

# Henry James and the Better Part of Discretion

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This article begins with the realization that American students today experience Shakespeare's dramas in one of two predominant ways, both of which are informed by a scholarly *ethos* of discretion. One invokes the imperative to set aside any foolhardy desire to pin down the biography of the Bard, unknowable as it is. The other insists on travelling abroad to get to know, if not the man himself, then at least his *umwelt*, breathe the air he breathed, walk the streets he walked, and dive deeper into ever-frustrated intimacy. Both approaches promote a form of discretion that has little to do with *withholding* what we *do* know and everything to do with disclosing what we *might* know despite all the things we know we *cannot* know. The trials and opportunities, the acts of courage and cowardice which such discretion imposes upon readers were well-known to Henry James. Scholars have paid due attention to his introduction to *The Tempest* or his famous short story "The Birthplace". But one must also revisit "The Jolly Corner" through the lens of that champion of discretion, Sir John Falstaff, to better glimpse James's critique of a trending pusillanimity.

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Midway through Henry James's short story "The Birthplace", Morris and Isabel Gedge, the newly-employed wardens and tour-guides of "the early home of the supreme poet, the Mecca of the English-speaking race" (James 2017, 5), have a domestic spat, the outlines and stakes of which are all too familiar to students and teachers of Shakespeare. Morris, more scrupulous than Isabel, worries he is lying through his teeth every time tourists visit the upstairs room of the historic house and ask whether it is indeed, truly, 'the birthplace'. When he finally has the gumption to confront his wife on the topic, whom he knows to be a devout believer in the birthplace's authenticity, it is with a weak conviction that truth, or at least the dignity of not having to lie, should have some

negotiating power against the economic obligations that keep them tethered to their current presentation. “Couldn’t you adopt [...] a slightly more discreet method?”, he timidly proposes, as much to himself as to her (25). Any number of oblique approaches – a deference to tradition or lore, a mode of speech that highlights the factuality of facts, a reserve or strategic hesitation – would, Morris suggests, alleviate the pressure put on truth and still meet the financial constraints which their contract with the Poet’s heritage foundation enjoins:

“[...] [I]s this really [...] the very *spot* where He was born?” “So it has, from a long time back, been described as being”. Couldn’t one meet Them, to be decent a little, in some such way as that? (25)

Isabel rejects Morris’s proposal – “I decline to let the place down” (26) – but academics in America have taken Morris to heart even as they, too, decline to let the birthplace go.

Around the unknowability of ‘Shakespeare the man’ have grown two critical habits: one, a disavowal of all biographical criticism that treats the plays as guides to the psyche of the author; and the other, a need to see, taste, smell, and analyze the material landscapes where he allegedly breathed them into life. Generations of student audiences have been taught a number of “more discreet methods” for reading Shakespeare *sans* Shakespeare, some pronouncing “the death of the author”, others beckoning to “always historicize” but never speculate biographically or psychologically. At the same time, and at first glance paradoxically, generations of students’ tuitions have fed the touristic-academic industry that promotes getting to know the Bard by visiting his homeland and becoming intimate with his works in the environs in which they were composed.

This unusual intertwining of Isabel and Morris’s positions in American academia emerges from the very concept of discretion invoked but not defined in the Gedges’s dispute. As all study-abroad-in-London alumni will remember, the one thing we all know and can say with certainty about Shakespeare is that we know next to nothing about Shakespeare. In a clear role-reversal of James’s “The Birthplace”, the unknowability of the Bard is today

the clear, core, and imperturbable dogma that the authenticity of his birthplace was for the Isabels of ages past. If Oxfordians occasionally rattle the cages, or if proponents of Shakespeare as crypto-Catholic or closet-trans seasonally make waves, a scholarly bulwark stands ready to re-echo Morris's discretionary agnosticism: "I grant you there was somebody. But the details are naught. The links are missing. The evidence [...] is *nil*" (26). The very success of that discretionary agnosticism works, counterintuitively, to stoke the insatiable curiosity of those who visit the birthplace. The radical unknowability of Shakespeare has made the need to trace his footsteps all the more urgent, compelling, and self-evidently fundamental if one is to get any real sense of the writer. What is left of Shakespeare when you get rid of the person is the place in which his life took place: short of getting to know him, go and get to know that.

