

Iconoclash: Transfiguring the Icon in *The Spoils of Poynton*

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I.

No account whatever had been taken of [Mrs. Gereth's] relation to her treasures, of the passion with which she had waited for them, worked for them, picked them over, made them worthy of each other and the house, watched them, loved them, lived with them. (James, *Spoils* 43)

Collecting in Henry James' *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897) is an art of devotion that leads to the merger of collector and collected. Mrs. Gereth, an avid collector of rare arts and artifacts and the mistress of Poynton, is defined by her creative capabilities, her "passion for the exquisite," a passion that positions her as an "author" of beauty (*Spoils* 37). The beauty that Mrs. Gereth creates is the Poynton collection—her marital home that is filled with unique pieces of art and cultural relics that she has arranged into a superb totality. As with the author-artist that James describes in his 1891 *Notebooks*, Mrs. Gereth finds a paradise in art while suffering under the burden of inspirational external stimuli. "[T]he terrible law of the artist" (James, *Theory* 88) condemns her to be tormented by the kitsch of Waterbath with its "intimate ugliness," while the splendor of Poynton uplifts her with its "rare perfection" (*Spoils* 37, 41). In her drive to create, Mrs. Gereth "embodies some aspect of the act of authorship," becoming what Diana Bellonby calls a "surrogate author" (Bellonby 209). Indeed, it is through her function as an author of beauty—a reflection of James' image of the author-artist—that Mrs. Gereth is able to create, and by creating, destroy.

The Spoils of Poynton narrates the clash between a strong-willed widow and the English custom of primogeniture. Forced to surrender her marital home Poynton and all of its treasures to

her son Owen and his philistine fiancé Mona Brigstock, Mrs. Gereth initiates a battle that not only destroys her domestic unity, but also wreaks irreversible damage on the antiques to which she has dedicated her life. Having bonded with the artistically inclined young lady Fleda Vetch over their shared horror at the ugliness of Waterbath, the Brigstock home, Mrs. Gereth brings Fleda to Poynton to mold her into a true connoisseur of art and an ally in her battle to keep the Poynton collection. When Mrs. Gereth is evicted from Poynton she transports the contents of the house to her dower house Ricks, not only destroying her relationship with her son but also the totality of the collection, which cannot be dissociated from the lovely environment of Poynton. As the objects are moved between Poynton and Ricks, the collection becomes increasingly fragmented, eventually resulting in its complete destruction.

Within the novel, things hold primacy over the development of human relationships; they are central to Mrs. Gereth and Fleda's friendship, and they are largely responsible for the dissolution of Owen's bond with his mother. The intricate connection between human and thing—the twofold influence of the thing on the human, and the human on the thing—creates a circuit of influence that links these two seemingly disparate entities together. Mrs. Gereth's very identity has developed in relation to the collection: she is defined by her things, as both the “mistress of Poynton” and the “great piece in the gallery” (*Spoils* 47, 81). Similarly, the things are not defined as individual pieces, but are rather parts of a larger whole where “preferences... [are] impossible” (*Spoils* 47). Perhaps the most radical feature of this circuit of influence is that the unity encompasses not only the collection and Mrs. Gereth but the house too: “The house and its contents had been treated as a single splendid object” (*Spoils* 43).

As a whole that encompasses entities from multiples “species”—objects, humans, and a particular locale—the Poynton collection functions within what Miguel Tamen calls a “society of

friends,” a collective formed around a group of material things (Tamen 3). A society of friends allows a thing or a collection of things to be “interpretable”—that is, to have meaning beyond its mere inanimate materiality—through a mutual recognition of the meaning of things. Whereas Tamen differentiates between the society of friends and the things around which the society centers, the Poynton collection extends beyond the distinction between society and material thing, and is an assemblage that encompasses the interpretable things as well as the society of friends. An assemblage, a term that Jane Bennett borrows from Deluze and Guattari, is a single, vibrant¹ whole that is made up of a diverse array of matter which functions in its entirety despite the persistent, seemingly conflicting presence of energies within it (Bennett 23). It functions as a “democracy” of matter whose success depends on the collaboration of its components rather than any single entity that serves as its governing head (Bennett 24, 21, 34). I shall use the phrase “society of friends” or “assemblage” interchangeably in what follows to characterize the totality of the collection, a whole that functions as a multi-species, interdependent social group. My usage combines the insights of Tamen and Bennett to extend “thing studies” generally. In addition to reading things as vibrant matter that actively influences sentient beings, I emphasize the social dimension of the Poynton collection, a collaborative, interdependent society of people, objects, and place that James imbues with feelings and the capacity for mutual understanding.

