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“THAT’S THE WAY TO WOOOOO IT!”: PUNCH AND JUDY IN JAMESIAN GHOST STORIES¹

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Abstract: M.R. James is known as a master of the ghost story, giving his name to a sub-genre. This article explores his use of the traditional Punch and Judy puppet show in his short story *The Story of a Disappearance and an Appearance* and the subsequent use by two modern authors, Christopher Harman and D.P. Watt, writing in the Jamesian style. The article considers the association between puppets and the occult before examining aspects of the show and how representations of historic and contemporary performances differ. Finally, the authors’ utilization of the Punch and Judy tradition in the stories is analyzed.

Montague Rhode James, despite being a noted scholar, polyglot medievalist and collector of folklore, is probably best known as a writer of supernatural tales. Indeed, his short stories not only changed the genre of ghost stories but gave rise to what may be considered a sub-genre- the Jamesian ghost story, which, amongst other things, utilizes such features as the familiar as unfamiliar (often choosing everyday settings such as libraries over the older gothic locations of earlier ghost literature), an antiquarian or university Don

¹ For those readers unfamiliar with the Punch and Judy tradition, this title may be a little puzzling. It is a word play based on Mr Punch’s catchphrase, “That’s the way to do it” [Hill 2018, 207] and the sound “Woooo!”, which British native speakers often attribute to ghosts.

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as narrator and a gradual build up to an unpleasant encounter with some form of malicious supernatural entity (see Mainley-Piddock 2020).² Amongst those influenced by the work of James were H. Russell Wakefield, Edmund Gill Swain (a colleague of James) and modern writers such as Stephen King and the actor, screenwriter and director Mark Gatiss (who has adapted several of James's stories for television).

In his short article *Ghosts, Treat Them Gently*, first published in 1931 in the *Evening News*, James wrote of his own influences and declared his interest in ghosts was inspired by a character in a puppet show,

What first interested me in ghosts? This I can tell you quite definitely. In my childhood I chanced to see a toy Punch and Judy set, with figures cut out in cardboard. One of these was The Ghost. It was a tall figure habited in white with an unnaturally long and narrow head, also surrounded with white, and a dismal visage. Upon this my conceptions of a ghost were based, and for years it permeated my dreams [James 1913, "Ghosts"].³

The influence of Punch and Judy is not only apparent through the appearance of The Ghost in a number of James's stories but also his use in at least one tale of the Punch and Judy puppetry tradition itself. The Punch and Judy motif has also been utilized by a number of authors writing in a Jamesian style. This article will examine how the Punch and Judy show in the work of James and other Jamesian short stories creates a specific environment and atmosphere, not least due to the cultural status of the tradition itself. This shall be examined through the analysis of three short stories: *The Story of a Disappearance and an Appearance* (1913/1994) by M.R. James (hereafter referred to as *Disappearance*), *Slapstick* by Christopher Harman (2014) and *Shallallah* by D.P. Watt (2014). The latter two works appeared in publications by *Ghosts & Scholars*, an organization dedicated to promoting research and writing within the Jamesian tradition.⁴

While not one of the better known stories of M.R. James, *The Story of a Disappearance and an Appearance* utilises a number of tropes found throughout the canon (and which also appear in the two other chosen stories). A dark, vengeful figure is a recurrent motif in James's stories, such as *Count Magnus*, *A Warning to the Curious* and *The Tractate Middoth* and is comparable to the mysterious figure the narrator claims to see inside the puppet booth during the fateful performance in *Disappearance*. Likewise, the appearance of seemingly supernaturally animated objects can be found in such works as *The Mezzotint*

² For further information about James's own thoughts on the ingredients of a good ghost story see *Appendix: M.R. James on Ghost Stories* [James 1989, 337-352].

³ James's recollection suggests he was watching a performance using paper theatres which were popular in the late nineteenth century, such as those featured on the blog site *Hypnogoria*: [<http://hypnogoria.blogspot.com/2018/12/the-first-phantom-mr-james-ghosts-and.html>] [Accessed 14 III 2021].

⁴ The organization was founded in 1979. One of the founder members was the scholar and fiction writer Rosemary Pardoe, a specialist in M.R. James [<http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/GS.html>] [Accessed 25 X 2021].