American academia may want it both ways in its approach to Shakespeare, but in adopting this stance, it takes the word "discretion" far beyond its usual precincts. The "more discreet method" of side-stepping the biographical abyss has led us into new territories of discretion. Here discretion has very little to do with preserving truth from error, exaggeration, embarrassment, or overreach, and still less to do with the usual understanding of guarding unpublishable secrets from uncivil leaks. Scholarship is not concerned with what ought *not* be said given what *is* known but with what *is* left to say given what *cannot* be known. Discretion, as asserted in America's classrooms and conference-rooms, is no longer a convention regarding what we agree to never air publicly about Shakespeare; it is an evolving decorum about what we resign ourselves to never knowing about Shakespeare.

In that sense, discretion remains an epistemic value as well as an aesthetic, social, and moral code, and a changing one at that. It takes a learned gentility, an educated rhetoric to maintain that you simultaneously presume to know nothing about Shakespeare the person (if he or she ever truly existed) yet to admire everything admirable about the works. This strange combination of being passive in unknowing yet active in appreciation requires a heady mixture of urbanity and mystic sensitivity; but it can result in moments of unintended presumption and embarrassment (ask any

doctoral student coming home from their first Shakespeare conference whether they feared making some gauche remark like “What Shakespeare really meant to say is...” or “I feel as though Shakespeare would never have...”).

Nina Schwartz once described, with her characteristic precision, the similar dilemma and skirting of embarrassment that Henry James’s stories chronically induce in readers:

On the one hand, we may often feel as intensely as James’s characters do a desire simply *to know* the facts [...]. At the same time, however, we may also feel embarrassed by this desire, fearing it to be a sign of vulgar literal-mindedness. [...] [T]o require the specifics is to expose oneself as unaware of the general aesthetics of social order. To need to know the facts, that is, is to refuse the opportunity that a mystery offers, the chance to assert one’s civil sophistication by analogically inferring its solution. (Schwartz 1991, 69-70)

This civil sophistication that willingly accepts mysteries and infers the solution to ‘known unknowns’ is a class virtue that James’s protagonists and narrators reverently call “discretion”. Sometimes, as in Morris’s proposal to adopt a “more discreet method”, it is a useful lever with which to seize higher social ground, for one can never be discreet or decent enough. But at other times, as in James’s short story “The Jolly Corner” (1908) – and, I would argue, in the American Shakespeare classroom – it is crowned with a capital “D” and an exclamation point, like a modern-day “Eureka!” for the ways in which it allows us to cope and rest content with certain kinds of unknowing. “The Jolly Corner”, read through the lens of Shakespeare’s champions of discretion, Hamlet and especially Sir John Falstaff, proves an excellent primer for understanding the manipulable social and epistemic uses of discretion which have shaped Shakespeare in American classrooms. Especially in the pages of a journal like *Memoria di Shakespeare*, whose title evokes Borges’s story of the same name where a protagonist walks about mysteriously endowed with the memory of the real-life William Shakespeare<sup>1</sup>, it behooves us to reflect on this “need to know the facts”, the embarrassments which it occasions, and the

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<sup>1</sup> See Borges 2001. The original title is “La memoria de Shakespeare” (1983).

entanglements, ironies, perhaps even vices it begets in those learning and professing Shakespeare in today's America.