When Fleda is first brought to Poynton, Mrs. Gereth and Fleda experience the Poynton collection physically, reacting with tears and exclamations over its beauty. Entering Poynton for the first time, Fleda

¹ “Vibrant” is the word that Jane Bennett uses to indicate the liveliness and aliveness of matter, especially in an assemblage. Through the liveliness of matter, the “difference between subject and object [is] minimized” and “the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated” (Bennett 12-13).

dropped on a seat with a soft gasp and a roll of dilated eyes. ... [T]he two women embraced with tears over the tightening of their bond—tears which on the younger one's part were the natural and usual sign of her submission to perfect beauty. (*Spoils* 47)

The women's shared emotions over Poynton establish the collection as the reason for Fleda and Mrs. Gereth's connection. They worship Poynton is an icon in that, like a true icon,² it represents an ideal image to those who worship it: Fleda perceives Poynton as the true representation of "perfect beauty," while Fleda's reaction to Poynton makes "the poor old place... more precious than ever" for Mrs. Gereth (Berlis 389, *Spoils* 47). Mrs. Gereth's experience of Poynton is perhaps still more reverential. The opening sentence of *The Spoils of Poynton* points directly to the experience of the house as the experience of worship: "Mrs. Gereth had said that she would go with the rest to church, but suddenly it seemed to her that she should not be able to wait even till church-time for relief" (*Spoils* 35). Poynton is equated with a religious experience in its position as an alternative to attending church. Tormented by Waterbath's pedestrian decorations, Mrs. Gereth foregoes established religious worship in order to escape into the gardens and reminisce about the beauty of Poynton. It becomes a personal icon for Mrs. Gereth to the extent that she devotes her church hours to pondering its beauty rather than honoring an established deity.

Mrs. Gereth also connects Poynton with her deceased husband, who was her partner in collecting "the best things" and with whom she "almost starved" for the treasures (*Spoils* 53). In

² As Angela Berlis enumerates in her essay "The Politics of Representation," an icon differs from an idol in that it is an ideal representation that the worshipper perceives to be real. An idol, on the other hand, is a psychological image that is exported onto an external being (for example, the idea of a pop star that a fan constructs in her mind, allowing the fan to develop a personal relationship with that idol based on this imagined image) (Berlis 389).

equating Poynton with Mr. Gereth, Mrs. Gereth participates in the nineteenth century culture of death that centered on imbuing inanimate matter with iconic significance (Lutz 128). Rather than honoring saintly icons that held significance for vast numbers of people, personal Victorian icons, often hand-made by the mourner, commemorated a familiar individual (Lutz 136). Like a personal icon, Poynton is significant for Mrs. Gereth because of its connection to her deceased husband. But Mrs. Gereth does not only create her personal icon, but also, in an exemplary act of iconoclasm, destroys it to create a new object of worship.

The term iconoclasm, coined by Bruno Latour and born out of the 2002 exhibition *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, provides an alternative to iconoclasm, emphasizing the possibility of a “clash” between the impulse towards image breaking and image making (Probst 10, van Asselt et. al 2). Rather than the wholly destructive impulse associated with iconoclasm, Latour’s term invokes a simultaneous act of destruction and reconstruction. As Latour notes in his introduction to the conference catalogue, iconoclasm focuses on “sites, objects, and situations where there is an ambiguity, a hesitation, an iconoclasm on how to interpret image-making and image-breaking” (Latour 22). While iconoclasm refers to the conscious breaking of an object and a clear agenda for destruction, iconoclasm occurs “when one does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further inquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive;” this act of creation through destruction is defined by the uncertainty of the human hand in creating the image, icon, sign, etc. (Latour 14, 18). Latour’s example of the fire at the Turin cathedral in 1997, where firemen destroyed the glass casing surrounding the cathedral’s famous relic, epitomizes the riddle of iconoclasm (Latour 16). Without the context of the fire, the breaking of the glass could be interpreted as a destructive act; however, within the narrative of the fire, this destruction is rather

motivated by a desire to preserve the icon. Mrs. Gereth's breaking up of the Poynton collection follows a similar ambiguity, where destruction is an innate part of the quest to rebuild the icon. This "innocent vandal[ism]"—unwitting destruction motivated by love for the icon—is driven by Mrs. Gereth's desire to preserve the continuity of the collection when she is forced to relocate to Ricks (Latour 29). Indeed, for the icon to undergo recreation through destruction, it must initially be a united whole. Only by being part of a complete society of friends can Mrs. Gereth's desire to recreate the collection justify its initial destruction.

