage, preferably one that would allow her to exercise her formidable social skills and talents at the highest level and become a stylish and influential “personage.” She might indeed prove the ideal addition to their little ménage, at that time disrupted by the descent of American acquaintances and friends of friends, especially assorted women who felt that the wealthy widower Adam must be in want of a wife. Suitably primed by Fanny, Maggie hinted that, while she disliked the voracious ladies then besieging him, she would, by contrast, find Charlotte—her best friend at school, who was only slightly older than herself—decidedly acceptable. She believed the tactful Charlotte would accept the close relationship between father and daughter without disturbing their existing equilibrium and harmony. Summoned to Fawns, Charlotte speedily dispatched the predatory female visitors and charmed and intrigued Adam. The American collector recognized that, like his son-in-law, Charlotte was “the real thing” and a genuine “find,” a superlative living example of human cultivation and civilization (178). Left alone with Adam and the Principino, Charlotte worked her spell, and Adam duly proposed.

Initially, the new fourfold arrangement seemed resoundingly successful. To quote Mrs. Assingham: “They ‘brought her in’—on the crudest expression of it—to do the ‘worldly’ for them, and she had done it with [...] genius” (263–64). What Verver’s bride did not quite anticipate was that, rather than wishing to shine in high society themselves, her husband and his daughter generally prefer to spend time together, admiring the Principino. Surplus to requirements, their neglected and excluded spouses resemble extremely expensive ornaments, supernumeraries often relegated to the sidelines, and even encouraged to attend house parties, balls, and other social occasions in each other’s company. The only person who apparently finds anything amiss in these arrangements is Fanny Assingham. But again, Fanny’s rather tactless warnings to the former lovers that their names are too often linked together on public occasions seem almost calculated to provoke their defiance rather than caution.

When Fanny precipitates the next act, resolution of which will consume the rest of the novel, Matcham, as in *The Wings of the Dove*, once again provides the crucial fulcrum. Learning that the entire Verver family foursome had been expected to spend Easter weekend at Matcham, but that Adam and Maggie have finally decided against going there, Fanny decides to act. Matcham, it seems, represents to her a greater order of magnitude than the standard London social round. After failing to dissuade Amerigo and Charlotte from visiting Matcham together and in an effort to play the chaperone, Fanny procures an invitation for herself and her husband, their relatively modest social status notwithstanding.

When Charlotte and Amerigo arrive together at Matcham, its mores are perhaps even more liberal and its attendees more exclusive than in *The Wings of the Dove*. Matcham, where tolerance is the watchword, hosts “a society so placed that it had only its own sensibility to consider. [...] What anyone ‘thought’ of anyone else—above all of anyone else *with* anyone else—was a matter incurring in these halls so little awkward formulation that hovering Judgement, the spirit with the scales, might perfectly have been imagined there as some rather snubbed and subdued but quite trained and tactful poor relation”

(*Golden Bowl* 272). By this time, the reluctance of Maggie and Adam to grace such occasions and the consequent working social partnership of their *sposi* has indeed become a firmly established pattern into which no observer wishes to inquire too deeply. Tolerance does, however, have its limits. Matcham, as run by the Castledeans, is unsuited to the middle-aged or elderly, and the Assinghams, “in their comparatively marked maturity and their comparatively small splendor, were the only approach to a false note in the concert” (273). Fanny, “the sole and single frump of the party,” is left “out of the crystal current and the expensive picture” (277) and finds her visit a decided ordeal. Even more, it turns out to be an ironic demonstration of how the woman who counseled the Ververs to acquire Charlotte in order to bolster their own social profile herself lacked the credentials to shine at Matcham, where “she should never be anything but horrible” (277). Tellingly, the principle of sexual disorder that Fanny’s name and “flagrant appearance” (64) both signal is out of place at Matcham, where desire is regulated by strict if largely unarticulated conventions.