(a haunted picture depicting a kidnap in “real time”), *The Haunted Dolls House* (a model dolls house which recreates certain horrific past events) and *Oh Whistle and I’ll Come To You, My Lad* (a bedsheet inhabited by a malevolent entity). In each tale familiar objects which one would not expect to be animated become so through apparently supernatural forces. An important point to consider in these tales is that James rarely, if ever, confirms the “reality” of events, hence both the narrator and the reader may find themselves confronted with the uncanny but left wondering to what extent this extends into the supernatural. As with *Disappearance*, there is often a certain amount of “distancing” throughout the narrative, be it temporal (an old text, a repeated anecdote) or a discrepancy in the witness accounts, which leaves the reader uncertain of what has actually transpired. As will be demonstrated below, this technique has certain parallels with particular forms of puppetry in that the “hidden” nature of much of the art gives rise to alleged links with the supernatural, as suggested in the chosen stories.

For the purposes of this article it is necessary to provide a brief contextual history of the Punch and Judy tradition. Representations of the Punch and Judy show will then be examined from an historicultural perspective. This will be followed by an analysis of how the tradition is utilised as an extension of the uncanny (or supernatural) in the chosen texts.

The Punch and Judy show⁵

The trope of dolls within uncanny and supernatural fiction is well known. Some noted examples include the psychological horror of William Goldman’s *Magic* (1976), in which a mentally disturbed ventriloquist comes to feel himself increasingly under the power of his dummy, the automaton Olympia in E.T.A. Hoffman’s *The Sandman* (1816) and more recently in horror films such as *Annabelle* (2014) and *Child’s Play* (1988/2019). It is, however, important to note that when discussing puppetry it is necessary to address the significant differences between dolls and puppets. Where dolls are more familiar as personal play-things and are connected with the private (domesticity, bed time rituals and individual play) rather than with performance, puppets are animated specifically to be watched. The latter examples of demonic dolls given above are important as, despite being dolls, they cross the line to inhabit a liminal space by virtue of their animated state.

⁵ In the interests of transparency, it should be noted that the current author has been a practicing Punch and Judy performer for over twenty years. This means that some readings of works utilizing Punch and Judy may be influenced (occasionally hindered) by background knowledge, such as anachronisms, Punch practice etc. It should also be noted that as this subject is approached from a scholarship of theatre and puppetry (specifically Punch and Judy), a wider in-depth analysis of Jamesian literature is kept to a minimum.

Despite this popular motif of possessed playthings, the use of theatrical puppets, especially Punch and Judy, within British supernatural fiction is not necessarily as widespread as one might expect, despite being a steadfast of British culture [Hill 2018, 169]. The aim of this article is to explore why puppets are used within the genre of the supernatural and how Punch and Judy, especially from a cultural perspective, is deployed within the Jamesian ghost story tradition (even though James only used it once).

Punch and Judy as a form of popular entertainment is embedded in British culture, having been enjoyed by such notable people as members of the Royal Family and Charles Dickens as well as countless adults and children over several centuries. It features in games, TV shows, films and theatre as well as numerous novels and short stories [Hill 2018]. Accordingly, many features of the tradition are well known to the a large section of the British public even without them having witnessed a performance, such as certain characters and phrases, like Punch's battle-cry: "That's the way to do it!"

Punch and Judy is a predominantly British puppet tradition which can trace its history back to the masked theatre of the *Commedia dell'arte* [see: Byrom 1972; Leach 1985; Speaight 1990; Hill 2018]. During the Restoration period numerous Italian acting troupes and puppeteers brought their craft to England, amongst whom were purveyors of the comic adventures of *Pulcinella*. The following centuries saw the character develop into the anglicized figure of Mister Punch- a loud, aggressive glove puppet who wears a distinct sugar-cone hat and speaks with a shrill, squeaky voice (generated by an instrument known as a "swazzle"). From the late eighteenth century, the show was performed in a booth, often in the street or at fairs, and later at the seaside and children's parties. The traditional show involves slapstick humour and word-play, with Mr Punch meeting a series of characters (including; his wife Judy, their baby, Toby the dog, an officer of the law, a ghost, the Devil and a hangman) and usually dispatching them with his stick. Marina Warner describes the modern version of the show as follows:

The traditional comic drama of Punch and Judy, still a staple of summer fairs and parks, is staged specifically for the amusement of very young children in the UK, who stay and watch and scream between fits of giggles at the mayhem. In the course of the play, Punch gleefully lays about him in a series of violent assaults... Punch and Judy is considered good family fun, though in recent performances, in deference to contemporary sensitivities, the baby is merely (!) shaken about by the exasperated Mr Punch, not killed. His abuse is the play's only running gag, now and then punctuated by the puppeteer's up-to-date jokes inspired by the week's news and television. Children find it very funny [Warner 1998, 167].