Perhaps an act of iconoclasm itself, this essay focuses on the moments in James' narrative in which creation through destruction defines the relationship between humans and material things. This essay examines the composition of the society of friends around and including the Poynton assemblage, before turning to Fleda's transformation from idolater to agent of iconoclasm as a result of her entanglement in a gift economy. By focusing on the example of *The Spoils of Poynton*, this essay argues that creation through destruction relies on an intimacy that is only accessible through participation in a society of friends; only through Mrs. Gereth and Fleda's true devotion to the icon can they avoid the complete destruction of iconoclasm, transforming their unwitting destructive acts instead into acts of iconoclasm.

II.

Although Mrs. Gereth seems to function as the curator of the Poynton collection, her relationship with the objects at Poynton is closer than merely that of curator to collection. Her self-equation with the spoils fuses her to her creation—she creates the collection, and in the process, creates her own identity as part of the collection. John Locke, in his *Two Treatises of*

Government notes the intimacy that evolves between creator and created thing. Locke hints at the unification of man and property in remarking that, by removing something from “the state that Nature hath provided and left it in,” man’s labor, and thus something of man himself, is mixed with the created object (Locke 115). Mrs. Gereth “cared nothing for mere possession. She thought solely and incorruptibly of what was best for the objects themselves” and claims that the things “know [her] ... [and] return the touch of [her] hand” (*Spoils* 179, 53). The spoils are not property to Mrs. Gereth, but rather entities that can feel and that require an awareness of what is “best” for them. There is a shared communication between the spoils and Mrs. Gereth, an energy that binds them into a single entity.

Mrs. Gereth’s connection to the spoils is so strong that she feels their loss as she would the loss of a part of her body:

having passed the threshold of Poynton for the last time, the amputation, as she called it, had been performed. Her leg had come off—she had now begun to stump along with the lovely wooden substitute; she would stump for life. (*Spoils* 79)

The loss of the spoils registers with Mrs. Gereth as a permanent divorce of one part of her body from the rest. The permanence of this loss indicates that the spoils cannot be replaced by a substitute; her new home Ricks is merely a prosthetic. The language of amputation is echoed later in the chapter when Fleda, having discovered on her visit to Ricks that Mrs. Gereth has removed part of the Poynton collection, sees a similar injury: “[Fleda] had cared for [the Poynton collection] as a happy whole ... and the parts of it now around her seemed to suffer like chopped limbs” (*Spoils* 85). The image of amputation not only reiterates the emotional connection

between Mrs. Gereth and the Poynton collection, but also emphasizes that the original house, Poynton, was integral to the unity between the woman and her things.

The totality of this assemblage depends on the democratic, non-hierarchical collaboration of its constituent elements, rather than on Mrs. Gereth overseeing it as a curator. Mrs. Gereth is merely one item among others within the assemblage, moving as part of the collection rather than as its head. Like the power grid that Bennett uses as her prime example of a multi-species assemblage—a grid that includes humans, technology, electric energy, politics, and more—the Poynton assemblage includes multiple species: the human, the art object, the cultural artifact, the house, and the connecting energies between them all. The vibrancy of the collection is captured in Mrs. Gereth’s remark that the art pieces are “living things” to her (*Spoils* 53). The shared liveliness of the spoils and Mrs. Gereth creates a codependency between the two.

The removal of Mrs. Gereth, the spoils, or a selection of articles from Poynton thus threatens this totality. Despite Mrs. Gereth’s insistence on her need for completeness to be maintained—she “requires” every object of Poynton for her new life at Ricks, and “must either take everything or nothing” from Poynton (*Spoils* 63-64)—it is she who conducts the greatest act of destruction. The disruption of the totality by an individual within the system may seem like treachery; however, because of the intimacy of the social relation, it can be an act that springs from affection, and is driven by a desire for preservation rather than destruction. This ambiguous destruction is what differentiates iconoclasm from iconoclasm and recreates it as something done in the service of a new creation. By moving the collection to Ricks, Mrs. Gereth attempts to maintain its unity. Although the initial breaking is not orchestrated by Mrs. Gereth herself, the

subsequent breaking, construction, and reconstruction illustrates the way in which Mrs. Gereth unsuccessfully attempts to recreate the Poynton icon.³

Poynton's collection goes through three significant phases of iconoclasm following the initial breaking up of the collection. The icon is first dismantled—it is pulled apart and made alien to its original composition; then a new icon is constructed at Ricks out of the shards of the old; finally, it is dismantled for a second time and returned to the shell of its initial home where attempts are made to rebuild it to its former, complete glory. Mrs. Gereth is the driving force behind this iconoclasm, but she does not break and recreate out of spite; rather, Mrs. Gereth is unaware of the implications of the unique yet interconnected acts of breaking and recreating.