Yet, provided the rules are observed, Matcham can readily facilitate sexual adventures. Struck by “the noble fairness of the place, [...] the bravery of youth and beauty, the insolence of fortune and appetite so diffused among his fellow-guests,” the Prince realizes: “Every voice in the great bright house was a call to the ingenuities and impunities of pleasure” (273). Amerigo nonetheless recognizes that in this atmosphere Maggie and her father would be totally incongruous. Moreover, in these worldly surroundings, the Prince feels “ridiculous” to be expected “to ‘go about’ at such a rate with a person such as Mrs. Verver in a state of childlike innocence, the state of our primitive parents before the Fall” (245–46). If anything, he blames his wife, who declined to go to Matcham, yet insisted that he and Charlotte do so, for putting him in this position, “to which [...] it would be too absurd that he should merely lend himself” (275).

Even the urbane Italian Prince, however, finds it difficult to navigate Matcham’s conventions and formulae. As the novel began, he was renouncing many of the more discreditable aspects of his spectacular but “wicked” ancestral heritage, in an effort to prove a good son-in-law and husband to the American pair whose millions so dramatically enhanced his fortunes (Landau 119–22). Yet, despite his good intentions and many years of familiarity with Britain, the deracinated Amerigo not only finds his wife and father-in-law almost impossible to comprehend, he also never quite attains the instinctive understanding of the ways of British high society that the more protean Charlotte enjoys. “He knew them all, as was said, ‘well’; he had lived with them, stayed with them, dined, hunted, shot and done various other things with them; but the number of questions about them he couldn’t have answered had much rather grown than shrunken. [...] They didn’t like *les situations nettes* [clear-cut situations]—that was all he was very sure of” (288).

The British concern to preserve appearances nonetheless permits Charlotte and Amerigo to spend most of one day alone together. As the party disperses, Charlotte evades Fanny’s efforts to persuade the younger pair to return to London with herself and the Colonel on a morning train, explaining that Lady Castledean, their hostess, has invited them both to “stay over till after luncheon” (282). However, Lady Castledean has another diversion, an affair with one “Mr Blint, a sleek, civil, accomplished young man—distinctly

younger than her ladyship—who played and sang delightfully” (287). With the other guests safely departed, Amerigo and Charlotte are expected to politely make themselves scarce and decline Lady Castledean’s warm invitation for lunch, offering any plausible excuse, such as their desire to inspect Gloucester Cathedral. To the Prince, the day ahead of them seems “like a great gold cup that we must somehow drain together,” prompting Charlotte to recall the “gilded crystal bowl” she had offered him just before his marriage as a wedding present and that, guessing it to possess a hidden flaw, he had refused despite its beauty (292). Amerigo now repudiates any possibility that their day together could have anything in common with that “treacherous cracked thing,” though the bolder Charlotte asks him: “Don’t you think too much of ‘cracks’ and aren’t you too afraid of them? I risk the cracks” (292). To the Prince she confesses: “These days, yesterday, last night, this morning, I’ve wanted everything.” He gallantly responds: “You shall *have* everything” (295). Whether the two of them spend the afternoon simply lunching and sightseeing, or seize the opportunity to consummate their love affair is never entirely clear, though one rather suspects the latter.



Fig. 5: Cathedral Church of St. Peter and the Holy and Indivisible Trinity, 1089–1499, Gloucester, England © Saffron Blaze/Wikimedia. Burial place of Edward II.

Meanwhile, Fanny bustles portentously back to London, promising to hasten immediately to Maggie, who—doubtlessly—will be installed in her father’s (and Charlotte’s) house in Eaton Square, to inform her of the latecomers’ change of plans. Without even returning to her own home, Fanny rushes from the railway station to Eaton Square and spends all afternoon with Maggie. Whether deliberately or because her suspicions make her clumsy, Fanny Assingham fulfills her mission to such good effect that Maggie recognizes for the first time that her confidante believes something is much amiss in her husband’s

relationship with Charlotte and begins to cherish doubts of her own. From then onward, Maggie is aware that Fanny “had perhaps recklessly, for herself, betrayed the deeper and darker consciousness—an impression it would now be late for her inconsistently to attempt to undo” (394–95). Whereas Charlotte and Amerigo only briefly drop their guard, Maggie perceives a “constant renewal” of “discerned foreboding” in every encounter with Fanny, evidence that the older woman is “afraid of something [Maggie] might say or do” (395–96). Are Fanny’s ostensibly unconscious and involuntary intimations to Maggie—that all is not as it should be between her stepmother and her husband—really quite so artless as they seem? Fanny seems unable to resist setting the wheels in motion and opening Maggie’s eyes “[t]o what’s called Evil—with a very big E.” In Mrs. Assingham’s view, such “a shaking” is the best way to make Maggie “understand one or two things in the world” (310).