It is important to note that the show was not always predominantly targeted at children. Paintings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as early photographs show that audiences were mainly adults and the humour was often quite bawdy (as well as violent). The development of the show into

an entertainment for children began in the late nineteenth century as the tradition underwent a form of gentrification [Speaight 1990, 215]. By the time M.R. James published his story in 1913 Punch and Judy had become established as a family show, although even by modern standards it could be considered violent and “politically incorrect”. These more violent aspects are used in the stories analyzed in this article and are easily recognizable to the presumed reader as relating to the Punch and Judy show. While the chosen works are based on the traditions of the British Punch and Judy show and the Jamesian short story, it is nevertheless worthwhile briefly examining the wider literary and folklore connections between puppetry and the supernatural.

Puppets, the uncanny and the supernatural

For many people, especially in the West, dolls and puppets symbolise childhood. However, it is important to reiterate that not all forms of puppetry are specifically for children. Even the Punch and Judy show was predominantly aimed at adults for the first two centuries of its existence, becoming a children’s entertainment in the late nineteenth century [Hill 2018, 183], several decades after James’s story is set. Yet in many cultures dolls and puppets are considered to be linked to with the supernatural through their uncanniness, something which will be highlighted in the examination of the chosen stories.

While the terms “uncanny” and “supernatural” are often used coterminously they can in fact be differentiated. The dictionary defines “supernatural” as something “attributed to some force beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature”, whereas “uncanny” refers to something “strange or mysterious, especially in an unsettling way”.⁶ The latter term has further possible meanings via its etymology in sixteenth century Scots, where it meant “not canny”, as in something malicious or of the occult.⁷ Through Sigmund Freud, the word has also come to mean in psychology something hidden or obscured yet strangely familiar. Each definition has relevance for the puppet theatre – the concealed performers, the stage curtains or screen and the unsettling effect dolls and puppets can have on some people; the strange familiarity of little people who are not really people [Rodriguez McRobbie 2015].

Freud, citing Ernst Jentsch, explores this in his 1919 paper *The Uncanny* Referring to Jentsch’s 1906 analysis of Hoffman’s tale *The Sandman*, Freud notes:

We find in the story of the Sand-Man the other theme upon which Jentsch lays stress, of a doll that appears to be alive. Jentsch believes that a particularly favourable

⁶ Words generated through online Google dictionary (meanings accredited to “Oxford Languages”) [Accessed 25 X 2021].

⁷ The word “canny” is derived from a Germanic word meaning “to know”, in which case “uncanny” may be used to mean “unknown” or “unseen” in a similar way to one meaning of “occult”.

condition for awakening un-canny sensations is created when there is intellectual un-certainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one [Freud 1919, 8].

This is echoed by Jane Marie Law's appraisal of the widespread fascination and revulsion towards puppets: "There is something unsettling about imagining that inanimate humanlike figures are actually human and then being brought back to the awareness that these effigies are in fact nothing more than wood and paint" [Law 1997, 22]. Law explains a deeper possibility for this uncertainty via a move from the psychological to the supernatural,

Puppets, which exist "in the shape of the human," are not simply metaphors for the human but actually comprise a world of their own, a parallel world bridging the domains of the human and the divine. The puppet, as an intersection of these two worlds, is powerful and frightening, eliciting both fear and fascination. They have the capacity to draw sacred forces and can become vessels... in which the sacred comes to dwell. Furthermore, they can embody the souls of human beings, both living and dead [Law 1997, 69].

This description of the uncanny nature of the puppet connects it to rituals and applications much older than the entertainments witnessed by modern audiences, linking them to the supernatural. Examples of the relationship between puppets and the supernatural can be found in folklore worldwide. Puppets have been used in funeral rites and mystical decontamination rituals throughout history. As such, they are often associated with malevolent entities and death, as seen in the Chinese legend of the magician "resurrecting" the Emperor's dead wife by using shadow puppetry [Law 1997, 27].⁸ This suggestion of arcane mysteries is a common feature throughout James's repertoire.