Today's legalese understands the term "discretion" as a form of jurisdiction based in private discernment, and so Harold Bloom once glossed it in defense of his beloved poltroon Falstaff: "the right to choose what should be done in a particular situation" (Bloom 2017, 119). Yet its more civil meanings – a resistance to ostentation, a trustworthiness with respect to the public disclosure of private matters, "a reserve of expression" (Levine 2002, xi)<sup>2</sup> – have never been lost on readers of Shakespeare, including James himself. In his introduction to *The Tempest*, James wrestles fiercely with that very high reserve of expression which has made Shakespeare, the man, an ungraspable figure to a reader of his plays. James's desire is an understandable but ill-fated one: he would cross-examine the slightest indiscretions of Shakespearean characters for clues to the playwright's otherwise inaccessible life and psyche. If scholars may discuss "the facts of the Poet", what "supremely interests" James is "the Man" *inside* the characters, who "remains as unseen of us as our Ariel, on the enchanted island, remains of the bewildered visitors" (James 1984, 1216). Neil Chilton, parsing the introduction in 2005 with tact for its ironies, proposed that for James "to develop intimate understandings of Falstaff and Hotspur it is, perhaps, at the expense of our knowledge of William Shakespeare" (Chilton 2005, 220). In James, as in the average American study-abroad student, Shakespeare's biographical unknowability stokes the fire of curiosity even as it establishes firm limits upon it. For James, however, unlike most undergraduates, it is more than mere curiosity, it is a vocational, indeed existential aspiration and exasperation: "How are we to arrive at a relation with the object to be penetrated if we are thus forever met by a locked door flanked with a sentinel [...]?" (James 1984, 1217).

For Shakespeare critics besides James, the various meanings of discretion take on special value, for phraseological and performative reasons as well as for broader historical and

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<sup>2</sup> Levine invokes the term "discretion" more narrowly to refer to culturally imposed silencing or self-elected censorship with regards to what James's editor called "guilty love", adulterous themes, and other forms of sexual explicitness.

ideological ones. In citing Harold Bloom earlier, I have already discreetly nodded at Falstaff's much-cited line "The better part of valor is discretion", a renowned justification uttered shortly before the fat knight lies down to play dead rather than fight at the Battle of Shrewsbury (*1 Henry IV*, V.iv.122)<sup>3</sup>. One may just as well recall Hamlet's injunction to the visiting troupe of actors, "let your own discretion be your tutor" (*Hamlet*, III.ii.17-18), or Lysander, Demetrius, and Theseus's quips at Snug's expense, as the rude mechanical takes on the role of Lion in *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*:

LYSANDER

This lion is a very fox for his valor.

THESEUS

True, and a goose for his discretion.

DEMETRIUS

Not so, my lord, for his valor cannot carry his discretion, and the fox carries the goose.

THESEUS

His discretion, I am sure, cannot carry his valor, for the goose carries not the fox. It is well. Leave it to his discretion, and let us listen to the moon.

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.245-52)<sup>4</sup>

Across these examples, the keyword fluctuates in meaning, or, as V. N. Vološinov once wrote, its "social accents" "clash and criss-cross" (Hillman 1996, 74)<sup>5</sup>. In one corner of the arena, we have the expectations placed on the Danish prince, the Athenian nobles, and the lords at the Battle of Shrewsbury, namely that their valor should match and "carry" their discretion, their courage complement their

<sup>3</sup> All Shakespeare quotations are taken from the Folger Shakespeare Library's online open-access digital texts (<https://shakespeare.folger.edu>).

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to colleagues at INCH (the International Network for Comparative Humanists) for several of these suggestions.

<sup>5</sup> As the philologist David Hillman reports, V. N. Vološinov, a Marxist linguist, called discretion "a little arena for the clash and criss-crossing of differently oriented social accents" (Hillman 1996, 74). On the same page, Hillman adds that discretion "came to mean 'separation or disjunction' [...] toward the last decade of the sixteenth century", coincidentally the very decade when Falstaff, the character who boasts of containing multitudes, came to life.

prudence, not rival it. In the opposite corner, we have the discretion expected of Snug the Lion and enjoined by Hamlet upon himself and his troupe of actors: that of theatrical verisimilitude and illusion, that of not betraying one's secrets nor one's intentions.

Falstaff crisscrosses both meanings as he arises from his counterfeit collapse on the battlefield. To his mind, the better part of valor is knowing when and how to avoid calling upon valor. And to his credit, counterfeiting death proves more useful and salutary than counterfeiting bravery: "to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed" (1 *Henry IV*, V.iv.119-22). Nothing, for Falstaff, is more consonant with human existence than to pretend and dissimulate when discretion permits and the law of life demands. Yet thinking partly of Falstaff's other life as a philanderer with the merry wives of Windsor, Jacqueline T. Miller notes that discretion also admits of a feminine twist in the "arts of discretion", whenever a lady openly loved two men and exercised either her judgment in choosing one over the other or her self-possession in voicing a preference for neither (Miller 2006).