Primed by Fanny, the first sign of the change in Maggie comes when she promptly overturns the plans Amerigo and Charlotte have made for both themselves and her to dine with her father at Eaton Square. Instead, she decides to wait alone for her husband at Portland Place, their own home. Maggie realizes that “her deciding to do something, just then and there, which would strike Amerigo as unusual,” will implicitly signal to him that something is amiss (331). Finally, as Maggie, wearing her newest frock, contemplates that she should once more begin attending balls and similar events, the “door [...] opened and her husband was there” (335). But even then, all is not smooth sailing; the Amerigo who enters seems somewhat discomfited by her presence and unaccustomed behavior. Amerigo’s “hesitation” is only fleeting, as he takes Maggie in his arms and embraces her before recounting “his day, the happy thought of his roundabout journey with Charlotte, all their cathedral-hunting adventure, and how it had turned out rather more of an affair than they expected” (338). Amerigo, however, senses that “[t]here was still, for the instant, something in suspense, but it passed more quickly than on his previous entrance” (342). As they dine, however, Maggie begins what will soon become a near obsessive quest to recreate and capture for herself the experiences of her husband and Charlotte over their long weekend at Matcham and Gloucester, enquiring about every detail until even her husband begins to feel her wifely interest as excessive. Ultimately, Amerigo ends the conversation by sweeping Maggie off to bed.

On the next morning, Maggie continues her investigation of the Matcham weekend by heading immediately for Eaton Place to see Charlotte, once more professing “the same show of desire to hear all her story” and obtain “the whole picture” of “what, in their unusually prolonged campaign, the two had achieved.” When Maggie first encountered her father’s wife, the younger woman noted the same momentary expression on Charlotte’s face that she had perceived on her husband’s: “a kinship of expression in the two faces—in respect to which all she as yet professed to herself was that she had affected them, or at any rate the sensibility each of them so admirably covered, in the same way” (349). The near-identical responses of her husband and stepmother help to convince Maggie just how deftly the two of them are colluding in efforts to handle and

manage her. Later she will tell Amerigo that her certainty about their closeness began “the night you came home so late from Matcham. [...] For that was the beginning of my being sure” (456).

Maggie’s interrogations of the Prince and Charlotte by no means satisfy her curiosity as to just what happened at Matcham. Both, the continuing presence of Matcham in Maggie’s thoughts and the Verver family’s social life become a subplot, intertwining itself around the theme of the Golden Bowl. Its rediscovery in a Bloomsbury antique shop finally alerts Maggie that, before Amerigo married her, he and Charlotte had been lovers. Until then, Mrs. Assingham had sedulously—perhaps too sedulously—denied all Maggie’s suspicions that the two are conducting an affair under the noses of their respective spouses. Well before, however, at Maggie’s instigation, the Castledeans and their friends had become a near constant social presence in both Verver households. Reciprocating for their weekend, Charlotte and Adam soon host a dinner for the Castledeans and six other guests present at Matcham for “the Easter revels at the visionary house,” a gathering to which Amerigo and Maggie are of course invited. Surveying those present, Maggie realizes that “[t]heir common memory of an occasion that had clearly left behind it an ineffaceable charm—this air of beatific reference, less subdued in the others than in Amerigo and Charlotte, lent them, together, an inscrutable comradeship against which the young woman’s imagination broke in a small vain wave” (359). She also recognizes that the assembled guests are acutely curious about herself, especially Lady Castledean, even though this “charming clever woman wondered about her—that is wondered about her as Amerigo’s wife, and wondered, moreover, with the intention of kindness and the spontaneity, almost, of surprise” (360).