The suggestion of ancient rituals raises a point concerning the earlier notion of puppets being designed for performance, in that such performances often play a role in the communal experience of the audience. It therefore follows that not only the puppet has links to the supernatural, but also the puppeteer. Historically, in many societies, puppeteers were often strolling players. As such they have often been connected, at least in popular imagination, with "*the Other*": undesirables, itinerants, gypsies and those of "questionable character" (a major aspect of Law's work on Japanese puppetry traditions⁹). An example of this can be seen in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) by Charles Dickens, where the itinerant Punchmen Codlin and Short are discovered

⁸ The story concerns an emperor whose beloved wife dies. The ruler then sinks into a deep depression which is only relieved when a magician offers to bring the late wife back from the dead to speak with her husband. There is, however, a condition that the wife must stay behind a screen separating the worlds of the dead and living. Each night, the woman appears behind the screen and speaks to the emperor. As his depression lifts, his passions arise until one night he tears down the screen separating him from his wife, only to find the "wife" was actually a shadow puppet.

⁹ I use the uncapitalized word *gypsy* to differentiate specifically from people of the Romany ethnicity, meaning people of a travelling, nomadic lifestyle referred to in popular speech as such, regardless of their ethnic origin.

painting their figures in a graveyard, the haunt of society’s lowest elements (fig. 1). The relationship between Punch and the outsider, or strolling player, is highlighted in all three of the stories analyzed here. Below is a selection of representations of the Punch and Judy show, including various elements of the tradition as depicted within the chosen texts.



Fig. 1. Codlin and Short in a cemetery.
Source: Phiz – Hablot Knight Browne (1841)

Historical representations of Punch and Judy

M.R. James’s *The Story of a Disappearance and an Appearance* is a tale told in the form of letters from the unnamed narrator to his brother about the search for their uncle, a pastor who has gone missing after visiting a sick parishioner. The narrator finds most of the village concerned about his uncle’s fate, although the landlord of the local inn, The King’s Head, makes it plain that he and the pastor had had an altercation over a barrel of ale. During the narrator’s stay at the inn he hears tell of a travelling Punch and Judy featuring the particularly entertaining gimmick of a live Toby dog (a performing dog which interacts with the puppets), a recent novelty in the show. Before seeing the show the narrator has a dream in which he watches a puppet show where Punch commits several bloody murders and is then attacked by a monstrous figure in black. The following day, the narrator attends the actual performance and observes a strange occurrence involving a mysterious figure in the puppetbooth, which results in the death of both of the players and the discovery of his murdered uncle’s corpse.

The Punch and Judy show is presented twice within the story, firstly within the narrator’s torturous, prophetic dream and then in the live street performance outside his window. In each instance allusion is made to several features particular to an 1830s performance of the show, the time in which the story is set. At the beginning of the dream performance the narrator describes his excitement: “I was ‘strung up’ to a high degree of expectation and looked

every moment to hear the pan-pipes and Roo-too-too-it” [James 1994, 253]. The pan-pipes were a common feature of the Punchman’s partner, who, along with his drum, announced the show and played tunes for the puppets to dance to while collecting money from the audience (all whilst controlling unruly children).

The secondary characters mentioned in the performance (Toby, the Turncock, the Foreigner and the Beadle) very much reflect a show of the early nineteenth century, having none of the later additions which Harman includes (Policeman and Crocodile) and which James would have probably have known of in 1913. Although only mentioned in passing by James, a particularly important figure with regards to D.P. Watt’s short story is the Foreigner, who is sometimes known as “Shallabalah”, because it is the only word he can say. James was clearly knowledgeable about older production conventions (and may possibly have seen some in his younger days), although it initially appears that he is guilty of an anachronism.

A major feature of the show, the narrator of *Disappearance* is told by a bagman in the tavern, is the wonderful Toby Dog. The narrator writes to his brother, “Toby dogs, you know, are the last new thing in the shows, I have only seen one myself, but before long all the men will have them” [ibid, 253]. The narrator’s interest in the “new” Toby echoes the musings of an actual Punchman who was interviewed by Henry Mayhew in the 1840s. In this interview the popularity of Toby is made explicit: “[N]ow the performance is called Punch and Toby as well. There is one Punch about the streets at present that tries it on with three dogs, But that aint much of a go – too much of a good thing I call it” [Mayhew 1968, 45]. That Toby was very fashionable is undeniable (although he had fallen out of fashion by the late twentieth century) but Mayhew’s interviewee makes it clear that the introduction of a live dog was the brainchild of a performer called Pike, the apprentice of the famous Giovanni Piccini, the Italian player whose show in 1827 was the first Punch show to be recorded in England, in 1827 [Van der Craats, *Punch and Judy*].¹⁰ Pike’s own show is the subject of an 1829 painting by Benjamin Robert Haydon called *Punch, or May Day*. Pike died in the workhouse in 1841 aged seventy one [Van der Craats, *Punch, or Mayday*]. This would suggest that if Pike was the man who introduced a live dog into the show, it was presumably some time before 1837. However, as Christopher Van der Craats points out, Punch shows were very much centred in London until the coming of the railways, therefore for a performance in the provinces (where *Disappearance* takes place) it is entirely probable that Toby would be considered “new” [personal communication 18 III 2021]. James’s inclusion of Toby as a new innovation not only adds

