

Reading rooms: MR James and the library of
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Penny Fielding

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Reading Rooms: M. R. James and the Library of Modernity

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If we were to read the development of Gothic fiction through its objects of terror, from giant helmets to serial killers, then M. R. James would be hard to place. While he occasionally does make use of traditional Gothic conventions—two of his stories, "Count Magnus" and "Wailing Well," are populated by that familiar monster of Victorian horror, the vampire; in other stories he includes a number of troglodytic characters resembling Robert Louis Stevenson's Mr. Hyde; and some monstrous spiders appear in "The Ash Tree"—usually James's creatures are more difficult to categorize. Sometimes they lurk in the uncanny objects of the everyday: curtains, prayer books, rolls of linen, and bedclothes all take on a ghostly animation. More often it is hard to say precisely of what the phobic objects consist, as they rarely take on material form. James is a master of the unexplained supernatural, not so much in luring the reader into a bewildering and impossible choice of explanations, as Henry James does in *The Turn of the Screw*, but in seeming almost willfully unconcerned with the provision of any explanation at all. In "Rats," a short story from his *Collected Ghost Stories* (1931), James draws attention to this tendency by opening with an epigraph from Charles Dickens's story "Tom Tiddler's Ground": "'And if you was to walk through the bedrooms now, you'd see the ragged, mouldy bedclothes a-heaving and a-heaving like seas.' 'And [End Page 749] a-heaving and a-heaving with what?' he says. 'Why, with the rats under 'em.'" But in line with the perverse anti-logic of James's later tales, when the story itself commences it turns out not to be about the "Rats" of the title at all: "But was it with the rats? I ask, because in another case it was not. I cannot put a date to the story, but I was young when I heard it, and the teller was old. It is an ill-proportioned tale, but that is my fault not his" (341). And, contrary to the reception of James as a master of the "well-made tale," "Rats" is ill-proportioned, with an extensive and somewhat repetitive buildup to a conventional "what's behind the locked door?" plot, followed by a cursory explanation about an executed murderer whose animated corpse may have been spotted.¹

Thus James's stories—particularly his later ones—show a marked disregard for any kind of conventional plotting. Many stories are oddly shaped, containing large sections of description only related to the plot by proximity, and others, like the confusing "Two Doctors," do not bother with any explanation at all. An interesting case in this respect is the Freudian-entitled "The Malice of Inanimate Objects." The story begins as Mr. Manners tells Mr. Burton of the suicide by throat-cutting of George Wilkins, a man they both knew, and with whom Burton had been in legal dispute (expressed only in the vaguest of terms in the story). The two men then take a walk and Burton destroys a kite imprinted with the letters "I.C.U." Burton continues through the day experiencing all sorts of minor accidents until he apparently has his own throat cut on a train, the words "Geo. W." being inscribed in blood near the body. With typically misleading confidence, the narrator ends the story by remarking, "Do not these facts—if facts they are—bear out my suggestion that there is something not inanimate behind the Malice of Inanimate Objects?" ("Casting" 292). Of course, they do not: the story provocatively fails to establish a connection between the various annoying but trivial objects of Burton's day, including the kite, and the supposed ghost of "Geo. W. Feci," who never turns up in person. This uneasy relationship between objects and their ordering in the cause-and-effect narration of the ghost story characterizes James...



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