As an object of worship—it is described as the “religious” center of the Gereths’ marriage (*Spoils* 53)—the Poynton collection stands in for Mr. and Mrs. Gereth’s marriage that has now ended with the husband’s decease. Owen and Mona initially break the collection by demanding that Mrs. Gereth relocate to Ricks to allow them to prepare for their married life. This act is the most destructive form of iconoclasm, the sort that defaces the icon of an opponent in order to hurt them by smashing the thing “to which [they] *cling* most forcefully” (Latour 28, emphasis in original).⁴ By divorcing Mrs. Gereth from the Poynton collection, Owen and Mona are stripping it of its iconic significance, and reducing it to the level of property and financial worth. When Owen becomes aware of his mother’s reluctance to leave Poynton because she will not leave without the “furniture,” he implores Fleda to convince Mrs. Gereth to give Poynton up because “the furniture happened to be his, just as everything else happened to be his” (*Spoils* 61). The

³ Unlike Fleda’s adoration of Poynton, which holds religious implications, for Mrs. Gereth Poynton is not a religious icon but rather a personal one.

⁴ In his categorization of acts of iconoclasm, Latour places personalized iconoclasm—the destruction of an icon out of a desire to destroy the idolater—as one of the most destructive forms of iconoclasm (Latour 28). Rather than disapproving of the equation of the icon with a deity, iconoclasts such as Owen and Mona use the icon to damage their opponent.

basis of this ownership originates in Mr. Gereth's will, which states that Poynton and its contents would pass, through the authority of primogeniture, to Owen. But Owen's repeated use of the word "furniture" illustrates that he does not see Poynton nor its contents as "works of art," but rather as property, contrasting starkly with the idolaters' experience of Poynton (*Spoils* 61). When she first enters Poynton, Fleda "exult[s]" in its beauty (*Spoils* 47), "finger[s]," "thumb[s]" and physically experiences individual artifacts, and submits to the "respect" and "compassion" that the works of art inspire in her (*Spoils* 48).

Mrs. Gereth is not aware of the central role that the house plays in the assemblage, demanding only to be accompanied by the artifacts: Mrs. Gereth "would move only with the furniture" (*Spoils* 61). In making her willingness to move contingent upon her continued intimacy with *only* the furniture and not the house, Mrs. Gereth illustrates her ignorance about what comprises the complete society of friends. By separating the spoils from Poynton and reconstructing the partial collection at Ricks, Mrs. Gereth is deconstructing and breaking the icon. But Mrs. Gereth does not know that what she is doing will destroy the collection. By bringing the spoils with her to Ricks, she is attempting to recreate the object of worship and rebuild around her the society of friends from which she has been separated. When Fleda visits Mrs. Gereth at the newly decorated Ricks she notes the pleasure that Mrs. Gereth's takes in the reconstruction: Mrs. Gereth's eyes "lighted up with joy ... [and she] was so pleased with what she had done" (*Spoils* 81). But there is also an aspect of particularity in this selection; Mrs. Gereth insists that she only brought with her what she "required" and rather let the "rubbish" remain at Poynton (*Spoils* 81). Because it is only a selection of items from the collection, the reconstructed icon at Ricks can never function as a true icon, but only as an inadequate

substitute. Poynton has neither been fully destroyed nor has it been fully remade into a new object of worship.

The spoils' partial reconstruction at Ricks, however, is only temporary; believing that Fleda will marry Owen, Mrs. Gereth returns the spoils once more to Poynton. Reconstructing the old society of friends out of the double pieces of the original and the fragments from Ricks is not possible; inevitably gaps will remain that cannot be filled, thus leaving a hollow substitute. In this case, Mrs. Gereth—the “great piece in the gallery”—is absent (*Spoils* 81). The images of Mrs. Gereth that adorn the text following her second divorce from the collection describe her as “gaunt and unnatural” as she sinks into the “quicksand” that is her life without true beauty (*Spoils* 132). In his essay in *Iconoclash*, Adam Lowe remarks that “killing with kindness” is often the result of attempted art restoration (Lowe 546). The well-intentioned restoration of Poynton by Mrs. Gereth is one such example of “killing with kindness,” where Mrs. Gereth's attempted restoration only results in further destruction (Latour 28).⁵ Like an inept art conservator, Mrs. Gereth's attempt to recreate Poynton solidifies its destruction rather than returns it to its former glory. The mere attempt to reconstruct the distorted assemblage does not reverse the process of ruin. Once instigated, destruction through creation is a perpetual cycle of attempted restorations, and attempts to reverse the unwitting, seemingly ambiguous acts of iconoclash only lead to further destruction.