There is perhaps no better way to summarize the polyvalency of the term "discretion" than to echo the early sixteenth-century humanist Thomas Elyot, who lamented its "moche abuse" (Hillman 1996, 74). Falstaff proves more opportunistic than most Shakespearean characters in abusing the term, and none testifies better to the exquisite ironies such abuse enabled. If the exasperations of trying to peer indiscreetly past the locked door and the flanked sentinel into Shakespeare's hidden life give us one sense of what discretion meant to Henry James, it is his re-use of Falstaff for his short story "The Jolly Corner" that illuminates, by contrast, James's concern with the discretion that scholars (following Morris Gedge) invoke as remedy to the problem of Shakespeare's unknowability.

Spencer Brydon, the aristocratic protagonist of "The Jolly Corner", could be described as a man choked with discretion. He clamors for more discretion (self-sovereignty), a more discreet manner (self-reserve), a more discrete situation (remoteness from others), as well as more valor. For Brydon, it is "above all the bignesses" of New York City – not only its indecorously large

buildings or the girth of police officers patrolling its avenues at night, but especially the greed with which social peers demand his opinion on “so big a subject” as “everything” – that make his homecoming to America so ghastly an experience after thirty-three years’ sojourn abroad in “Europe” (James 2017, 203-4). The quotation marks with which he and the narrator systematically cordon off “Europe” underscore that predilection for an old world of self-restraint, proportionality, and well-defined boundaries. By comparison, the modern American cityscape – the jungle, the wilderness, as James’s characters often describe it – is a concrete accretion built for indiscretion. Its all-seeing and all-revealing glass skyscrapers, its ancient familial homes repurposed into multi-plex apartments, its body-on-body-piled tramways no longer afford the old distinction that the philosopher Hannah Arendt mourned when she diagnosed modernity as the emergence of a “social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking” (Arendt 1998, 28). The city’s capacity to cram more and more people into less and less space is a loss, particularly, for those who feel a need to keep to themselves.

Pockets of discretion do remain, however, and notable among them is the more cherished of the two Brydon family homes, the titular Jolly Corner. It is an ancestral house and haunt and, as its name implies, Brydon reserves it for sport and solace. Abundant “in nooks and corners, in closets and passages”, Brydon describes it as a place where an adult might yet play “hide-and-seek [...] in spite of the clear windows” without fearing “the cynical light of New York” (James 2017, 219). The home is kept unfurnished and vacant, to the befuddlement of the Irish cleaning lady Mrs Muldoon and to the measured curiosity of Brydon’s only bosom friend, that “well of discretion” Ms Alice Staverton (215). The great secret Brydon keeps from both women, as readers soon learn, is that he spends his nights there in solitary pursuit of childhood specters. His quarry – he speaks of it in terms of big-game hunting – is a vision of who he might have become had he stayed in America those thirty-three years, had he in fact become the powerful millionaire that he and Alice suspect he could have been.

One late night, Brydon senses that his quarry is hidden behind a closed door that Brydon, mysteriously, does not remember