¹⁰ Although there are previous examples of written scripts for the puppet theatre, Piccini’s show was recorded and published by John Payne Collier and illustrated by George Cruikshank in 1827, the first published script of a booth show [Hill 2018, 177].

authentic historical detail to the story but also suggests a certain awareness of the show’s history or that James specifically researched the topic.¹¹

Also intriguing are the names of the performers. The narrator writes that “the names of the proprietors, I need hardly tell you, were Italian, Foresta and Calpigi” [James 1994, 257], yet following the deaths of the two men, he discovers their names are really Kidman and Gallop, the names he saw on the booth in his nightmare. What is of interest is that the first name appears to be a play on that of a famous Punch performing family, the Codmans, who still perform at the Welsh seaside town of Llandudno today (and, historically, in Liverpool) [Hill 2018, 180]. It is reasonable to question if James encountered either of these performances or if he perhaps heard of a Codman performance in a local theatre. Likewise, the description of Punch resembling Henry Fuseli’s “vampire” [ibid, 254], a reference to his 1781 painting *The Nightmare* (fig. 2) is of relevance when considering the Codman show at Llandudno. The Codman’s Devil was adapted to look like a vampire during the late nineteenth century in response to objections on religious grounds and presumably the popularity of vampires in fiction (fig. 3).¹² It bears some resemblance to Fuseli’s creature.



Fig. 2. *The Nightmare* by Henry Fuseli (1790-1)¹³



Fig. 3. Codman’s Devil and Mr Punch (photo by author)

¹¹ Considering the importance of Mayhew’s work, it is entirely possible that James might have read the interviews or at least been familiar with the content, although my research has not determined whether this was so.

¹² Personal communication with Jason Codman (2018).

¹³ By Henry Fuseli – The Yorck Project (2002) 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei (DVD-ROM), distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH. ISBN: 3936122202., Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=151185>.

Harman's short story *Slapstick* is an imagined sequel to *Disappearance*, taking place in the same town approximately one hundred and fifty years later. A Punch and Judy booth (which is strongly suggested to be the original from *Disappearance*) is found in the local pub and donated to a charity sale at a nearby school. The events of 1837 still reverberate through the community and one character, a journalist called Alec Gator, is a distant relative of both the original narrator and the murdered pastor. The booth is to be used by local amateur actors for a fund raising show and a series of mysterious, unsettling occurrences take place which appear to be linked to the original murder case and the Punch and Judy booth.

This more recent setting of the story means that a number of the Punch references differ from those used by James. By this time the show had markedly developed over the twentieth century and several characters and phrases which were known in the 1830s, and indeed in James's own lifetime, had disappeared from the show (such as the pipes and drum, the Roo-too-too-it and characters such as the Foreigner and Toby). In *Slapstick* the most obviously "new" characters are the Crocodile, used as the basis for a joke about Alec's name [Harman 2014, 21], and the Policeman, who replaced the older figure of the Beadle. Ed, the main protagonist of *Slapstick*, is a former police officer, something which comes into play in the final scene of the story [ibid 91]. Another "recent" addition to the show is a phrase which has become synonymous with Punch and Judy but was not part of the original nineteenth century performances: "*That's the way to do it!*" A voice ingrained in everyone's psyche – Punch's grating timbre produced by a swazzle device in the back of the mouth" [ibid 84]. The swazzle itself is an old and integral part of the tradition, and treated as a trade secret amongst Punch performers. It is referred to by Mayhew's Punchman interviewee as "the secret voice" [Mayhew 1968, 53].¹⁴

D.P. Watt's *Shallalah* differs from the stories by Harman and James in that it contains less in the way of action. It is told in the form of a letter from a father to an estranged daughter. The narrator describes finding some old papers and recordings of his father, who, like Mayhew, once interviewed an old Punchman, and learned of a belief in a kind of harbinger of death or psychopomp, known as "the bag-man". The bag-man accompanies Punchmen, and others, throughout life, claiming them at the moment of death. Part of the Punchman's existence involves continually trying to avoid or outrun this entity, which the interviewee associates with the puppet of the Ghost.