⁵ The unwitting destruction through attempted restoration is what Latour categorizes as the purest form of iconoclash. The “innocent vandals” do not know that their well-intentioned acts are destroying anything; they only believe that “they [are] cherishing images and protecting them from destruction, and yet they are accused later of having profaned and destroyed them!” (Latour 29). As Mrs. Gereth is blind to the true nature of her “restoration,” so Fleda cannot look past the destruction, seeing only the iconoclastic destruction rather than the more positively intended restoration.

III.

Although initially an idolater, Fleda is transformed into an actor in the cycle of destruction and (re)creation by her increasing obligation to the Gereths in their economy of gift-giving. The ultimate end of the gift economy is the prospect of Fleda's transformation into the "right sort of wife" for Owen—Mrs. Gereth's ideal curator of the society of friends—that would ensure the termination of her indebtedness (*Spoils* 57). While the argument that Fleda is a liminal character is by no means original, it is nonetheless necessary to briefly lay out the way in which her liminality functions in light of the Poynton collection. The characters around Fleda objectify her in a similar way to Gilbert Osmond's objectification of Isabel Archer, in *Portrait of a Lady* (1881). Like Isabel, who for Osmond functions as an accessory to social life, Fleda is an accessory in the battle for possession of Poynton. Both Mrs. Gereth and Owen treat Fleda as an auxiliary object that can be moved between them as they battle to maintain possession of the spoils.

Fleda's objectification began in James' compositional process, as James explained in his Preface to the 1908 New York edition. Describing his desire to write a novel in which "the Things, always the splendid Things" would be the center, enjoying "heroic importance," James remarks that the challenges of the editorial process resulted in the need to replace the things at the center with a person at the center to curb the length of the text (James, "Preface" 29, 27). James writes that the things "would have been costly to keep up. In this manner Fleda Vetch, maintainable at less expense ... marked her place in my foreground in one ingratiating stroke" ("Preface" 29). James replaces the things originally intended to dominate the text with Fleda in order to maintain the dominance of the things through Fleda's liminal status. I agree with Kurt

M. Koenigsberger's observation that Fleda's objectification is a formal materiality that allows for a continued distinction between the human and thing (Koenigsberger, 40). Through being thing-like in a formal sense and thereby functioning as a mediator between the things and the human sphere, Fleda has the most intimate relationship with the spoils of any character in the novel. She not only reacts emotionally to their beauty, but is also permitted to physically interact with them, holding velvets "in a loving palm" and "hang[ing] over cases of enamels" (*Spoils* 48). This intimacy does not transfer a religious aura to Fleda, but rather makes her the true idolater of the novel.

Because of this intimacy with the sacred object, Fleda is used by the other characters in the novel as a mediator. For Owen, this manifests itself in his utilization of Fleda to get closer to his mother and thereby the spoils. For Mrs. Gereth, this results in her attempts to train and mold Fleda into a suitable member of the spoils assemblage. Owen recognizes the unique position that Fleda holds, and uses her as the means by which to convince his mother to return the spoils to Poynton:

he was conscious only of [Fleda] being there as for decent service—conscious of the dumb instinct that from the first had made him regard her not as complicating his intercourse with ... [Mrs. Gereth], but as simplifying it. (*Spoils* 60)

To Owen, Fleda is a "service," a means to his desired end. Owen continues to mediate all of his requests through Fleda, recognizing that Fleda is "on his mother's side," that she "belonged to his mother" (*Spoils* 77).

Simultaneously, Mrs. Gereth takes advantage of Fleda's liminality by molding her into a suitable caretaker of the spoils. By manipulating Fleda's growing affection for Owen, Mrs. Gereth hopes that Fleda's idolatry of the spoils will supersede her more human impulses of

social acceptability. Understandably, Fleda disapproves of being “shown off to Owen as the right sort of wife for him” (*Spoils* 57). Mrs. Gereth’s prerequisite for “the right sort of wife” is one who can take on the maternal duty that she has fulfilled, namely, an integral part of the spoils. Mrs. Gereth’s affection for Fleda stems from their shared idolization of the objects: Mrs. Gereth “had taken a tremendous fancy to [Fleda], but that was on account of the fancy—to Poynton of course—taken by Fleda herself” (*Spoils* 57). As Fleda’s entrance into the novel is based upon her affinity to the “splendid Things” that James desires to be central to the text, so Fleda’s entrance into Mrs. Gereth’s circle of confidence relies upon her respect for the things.

