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Reading Knowledge: Curiosity in The Golden Bowl

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Abstract

This essay argues that showing us what things are—and particularly what they cost—is an especial violation of The Golden Bowl. The Golden Bowl stages the fatal encounter between two curious subjects: a woman who wants to know and a bowl that wants to tell. Between them, they enact the central enigma of the realist novel: is the heroine curious because she wants to know or because everyone (including the reader) wants to know about her? How does the novel, by making a spectacle of its taciturn realist object, both feed and toy with the reader's curiosity? And what, for the heroine and for the reader, is the price of female curiosity?

Reading Knowledge: Curiosity in *The Golden Bowl*

By Hilary M. Schor, *University
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When Ruth Praver Jhabvala, James Ivory, and Ismail Merchant went to film *The Golden Bowl*, they created a kind of mouse-trap, a dumb show or masque that “pre-tells” the story of the novel. In a torch-lit, Renaissance shadow-play we observe the violent husband, the adulterous wife, the trapped lover—and the horrifying death of the deceivers. Clearly, these *filmistes* are channeling Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* as much as *Hamlet*, but this opening sequence performs what any critic must eventually do yet almost certainly postpones: it chooses a reading of *The Golden Bowl*. The film does many things the novel refuses to do—among them, giving a price (inflated, like so much else in the movie) to the eponymous bowl. Nonetheless throughout, it seems to illustrate that to *show* James is not to *tell* but to *lie*, precisely to announce a choice that can only be revealed as arbitrary, partial, and finally not especially interesting. I will resist following this observation into some sweeping generality about the difficulties of doing filmic readings of James and content myself with one observation, which in turn will lead me into my own “reading.” My argument is that showing us what things are—and particularly what they cost—is an especial violation of *The Golden Bowl*, which is far less about knowledge than it is about knowledge’s bastard sister, curiosity. *The Golden Bowl* stages the fatal encounter between two curious subjects: a woman who wants to know and a bowl that wants to tell. Between them, they enact the central enigma of the realist novel, as Henry James (and I) read the tradition: is the heroine curious because she wants to know or because everyone (including the reader) wants to know about her? How does the novel, by making a spectacle of its taciturn realist object, both feed and toy with the reader’s curiosity? And what, for the heroine and for the reader, is the price of female curiosity?

Of all the novels of female curiosity in the Anglo-American tradition, and I am thinking of a line that reaches from *Clarissa* through *Emma*, *Jane Eyre*,

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