This story makes use of two significant elements of the Punch and Judy tradition which the previous stories do not. One is the "Swatchel Omi", a group of noted families who have carried on the tradition over several generations, like the Codman family, usually handing the show down from

¹⁴ The use of the swazzle is suggested as symbolizing distorted narrative devices in the work of Neil Gaiman's 1994 work *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr Punch* [Hill 2021].

father to son. Robert Leach’s *The Punch and Judy Show: History, Tradition and Meaning* devotes a chapter specifically to these families [Leach 1985, 111-125]. In *Shallalalah* there is the suggestion that there is some kind of superstition or secret knowledge amongst such performers, reinforcing the idea of the travelling player being akin to figures like Romany Gypsies, who may possibly have links to the occult. Something similar is suggested in *Slapstick*, when a Punchman refuses a booking to play in the apparently cursed town with the original booth.

The association of travelling players is emphasised by the Punchman’s use of “Palare”, showman slang based on Italian vocabulary and various other elements [Mayhew 1968, 47; Seal 2016]. Words like “slum” (the show), and “slanging” (performing) are used in the speech of the old Punchman, whose name, Albert Kodlin, is possibly a nod towards one of Dickens’ players, Codlin.

Textual Analysis

In order to appreciate the textual effects of introducing the Punch and Judy show as a metanarrative within the chosen Jamesian short stories, it is necessary to investigate the authorial devices which constitute a story “Jamesian” and to illustrate how the depiction of the show is utilised within these parameters. In her chapter on James Joanna Kokot points out that a key element in the Jamesian canon is the particular setting and its difference from what may be considered a “traditional” setting for a ghost story,

First of all the space and time setting of the stories is usually very carefully defined- and the details usually have nothing to do with the atmosphere of terror, or foreshadowing the ghastly events. On the contrary, the description of the setting assumes an air of exactness and a matter-of-fact quality, rather avoided in the traditional tales [Kokot 2004, 60].

Kokot also points out that the narrator is often an academic, student or antiquarian suggesting an analytical mind which may not engage with ideas of the supernatural other than in folklore studies or collecting legends [ibid 62], although this curiosity often leads to contact with the uncanny or supernatural.

James’s story pushes these boundaries in that his narrator (or rather the author of the letters) is not depicted as having such an occupation or casual interest. Nevertheless, the protagonist’s epistles and his financial situation (he sends money for his brother’s children and lodges at an inn for the duration of his stay) show him to be a highly educated professional. In addition, his enquiries regarding his missing uncle involve an engagement with analytical thought processes, though he seems not to suspect any dark or questionable reason for his relative’s disappearance beyond his ill health or advanced years.

The character of Ed in *Slapstick* is a retired detective, which has obvious parallels with the rational mind of the academics who feature in James's tales. Nevertheless he finds himself, much against his professional nature, making links between the events occurring around him and the supernatural. The narrator of *Shallahbalah* finds himself making similar links upon the discovery of research previously undertaken by his father.

With regards to setting, Kokot's description can be applied to both *Disappearance* and *Slapstick* in that they each take place in a small, mundane market town, notwithstanding the missing pastor. Despite special occasions and events things seem to run as normal; the inn is operating as usual, amateur actors are rehearsing and people going about their daily business. However, in both cases the Punch and Judy show is heralded as something out of the ordinary, escapist and fun.

Where *Slapstick* differs depends upon whether the reader approaches the story as a stand-alone piece or with an awareness of James's original (much like the characters' relation to the Punch and Judy show). While the text can be read independently of the James original (part of the background story is supplied by the narrator), it is apparent that Harman's presumed reader has some prior knowledge of the Jamesian tradition, as there are occasional hints both to the original story and to James himself¹⁵. The presumed reader, therefore, would realise the significance of both the discovery of the booth and the name of the inn, "The King's Head". This plants the suggestion that the forthcoming Punch and Judy show will play a role in the terror to follow.

The Punch and Judy motif highlights an aspect specific to several fictional Jamesian entities. As the Punch and Judy show is to some extent a form of itinerant theatre, especially in relation to nineteenth century performers, the connection of the show with a ghost or supernatural entity reinforces the liminal nature of many Jamesian terrors in that they are perforce mobile, not rooted to any one particular place as might be found in some traditional stories. James's revenants, while perhaps being linked to originary sites such as tombs, churches or secret caches of treasure, often possess the ability to pursue a transgressor some distance in order to exact revenge. In the cases of *Disappearance* and *Slapstick*, this is the chalk pit where the murdered pastor is discovered and one of the original Punch players found dead. In *Shallahbalah* the bag-man is able to follow the Punchman wherever he goes, waiting for the opportune moment to take his prey.