Owen and Mrs. Gereth’s objectification of Fleda points to a still more prominent trend in *The Spoils of Poynton*: the demands they make of Fleda indicate her obligation to reciprocate their kindness. Fleda’s obligation to Owen and Mrs. Gereth initiates her into a gift economy, a circuit of kindness and reciprocation that ultimately transforms her, too, into an agent of iconoclasm. A gift economy, as Marcel Mauss describes in *The Gift* (1925) and Georges Bataille further enumerates in *The Accursed Share* (1946-49), is a system of establishing power and primacy based on giving gifts and returning them with interest. Obligated by social principle to counter Mrs. Gereth’s accommodation of her and Owen’s friendship with increasingly more valuable gifts, Fleda enters into an ever-escalating cycle of indebtedness.⁶

Coincidentally meeting Fleda in London and accompany her on her errands along Oxford Street, Owen expresses his desire to buy her a present, “a tribute of recognition of all she had done for Mummy” (*Spoils* 74). Owen desires to give Fleda a gift in order to continue to request

⁶ This ever-escalating contest of gift giving is driven by the obligation to reciprocate with a gift of greater value (Mauss 13, 39; Bataille, *The Accursed* 65, 67). However, whereas the termination of the system of giving in *The Spoils of Poynton* is never realized as true social destruction, both Mauss and Bataille place destruction (whether that is destruction of material possessions, or the devastation of social honor) as the central motivator and end of a gift economy (Mauss 35-37; Bataille, *Visions* 122).

her assistance in his battle for the spoils.⁷ Fleda seems hyper-conscious of the contract that obliges her to reciprocate a gift of greater value, and therefore refuses all of Owen's grand offers, conceding only to accept "a small pincushion, costing sixpence, in which the letter F was marked out with pins" (*Spoils* 75). In basing her acceptance on the gift's monetary value, Fleda ensures that she will be able to maintain her independence. In subsequent meetings with him, Fleda finds herself having to offer Owen increasingly valuable gifts. Prior to this moment Fleda was still on the sidelines of the conflict over the spoils, not actively supporting either of the Gereths. But once she accepts Owen's gift she begins to side more actively with him and internally criticize Mrs. Gereth's "theft." Upon visiting Ricks newly decorated at the expense of Poynton Fleda's perception of the dower house is dominated by Owen; "his sad, strange eyes" are everywhere in Ricks, seeming to accuse Fleda of the theft, incessantly reminding her that "She owed him something" (*Spoils* 85, 157). Haunted by the obligation to counter the gift of the pincushion, Fleda actively expresses her willingness to disapprove of Mrs. Gereth's action and side with Owen (*Spoils* 97).

Owen and Fleda's series of exchanges break apart when Owen's offer to marry Fleda does not hold enough value; he proposes marriage before his engagement with Mona is securely dissolved. Fleda suspends her gift economy with Owen because of his failure to give a gift of adequate value. Dissociating herself from Owen, Fleda instead turns to Mrs. Gereth and Mrs. Gereth's unwittingly destructive relationship with the spoils.

From the outset of the novel, it is clear that "poor Fleda" "hadn't a penny in the world;" her only gift is her "subtle mind," which she willingly offers to Mrs. Gereth in repayment for

⁷ Mary Douglas describes this cycle of giving as an economy in which "each gift is a part of a system of reciprocity in which the honor of the giver and the recipient are engaged" (ix). Owen feels the need to maintain his primacy and honor by acknowledging Fleda's support of his mother—a role that, as son, he should have taken on.

Mrs. Gereth's accommodation of her (*Spoils* 42). While her "subtle mind" is used successfully to interact with Owen, it is not enough to repay Mrs. Gereth for the gift of indefinite hospitality and initiation into the cult of "perfect beauty" (*Spoils* 47). Because Fleda has so little to offer Mrs. Gereth, Fleda becomes increasingly indebted. When Fleda becomes aware that people are gossiping about her extended stay at Poynton, calling her a "leech," she returns to her father's house in London (*Spoils* 73). But a relationship based on gift-giving cannot be negated by leaving it behind; Fleda must return to Mrs. Gereth and continue to be her companion and support. By returning, Fleda gives herself fully as a companion and confidant to Mrs. Gereth and joins her in their shared worship of the spoils in repayment of Mrs. Gereth's gifts.