Seeking to penetrate this charmed circle, Maggie finally decides to end her social near isolation and begin competing on the “worldly” (264) plane where Charlotte so excels, an arena where her own title and wealth should win her ready admission. To the surprise of those assembled, Maggie insistently proposes another dinner for the identical guests, denying them any chance of polite refusal. Maggie also begins to covet in her own right the social prominence Fanny had once urged upon the Ververs through Charlotte’s instrumentality. The dinner party for the Matcham group Maggie hosts at Portland Place allows her to attain the “maximum of social glory, in the sense of its showing for her own occasion, her very own, with everyone else extravagantly rallying and falling in, absolutely conspiring to make her its heroine.” Fanny helps to showcase Maggie as the star of the occasion, “intensify[ing] the lustre of the little Princess” (373–74). Later, “the whole list of [Maggie’s] apparent London acquaintance” is invited to yet another party. Maggie, no fonder than before of Lady Castledean, manages to wield her social persona so effectively that the British aristocrat is “reduced by it at last to an unprecedented state of passivity” (374).

Maggie apparently develops a continuing fixation on Lady Castledean, who perhaps functions as a surrogate focus for hostility toward Charlotte that she cannot openly admit. Discussing with her father the possibility of inviting the Castledeans to Fawns that summer, Maggie confesses: “I don’t think I like her—and yet I like to see her: which, as Amerigo says, is ‘rum.’” Expanding still further on her feelings, Maggie explains that she

wishes “that she may be *there*—just before us. It’s as if she may have a value—as if something may come of her. I don’t in the least know what, and she rather irritates me meanwhile. I don’t even know, I admit, why—but if we see her often enough I may find out.” Adam, who considers Lady Castledean “very handsome,” drily asks: “Does it matter so very much?” and admits that, unlike his daughter, he “rather like[s] her.” This is, Maggie reflects, “the first case she could recall of their not being affected by a person in the same way” (391). But, as several critics have suggested, the same is quite possibly true of Charlotte, and Maggie greatly underestimates the strength of Adam’s feelings for his wife (Wakana 111–51; Reesman 137–39; Yeazell 117–24; Jolly 183–92; Williams 190–93). In conversations with Maggie, he consistently defends Charlotte, emphasizing how much it matters to him “to have made Charlotte so happy—to have so perfectly contented her.” He also repeatedly denies Maggie’s insistent claims that he had married Charlotte primarily to please Maggie rather than himself, even as Maggie informs him that this is what Charlotte herself believes and does indeed “so beautifully understand” (*Golden Bowl* 389).

Possibly being one himself, Adam has, it seems, no objection to social sophisticates. He is an aficionado of the reputedly sinful city of Paris, which is “always for [him] in any stress of sympathy a suggestion that rose of itself to the lips” (180). Shortly before he marries Charlotte, we learn that Adam suspects that had his first wife still been alive, her lack of genuine taste would have precluded his amassing the spectacular art collection that has been his passion. “Would she have led him altogether, attached as he was to her, into the wilderness of mere mistakes?” A “real lady” would not, he believes, be a good companion in this venture (141). The implication must be that Charlotte, whom Adam considers a partner in his collecting and the museum he has established in American City, is something rather different. Adam’s “years of darkness” when he was “hard at acquisition” of his massive fortune through “transcendent calculation and imaginative gambling” were not, one must suspect, without episodes of ruthlessness and brutality (142). During his business career, the seemingly unassuming Adam was, moreover, notorious for betraying no outside sign that he was working at “an unprecedented, a miraculous white-heat” (130). It is perhaps significant that the inscrutable Adam is described as a “high adept” at the “worldly” game of bridge, a pastime at which Amerigo likewise “excelled easily,” while “Mrs. Assingham and Charlotte, moreover, were accounted as ‘good’ as members of a sex incapable of the nobler consistency could be.” Only Maggie is excluded from the competition, “for [...] cards were as nought to her and she could follow no move” (486).

Maggie perhaps realizes what “value”—for her at least—Lady Castledean possesses during the visit to Fawns of the Castledeans “and several other members, yet again, of the historic Matcham week.” By inviting them, Maggie seeks to demonstrate she can mix with the sophisticated denizens of Matcham just as comfortably as either Amerigo or Charlotte do, so that she is “not asking either of them to give up anyone or anything for her sake” (471). More sinisterly, forcing the Prince and Charlotte into continued proximity with the Matcham group constitutes another way for Maggie to exercise her power over them. Maggie finds equal satisfaction in manipulating Lady Castledean’s circle who, for all their worldly *savoir faire*, are out of their depth when “compelled to assist at

attestations the extent and bearing of which they rather failed to grasp and which left them indeed, in spite of hereditary high spirits, a trifle bewildered and even a trifle scared.” As interested spectators, summoned yet again to the entertainments of the extended Verver ménage, the experienced Matcham *revenants* have by now undoubtedly grasped that something is amiss, as “they played their parts during a crisis that must have hovered for them, in the long passages of the old house, after the fashion of the established ghost” (472). In this context, Maggie’s obsessively reiterated reunions for the Matcham party eventually seem to become somewhat embarrassing for the mansion’s habitués, publicly signaling the existence of problems among the Ververs that should not be aired so indiscreetly.