The main device of the Punch and Judy show used in both *Disappearance* and *Slapstick* is not, perhaps surprisingly, the puppets, but the booth. In *Disappearance* the booth first appears in the narrator's dream,

¹⁵ Such as the mention of the cathedral town of Bury St. Edmunds, the abbey of which James wrote about.

It began with what I can only describe as a pulling aside of curtains: and I found myself seated in a place – I don’t know whether indoors or out. There were people – only a few – on either side of me, but I did not recognize them, or indeed think much about them. They never spoke, but, so far as I remember, were all grave and pale-faced and looked fixedly before them. Facing me there was a Punch and Judy show, perhaps rather larger than the ordinary ones, painted with black figures on a reddish-yellow ground. Behind it and on each side was only darkness, but in front there was a sufficiency of light. I was ‘strung up’ to a high degree of expectation and listened every moment to hear the panpipes and the Roo-too-too-it. Instead of that there came suddenly an enormous – I can use no other word – an enormous single toll of a bell, I don’t know from how far off – somewhere behind. The little curtain flew up and the drama began [James 1994, 255].

The darkness of the surroundings and the uncannily silent audience already suggests something untoward, being in stark contrast to the joyful excitement which greets the real show in the street [ibid 257]. The dream-booth acts as a kind of portal, transforming the well-known and beloved puppets into sinister characters, Punch notably looking “Satanic” and his normally comic assaults transformed into hideous murders, greatly disturbing the narrator. In addition, the frequent changing of scenery allows the performance to take the story beyond the normal street scene of a typical Punch and Judy show. The darkening of the stage with each killing foreshadows the hidden horrors (presumably yet to be discovered) of the murder. Eventually Punch sits on the playboard, examining his blood-stained shoes (thus utilising another feature of the puppet in that Punch is one of only two figures, the other being the Hangman, to have legs, suggesting the figure has some form of mobility) [ibid, 254]. The ensuing chase and assault upon Punch by the mysterious dark-clad figure inverts the usual ending of the show where Punch kills the Devil and escapes justice (interestingly, the mysterious figure in the dream-play is silent, as was the Devil in the early shows). The names of the performers are, according to the narrator, Kidman and Gallop [ibid, 255], which it then transpires also to be that of the street performers, thus completing the premonition.¹⁶

The actual show the following day is, as noted, initially, a much merrier occasion which the narrator is able to view from his window. This allows him to witness more than he expects to see. Again, James uses the action of the show to draw parallels between the puppets and the (apparent) revenant. While the narrator notes that the dream-show lacked a Toby, one is present for the real show. However, the dog seems ill at ease,

The only drawback was the Toby dog’s developing a tendency to howl in the wrong place. Something had occurred, I suppose, to upset him, and something considerable:

¹⁶ Kenneth Craik (1996) writes of similarities between M.R. James’ description of the dream and a nightmare John Ruskin had (and wrote about) some years previously, wondering if Ruskin’s influenced that of James. I am grateful to Rosemary Pardoe for bringing this to my attention and her other reading suggestions.

for, I forget exactly at what point, he gave a most lamentable cry, leapt off the foot board, and shot away across the market-place and down a side street [James 1994, 257].

It is after this that the narrator claims to see something inside the booth, a figure with a white bag over its head (similar, he says, to that of a condemned criminal) attempting to lift the puppeteer up towards the Hangman's gallows on the stage. Following this there is a flight and both proprietors of the Punch show are found dead, one lying in the same chalk pit where the pastor's hooded and mutilated body is found.

This final act of the show suggests three things, the first of which is that the behavior of Toby reflects the popular belief that dogs are somehow sensitive to ghosts [Coren 2017]. The presence of such an entity greatly disturbs the dog and he eventually flees, echoing his absence from the dream-show. Secondly, the image of the white-capped figure calls to mind James's own memory (cited above) of the white-faced ghost in the paper Punch and Judy show he witnessed as a child. The third feature of Punch and Judy which James appears to use is that of the question all curious children in the audience ask: what is happening inside the booth? From his position by the upstairs window the narrator is able to see inside the booth, where what is usually hidden becomes the spectacle itself. The revelation is horrific, sometimes, it is better not to see what happens within the booth.