Hearing that Owen is in love with Fleda and anticipating a marriage between the two, Mrs. Gereth arranges for the spoils to be returned to Poynton and, she assumes, to fall under the ministrations of the new mistress, Fleda. This arrangement would have enabled Mrs. Gereth to more than repay Fleda for her companionship. Owen, however, does not break off his engagement with Mona, but rather marries her, taking possession of the (partially⁸) restored Poynton. Fleda and Mrs. Gereth's relationship culminates in Fleda's attempt to completely submit to Mrs. Gereth as repayment for the gift (though unsuccessful) of the Poynton spoils by resigning herself utterly to Mrs. Gereth's tutelage.

By attempting to retrieve the treasured Maltese cross,⁹ Fleda shows herself prepared to further undermine the unity of the collection. The result of this attempted retrieval would have¹⁰

⁸ I say "partially" because, as a society of friends that relies on the presence of all of its components, Poynton cannot be complete without Mrs. Gereth in its midst.

⁹ The unity of the Poynton collection is not only conveyed through Mrs. Gereth's intimacy with it, but also through James' indistinct descriptions of the house; rather than describing single objects in detail, he presents Poynton as a total experience, describing it as having "vistas . . . long and bland" with its general effect "written in great syllables of color and form" (*Spoils* 47). The Maltese Cross is the exception to this. It is the only item that Mrs. Gereth, Fleda, and Owen

ambiguous consequences: on the one hand, by removing the Maltese cross, the partial totality of the icon would be destroyed. However, at the same time Fleda would be creating a new object of worship, a symbol of her enduring, if unrequited, affection for Owen. Had she succeeded, Fleda would have performed an exemplary act of iconoclasm.

IV.

The real centre, ... the citadel of the interest, with the fight waged round it, would have been the felt beauty and value of the prize of battle, the Things, always the splendid Things, placed in the middle light, figured and constituted, with each identity made vivid, each character discriminated, and their common consciousness of their great dramatic part established. ("Preface" 29)

The language of James' preface establishes the Poynton collection as an autonomous figure around whom the action of the novel takes place. By emphasizing the splendor of the things, James imbues them with iconic significance to justify their centrality to the story. Fleda likewise participates in this adoration based on the "felt beauty and value" of the spoils. But when faced with the destruction of the collection, this adoration transforms into idolatry.

distinguish from the rest of the collection (indeed, Owen calls it "the gem of the collection" (*Spoils* 208)), and it is the only artifact that is afforded a detailed description: it is "a small but marvelous crucifix of ivory, a masterpiece of delicacy, of expression, and of the great Spanish period" (*Spoils* 82). By distinguishing this one object from the collection, James is separating it from the society of friends of which it is a part, in essence destroying the totality of the collection. As such, the destruction of the assemblage begins already in the process of composing the novel.

¹⁰ I refer to this iconoclasm as speculative because the fire that destroys Poynton at the end of the novel forecloses any realization of this final act of iconoclasm.

Like the idolater, Fleda cannot look past the “great gaps in [Poynton]” to see the new object of worship that Mrs. Gereth is attempting to create by relocating the spoils to Ricks (*Spoils* 80). The Poynton icon cannot be completely erased, but rather continues to remind Fleda of its original form in its shards. Joseph Keorner, in his chapter in *Iconoclasm*, remarks that, “defacement itself leaves a face behind. When iconoclasts [clean] their churches . . . they [leave] the ruined idols standing as emblems of defeat” (Koerner 179). Since Poynton and its contents are repeatedly described as being a single object, the removal of the spoils from Poynton does not entirely erase the icon; the house—a shard of the “ruined idol”—still remains (Koerner 179). It is this presence of the ruins of the revered object, the image of Poynton “dishonored,” that haunts Fleda as she lies awake in her room at Ricks (*Spoils* 85, 80). The “great gaps” in Poynton and “the far-away empty sockets, a scandal of nakedness between high bleak walls” that Fleda sees when looking at the newly decorated Ricks is a tribute to the destruction that results from iconoclasm (*Spoils* 80, 81). Indeed, while the “nakedness” between “bleak walls” recollects the Protestant Iconoclasts’ stripping of Catholic churches in the sixteenth century, the “empty sockets” are reminiscent of a yet more brutal destruction: the defacement of the eyes, hands, and mouths of religious portraits in the sixteenth century that stripped the icons of their purported power (Koerner 168, 179).

Although the spoils that are returned to Poynton are never successfully gifted to Fleda in the traditional sense, it is nonetheless part of Mrs. Gereth and Fleda’s relationship of gift-giving and therefore requires Fleda to reciprocate: “Mrs. Gereth’s bounty had laid her under obligations more marked than any hindrance” (*Spoils* 168). Having already given herself fully to Mrs. Gereth as a companion and confidant, the only thing Fleda has left to offer is her complete

transformation into the figure that Mrs. Gereth desires her to be. By attempting to remove the Maltese cross from Poynton, Fleda becomes an agent of iconoclasm.