closing. The door “stared, it glared back at him with that challenge; it put to him the two alternatives: should he just push it open or not?” (223). He chooses not to, invoking “the value of Discretion!” (224) as pretext and rationale. Discretion, Brydon goes on to articulate, bypasses that confrontation with hazardous knowledge, avoids the offense of closure or certainty, spares the secret of the hidden figure, and politely excuses Brydon from what Schwartz calls “the opportunity that a mystery offers”. Yet as if to thwart that discreet retreat, the same night Brydon does confront (or is confronted by – it is hard to tell which) the vision of a stranger with mutilated hands and pince-nez glasses. It is far more terrifying and less sporting an alter-ego than he ever expected to encounter. It proves to be more than he can face. The terror of being hunted by what he thought he was hunting makes him swoon. He awakens the next morning in the caring lap of Alice Staverton, who beguiles readers by revealing that she knew intuitively of Brydon’s secret nighttime escapades and that she understands, via her dreams, the nature of that mystic encounter. She tantalizes us with the identity of the threatening stranger – is he or is he not Brydon’s other self? – by disclosing a degree of liking for him: “why [...] shouldn’t I like him?”, “I *could* have liked him”, “And it may have pleased him that I pitied him” (235). The art of discretion, indeed! The story ends, however, with a tender rapprochement, as Brydon, in a moment of lucidity, discovers that the millionaire he might have been “has a million a year [...]. But he hasn’t you”, while Alice soothes Brydon’s conscience: “I don’t say I like him *better* [...]. And he isn’t – no, he isn’t – *you!*” (235).

We might at first glance deduce that “The Jolly Corner” centers more on a late-life Hamlet, with Alice Staverton in the combined roles of Ophelia and Horatio, than on a Sir John. Returning from a long stay abroad, this Prince of New York City seeks to encounter the phantom figure of something like himself, and we agonize with him over whether the vision is psychologically counterfeit, an induced forgery of jealousy, or numinous and therefore ominous. Its manifestation gives Brydon direction and momentum towards answering not the eternal question “To be or not to be?” but an equally impossible variant: “To be what I am now or to have been otherwise?”. Yet James laces Brydon’s ghostly encounter with a

humor that parodies this philosophical, psychological conundrum, turning the tenor of the story towards Falstaffian mock-heroism as Brydon invokes "Discretion!" to creep, in apparent cowardice, away from a moment of true valor.

The comparison of Brydon to Falstaff seems all the more valid on characterological grounds, where demeanors and comportments mirror tellingly. Brydon is middle-aged, grizzle-haired, and monocled; he toggles between aristocratic decadence and desuetude; he finances his hotel-plus-evening-club lifestyle by turning ancestral legacy into capital flow. Like Falstaff amidst his tavern friends and servants, he relishes both his superiority over the work-a-day contractors he enlists and his feigned equality with them. Caught in the living paradox of the juvenile senex, Brydon and Falstaff adjust the count of their years at their discretion. Falstaff famously either boasts of his youthful complexion or demands respect for his gray hairs, while Brydon asserts that he is only fifty-six but if "he were to reckon as he had sometimes, since his repatriation, found himself feeling; [...] he would have lived longer than is often allotted to man" (203). Both evade confronting their mortality through serpentine wit and discreet escapes from anything that might jeopardize life itself. What Falstaff achieves by lying on the ground and counterfeiting death among the common soldiery, Brydon likewise considers, pondering whether to escape the top floor of his haunted house by rope or ladder, even something as plebeian as "one of the vertiginous perpendiculars employed by painters and roofers and sometimes left standing overnight" (225). In the end, in a brief moment of similarity-with-a-difference rather than strict similitude, Brydon's panic induces the painless swoon that leaves him (curiously like Falstaff) on the ground yet unbruised. We might also note that at the juncture where James's trope of haunted family homes meets his other trope of deracinated protagonists, the critic Allison Booth sees a ready and ironic loan from Washington Irving and, by extension, from Falstaff (Booth 2004, 218)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> For Booth, Irving's uprooted character Crayon in *The Sketch-Book* delights in the joys of a domestic sovereignty with no strings attached: "To a homeless man [...]"

The ironies surrounding discretion, however, are more obvious. Liquid among class hierarchies yet stiffened by their ambitions for power and wealth, Falstaff and Brydon share above all a fluid relationship with respect to courage and a propensity for drowning themselves in ‘what if’ scenarios. Falstaff is notorious for the abundant conditionals “if I” and “an I” that pepper his speech. Twenty-seven instances out of a total thirty-four in *1 Henry IV* are his, and sixteen out of twenty-five instances are his again in *2 Henry IV*. As Falstaff uses them, these conditionals serve to demote historical truth and to spin out fictitious pasts and futures, some of them wishful thoughts, others vain threats and prophesies: e.g. “An I could get me but a wife in the stews, I were manned, horsed, and wived” (*2 Henry IV*, I.ii.54-55), “If I do sweat, they are the drops of thy lovers and they weep for thy death” (IV.ii.12-14), “if I return, [...] I’ll make him a philosopher’s two stones to me” (III.ii.340-42). As we might suspect, they altogether serve his turn. Shortly after quipping about “the better part of valor”, “in the which better part I have saved my life”, he looks over nervously to the corpse of