Perhaps not coincidentally, their visit to Fawns marks the last appearance of the Castledeans and their fellow Matcham habitués. While they have for several months served as “a new joke” for Maggie and her father—providing a welcome distraction and conversational topic that allowed Adam and his daughter to avoid direct discussion of their own personal dilemmas—the two Americans have always, Maggie feels, had “to teach themselves the way” with these sophisticated British aristocrats (501). And however intense Maggie’s fixation on the Castledeans may have become, the implications of just what may (or may not) have happened at Matcham between Amerigo and Charlotte are something that she and Adam invariably seek to skirt. Maggie has indeed come to regret bitterly the ambitions to adorn the higher reaches of British society that had been one reason impelling her to encourage Adam to add the cultivated, grand Charlotte to their ménage.

By now, the time before Charlotte came into their family to complicate their lives seems to Maggie a lost Eden when “I was so happy as I was” (505). The reappearance of the husband-hunting American women, who two years earlier had besieged the then single Adam, prompts Maggie to suggest that she herself had been selfish in urging Adam to marry Charlotte to boost their social position. Moreover, she comes very close to hinting that he, as well as Maggie herself, might have been happier had he not done so. Though neither Mrs. Assingham nor Maggie can ever be certain how much Adam knows, Fanny advised the Princess to let her enigmatic father resolve the situation after Maggie bought the Golden Bowl from a London antique dealer. The salesman subsequently revealed to the Princess not just that her ostensibly exquisite artifact had a well concealed flaw, but that Charlotte and Amerigo had previously visited his shop as a couple and contemplated purchasing the bowl, which she took as definite confirmation that her husband and stepmother had been emotionally entangled before her own marriage to the Prince. Reluctant as she still is to resign Adam to Charlotte—even as Fanny asks her, “Aren’t they, for that matter, intimately together now?” (445)—Maggie accepts the older woman’s counsel. Slightly uneasily, though, she tells her father that Fanny “thinks people are sometimes fools,” but “she doesn’t [...] quite so much mind their being wicked” (505).

While it is never clear whether he does so to protect his wife or his daughter from the other’s machinations, Adam soon decides that the best resolution is for him and Charlotte to move back to the United States to establish the museum in American City that has for many years been the ultimate objective of his voracious art collecting. With pronounced

schadenfreude, Maggie and Fanny Assingham both assume that Charlotte must be deeply unhappy with this outcome and vocally pity her, facing what they anticipate will be permanent and uncongenial American exile. But neither is a very reliable witness. Fanny seems to delight in constructing baroque and sometimes mutually incompatible versions of the situations she observes so attentively. And Maggie repeatedly indulges in imagined conversations with the other characters in the novel, imputing to them feelings as well as words that may be completely fictitious.

One interpretation of *The Golden Bowl*—a novel that is perhaps the ultimate detective story—is as “a story of two worthy lovers, passionately renouncing their love in order that they may carry out honorably their commitments to their respective spouses, then, ironically, being forced to conspire together to separate a possessive daughter from her father in order to save both their marriages” (Clair 81). In this reading, Charlotte and the Prince deliberately provoke Maggie’s suspicions that they are having an affair to shock her into what she believes is a battle to preserve her marriage (Clair 79–101; Wakana; Kimball). If Adam and his wife are, as he repeatedly tells his daughter, fundamentally happy together in a contented marriage, it seems equally plausible that both of them may welcome the chance for a fresh start, putting an ocean between themselves and Adam’s possessive, cloying daughter and Charlotte’s former admirer. Given the sophistication and ruthlessness each on occasion displays, it is not impossible that for months the two have quite deliberately colluded to engineer this outcome. It is worth remembering that the book’s original working title was *Charlotte* (Edel 572).