Travelling to Poynton “as a pilgrim might go to a shrine,” Fleda’s religiously motivated trip to further dismantle the Poynton icon and epitomizes the ambiguity of unwitting destruction through a desire to create (*Spoils* 209). The true iconoclasm comes in Fleda’s desire to create a new object of worship out of the old. At the end of the novel, Owen writes to Fleda, desiring her to take possession of the Maltese cross as a “remembrance of something of [his]” (*Spoils* 208). While Fleda’s acceptance of a “remembrance” of Owen’s indicates that she is willing to continue in the gift exchange that appeared to be completed with her refusal to marry him, I think the more significant implication of accepting this gift is the creation of a new object to be revered. The Maltese cross, as both a possession of Owen’s and a part of the Poynton assemblage, symbolizes both Fleda’s affection for Owen and for Poynton. However, in the true style of iconoclasm, the creation of this new religious symbol would result in the (further) destruction of the original Poynton icon. Like the craftsman who destroys the true image through restoration, Fleda’s desire to remove and create a new icon out of the Maltese Cross would result in the further degradation of Poynton.

V.

The culmination of *The Spoils of Poynton* comes as Fleda completes her pilgrimage to Poynton. Arriving on the train station at Poynton, she discovers that the house and all of its magnificent contents are burning. Critics’ readings of the Poynton fire are varied, from the

destruction of the spoils as the unrelenting advance of modernity,¹¹ to the end of cultural inheritance,¹² or to the objects' retribution on human attempts to own and manipulate them.¹³ While a case can be made for all of these arguments, in the context of creation through destruction the fire rather illustrates the inability of the distorted icon to continue as an object of worship. Seemingly in response to Fleda's pilgrimage to the "shrine" of her icon, the object of worship destroys itself (*Spoils* 209). In the context of the transformative power of fire (think of the phoenix's combustion that allows for new life), the Poynton fire suggests an attempt to repair the cracks that iconoclasm inflicted upon the revered object. Dörte Zbikowski, in discussing the transformation of icons by fire, remarks that,

Fire is among the carriers of spiritual forces. . . . It is ambivalent. On the one hand it is a pleasant perception, providing light and warmth; on the other hand its destructive forces are feared. It simultaneously is creative of culture and destructive. . . . Fire has the power of transformation; its destructive force is often interpreted as a means for rebirth at a higher level. (Zbikowski 431)

As an icon, Poynton contains intimations of personal spirituality, a spirituality that is apparent through its popular worship—especially by Mrs. Gereth and Fleda. The fire can also be read as an act of rebirth and regeneration—the collection's attempt to recreate itself as a united whole.

¹¹ Wynne, Deborah. "The New Woman, Portable Property and The Spoils of Poynton." *The Henry James Review* 31.2 (2010): 142–153. Print.

¹² Lyons, Richard S. "The Social Vision of The Spoils of Poynton." *American Literature* 61.1 (1989): 59–77. Web. 21 Nov. 2013.

¹³ Mitchell, Lee Clark. "'To Suffer like Chopped Limbs': The Dispossessions of The Spoils of Poynton." *The Henry James Review* 26.1 (2005): 20–38. Print; Tintner, Adeline R. "The Disappearing Furniture in Maupassant's 'Qui Sait?' And *The Spoils of Poynton*" *The Henry James Review* 6.1 (1984): 3–7. Web. 29 Nov. 2013.

Fire's dual qualities of destruction and regeneration speak to this ultimate and final act of iconoclasm: the possibility of new life through complete demolition.

But iconoclasm is not relegated to the realm of religious relics, or even visual and artistic objects. As James enumerates in his preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, destruction is an innate aspect of the process of writing. James breaks apart the "germ" of the story that he overheard at a Christmas Eve dinner party in order to use the "one thing [that] was 'in it'" as the center of his narrative—namely, the splendid things around which the family quarrel revolved ("Preface" 24). Like the decision to introduce Fleda into the manuscript as the replacement for the things, creating a story less about "the fierce appetite for the upholsterer's and joiner's and brazier's work" ("Preface" 26) and more about "the power in [things]" (30), so each decision to destroy an aspect of one's writing through editing is accompanied by its subsequent creations. Iconoclasm re-defines writing as complete creation; each draft, each replacement is an artistic creation—an icon—in its own right.

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