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there is a momentary feeling of something like independence and territorial consequence, when, after a weary day’s travel, he [...] stretches himself before an inn fire [...]. He is, for the time being, the very monarch of all he surveys. The arm-chair is his throne, the poker his scepter, and the little parlor, some twelve feet square, his undisputed empire. [...] ‘Shall I not take mine ease in mine inn?’” (quoted in Booth 2004, 218). Like Crayon (here citing Falstaff), Brydon takes pleasure in proprietorship without attachments. Giving Alice a tour of the ancestral home, he speaks magisterially “of the value of all he read into it, into the mere sight of the walls, mere shapes of the rooms, mere sound of the floors, mere feel, in his hand, of the old silver-plated knobs of the several mahogany doors, which suggested the pressure of the palms of the dead; the seventy years of the past in fine that these things represented” (James 2017, 209). She hints ever-so-discretely at the possibility of his putting down roots – “You may still, after all, want to live here [...] *with* such a home” – cutting herself off because “she had too much tact to dot so monstrous an *i*, and it was precisely an illustration of the way she didn’t rattle” (209-10). Yet he admits he is interested neither in “stay[ing] on” nor in selling the home for cash (209). Like Falstaff, Brydon is a king with a cushion for a crown, performing an aristocratic entitlement he has neither the finances nor the rootedness to back up. The irony of such domestic sovereignty remains that as these characters abide in the conviction of being at their ease in their own *chez-soi*, readers lick their chops in hopes of finally satisfying that curious hunger for indiscretion.

Henry Percy, the play's valiant and dangerous counter-hero, now seemingly dead at Prince Hal's hand, and wonders aloud:

Zounds, I am afraid of this gunpowder Percy, though he be dead. How if he should counterfeit too, and rise? By my faith, I am afraid he would prove the better counterfeit. Therefore I'll make him sure, yea, and I'll swear I killed him. Why may not he rise as well as I? Nothing confutes me but eyes, and nobody sees me. Therefore, sirrah, (*stabbing him*) with a new wound in your thigh, come you along with me. (1 *Henry IV*, V.iv.122-31)

Brydon channels this Falstaffian manner of being-in-potential-worlds, where the dead may indeed rise and alternative histories abound, when he discovers the closed door that should not be closed. This revelation sends him instantly into the realm of counterfactuals, contingencies, and risk-management:

He *couldn't*, by any lapse, have blocked that aperture; and if he hadn't, if it was unthinkable, why what else was clear but that there had been another agent? [...] Ah this time at last they *were*, the two, the opposed projections of him, in presence; and this time, as much as one would, the question of danger loomed. With it rose, as not before, the question of courage – for what he knew the blank face of the door to say to him was “Show us how much you have!” It stared, it glared back at him with that challenge; it put to him the two alternatives: should he just push it open or not? (James 2017, 223)

Ever so briefly, the narration loses its Falstaffian tone and pivots to a Hamlet-like consideration of thought over action:

Oh to have this consciousness was to *think* – and to think, Brydon knew, as he stood there, was, with the lapsing moments, not to have acted! Not to have acted – that was the misery and the pang – was even still not to act; was in fact *all* to feel the thing in another, in a new and terrible way. How long did he pause and how long did he debate? (223-24).