The novel ends with one final meeting of the two couples, as Adam and Charlotte visit his daughter and son-in-law to make their farewells before sailing for the United States. When Adam and Charlotte eventually arrive, they are royalty “conjoined for a present effect as Maggie had never seen them,” bent on the mission “of representing the arts and graces to a people languishing afar off and in ignorance” (*Golden Bowl* 572). They have jettisoned Maggie and Amerigo, who are left behind in a country and milieu where, despite their wealth and aristocratic titles, neither feels entirely comfortable. “We’re distinctly bourgeois!” Maggie, “a trifle grimly,” tells her husband as they await the older couple (570). Whether, after their departure, Maggie will renew her recent efforts to operate in British high society with all its equivocations, compromises, and unspoken understandings, is left unsettled. Her own embrace of the “worldly” Castledeans and all that Matcham represents appears, as Winnett suggests, in all probability a mere temporary expedient, a tactic she adopts in her campaign to separate Amerigo and Charlotte (196–233). By the novel’s close, when “it was to cease to matter what people they were or weren’t” (361), the Matcham party have finally disappeared, surplus now to Maggie’s requirements.

On their last morning at Matcham, Charlotte—a woman Maggie once described as “not afraid—not of anything” (168)—remembered the Golden Bowl, of which, even when certain it had something “the matter with it” (120) and might “split” (121), she had proclaimed: “I like it [...] I want it” (122). Unlike Charlotte, the Prince has never been overtly willing to “risk the cracks” (292) of the Golden Bowl, and will only accept what his “instinct” tells him is “perfect” (124). “Of course it’s exquisite,” he had warned. “That’s the

danger. [...] A crack's a crack—and an omen's an omen.” It would leave him “afraid” for his “marriage. For everything” (123). Once, when Adam described him as “a pure and perfect crystal,” Amerigo retorted he was “delighted” to be considered perfect for he believes “they sometimes have cracks and flaws—in which case they're to be had very cheap!” (138). Although the Prince seeks to avoid identification with the bowl, the implication that it symbolizes him is near unmistakable.

While her husband “didn't believe in” the bowl, the Princess “must have believed in it somehow instinctively; for [she] took it as soon as [she] saw it” in the antique shop (459). Yet Maggie too learns that the bowl is not what it seems: “It's of value, but its value's impaired, I've learned, by a crack. [...] It isn't gold. [...] It's glass—and cracked, under the gilt, as I say, at that. [...] [I]t's crystal—and was once I suppose precious” (447). Late in the novel, Maggie believes Amerigo “understands” that his wife now “want[s] a happiness without a hole in it big enough for [him] to poke in [his] finger. [...] The golden bowl—as it was to have been. [...] The bowl without the crack” (475). In their own separate ways, Maggie and Amerigo alike cherish a vision of perfection that each believes may be attainable. As the novel ends, it remains an open question whether the Prince and Princess will preserve their marriage and find together the love, companionship, and purpose—the rest of the “everything”—each still needs and seeks.

Conclusion

In James's two final novels, Matcham becomes the catalyst for events that are pivotal to the remainder of the story. If for Milly Theale, Matcham represents the rapturous high point of her British sojourn, symbolizing the social success she craves, her visit to the mansion also makes her—or her wealth—the target for the attractive but unscrupulous fortune hunters whose machinations will precipitate her death. But the events Kate Croy helps to set in train at Matcham also ensure that the handsome English girl will ultimately lose Merton Densher, the man she loves and for whose benefit as well as her own she seeks to appropriate Milly's money. For the infinitely more sophisticated Charlotte and Amerigo, their visit to Matcham—while very briefly giving them latitude to function as a couple—is also, as Krook notes, the occasion that triggers alarms that will soon conclusively end their association (294–99, 303). From Lady Castledean down, Matcham's habitués are expected to respect the conventions and give no overt cause for scandal. Whatever their personal feelings, their long weekend at worldly Matcham ultimately determines that the Prince and Charlotte are forced to accept the rules and standards of their elite social circles and stick to the financially advantageous and far from uncongenial bargains they contracted when they married. The highest echelons of British society who frequent Matcham may have much to recommend them, but romance, sentiment, and the rejection of practical considerations of worldly advantage rank rather low among their priorities. To paraphrase Lord Mark, splendid as Matcham is, one rather doubts that it is good.

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