But when the paralysis passes, the return of the Falstaffian mode and the eclipse of courage by discretion is pronounced and triumphant:

Brydon at last remarkably made up his mind on what it had turned to. It had turned altogether to a different admonition; to a supreme hint, for him, of the value of Discretion! [...] Discretion – he jumped at that; and yet not, verily, at such a pitch, because it saved his nerves or his skin, but because, much more valuably, it saved the situation. (224)

Rather than prove he is not afraid, Brydon opts to leave the door closed, indeed untouched, and to retreat, rehearsing a mode of evasion he employed in former days when he burned important letters “unopened” (211). Before abandoning the door and attempting to withdraw from the house entirely, Brydon addresses the as-yet-unseen figure in an *apologia* larded with Falstaffian paradiastole:

I spare you and I give up. You affect me as by the appeal positively for pity: you convince me that for reasons rigid and sublime – what do I know? – we both of us should have suffered. I respect them then, and, though moved and privileged as, I believe, it has never been given to man, I retire, I renounce – never, on my honour, to try again. So rest for ever – and let *me!* (224)

Under the new light of “Discretion”, the act he proudly goes on to call a “concession” and “surrender” (225) becomes, in his eyes, an act of necessary prudence, even justice, an act of sparing pity, perhaps of historical conservation, as though leaving undefiled a sacred presence that ought never to be disturbed again.

The conversion of cowardice into courage is the reverberating trademark of the Falstaffian heroic mode, but it points to a different and more upsetting conversion, that of ‘discretion’ into ‘Discretion’. The class virtue that James so often imposes upon his readers he satirizes here as a significant epistemic vice. If in its broadest and earliest definitions, discretion denoted forms of prudence to decide what is and is not to be concealed, and if in “The Birthplace” the “more discreet method” proved a way of respecting the unknowable *qua* unknowable to better inflame insatiable curiosity, it becomes in “The Jolly Corner” a means to spare ourselves from the knowledge we most desire, to avoid unlocking the closed door or confronting the sentinel who might, even as we turn away, suddenly choose to confront us against our will. James, in “The

Jolly Corner", discredits Discretion and seems to propose a need for a much more confrontational and honest encounter with the hazardousness of mystery. Even the tale's comic-domestic resolution ends with a lesson on the value of indiscretion worthy of that unruly embodiment of domestic incivility, Falstaff's companion Mistress Quickly. Alice Staverton, repeatedly described as "a woman who answered intimately but who utterly didn't chatter" (209), suddenly does what Mistress Quickly does best: she chatters intimately, revealing much to the readers that we might otherwise never have known about Brydon's heart and her own. She divulges, in brief, what a "well of discretion" very rightly might hold. The irony is not lost on us, nor is its humor. Yet the more-than-mild reproach remains that discretion, especially when elevated into Discretion, fundamentally occludes all quest and renders all searching fruitless. Discretion, at some point, must be damned.

Discretion becomes, hence, the truest enemy to the kind of inspection and introspection James, in his introduction to *The Tempest*, yearned to perform and wished to see espoused broadly in Shakespearean criticism. He famously said of scholarship on *The Tempest* that it "abounds much rather in affirmed conclusions, complacencies of conviction, full apprehensions of the meaning and triumphant pointings of the moral" (James 1984, 1205). He deplored how "Questions, in the light of all this wisdom, convert themselves, with comparatively small difficulty, into smooth and definite answers" and how the more fragile topics of speculation are made to "bench themselves along the vista as solidly as Falstaff and as vividly as Hotspur" (1205)<sup>7</sup>. To be Falstaff, in James's idiom here, is not merely to be obvious and concrete, honest and unsophisticated, open and exposed. Many will argue Falstaff is not so, and James, were he called upon to respond, would surely have agreed, for the Falstaff he reshapes as Spencer Brydon, full of sophistication and complications, asserts as much. However, Falstaff remains the fit metaphor in James's mind for facts and forces that fascinate without requiring unpacking, for objects that

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<sup>7</sup> For closer readings of that introduction and of this passage in particular, see Cowdery 1982 and McCombe 2010.

do not demand penetration, for subjects that lend themselves to being known and, in that higher visibility, occlude other mysterious forms. Brydon, following in Falstaff's footsteps, proves the fit analogue (more so than Morris Gedge) for the kind of Shakespeare critic whose discretion renounces investigation of the figure behind the locked door. The question becomes whether James hoped to impart more valor to American Shakespeare critics or whether he believed there was a better part of discretion.

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