The booth also plays a prominent part in *Slapstick*, becoming a character in its own right. It is the initial announcement made by the headmistress of the school of its discovery in the pub which instigates the build-up of "the terror", with Ed feeling "as if someone had administered a soft but weighty blow to his head" [Harman 2014, 68]. This establishes a further Punch and Judy connection and foreshadows the climactic events of the tale. After removing the booth to the storeroom, Ed encounters it again in several places, as if it has magically materialized (although it is allegedly being used by the actors for rehearsal). The accompanying descriptions of the booth reiterate the threatening nature of its construction: "The stage was a squared-off snarl, or a toothless mouth waiting to be fed" [ibid, 77] and "The booth was like an upright coffin with an aperture for mourners to view the departed, or vice versa" [ibid, 79]. The reader is supplied with numerous "reminders" of the booth's awful past, culminating in its description at the final show as "like an elongated sacrificial altar" [ibid, 92].

The importance of the booth in creating tension is further highlighted in that the puppets play a secondary role to it. Indeed, it is their lack of visibility which is used to suggest mischievous, malevolent entities as Ed hears chattering voice-like noises, baby-like calls of what he assumes is an animal and "out-the-corner-of-his-eye" glimpses of small figures which he dismisses as being mice or squirrels. For the presumed reader the possible resemblance to small puppets with squeaky voices is clear. While this connection is never confirmed,

Ed’s discovery of a pair of rotted puppets impaled on the school railings, which he assumes to be the original Punch and Judy figures from the booth, raises the question of whether the two obnoxious actors creating the performance have some kind of supernatural connection with the (assumed) original murderers of *Disappearance*. Has there been some kind of ghostly transfer from the puppets to the malicious actors as part of an uncanny act of vengeance against the blood-kin of their killer (Alec)? Ultimately these things are not explained, and just as James’s story leaves much of the action “assumed” (such as the puppeteers being the killers of the pastor), the reader is left to “fabularize” the events of *Slapstick* from fragments of information provided by the narrator, a practice which Kokot considers an essential element within the Jamesian canon [Kokot 2004, 65].

There is one detail in *Slapstick* which appears to be an anachronism but may, for some readers, lead to a different “fabularization”. It involves the description of the booth. Ed is shown to fold up the booth prior to placing it in the storeroom [Harman 2014, 69], however, this was not common with booths of the early nineteenth century. Most pictures of such booths show them to have been fixed structures on legs, carried on someone’s shoulders when travelling (fig. 4). If the booth in the story is, as is suggested, the same one as in James’s story, it is highly unlikely that it would have been of the folding variety. While this is most likely an oversight by the author and not meant to suggest that the booth is not the original, *if* Harman is suggesting to those readers familiar with the technicalities of Punch and Judy history (which is likely to be a small section of the readership) that the booth is not in fact the



Fig. 4. A Victorian Punch booth in transit. Drawing by Emily Lees c.1890

original, it would challenge the assumption of the theatre and puppets as being those from the M.R. James story. This would suggest that the “supernatural” element is a product of the narrator’s own mental state.

In contrast to the other stories, the booth is not a major feature in *Shallahbalah*, although the puppets themselves are given a special role in the mythos of the story. The narrator’s account of the tape-recorded interview with the Swatchel Omi attaches a deeper level of meaning to the routines of the Punch and Judy show:

Think about the talkin’ characters and the quiet uns, and ye’ll begin to catch the drift. The ghost dun’t say nuthin’. The blackman gives ‘im a secret word [The suggestion is that it is “Shallahbalah”]. Why is it that the devil don’t say nothin’ to Mr Punch, neither, and takes a good beatin’? That’s yer bag-man’s challenge that is. Can ye beat the devil? Can anyone beat the devil? [Watt 2014, 11].

The Swatchel Omi goes on to say:

The kids know what’s goin’ on, the young ‘uns any’ow. They know all about the bag-man ‘cause he aint quite left ‘em to go on his travels. And that’s why ye’ve got to show ‘em what they’re already forgetting- that it’s the devil what needs a wallop... give ‘im a crack before the bag-man comes. And if time aint on yer side ye use the word to give ‘im the slip [ibid, 12].

The Swatchel Omi mythos¹⁷ created by Watt imbues standard routines of the show with supernatural meaning but also invokes two common beliefs: that children have some kind of innate psychic awareness (invisible friends) and that children’s games, rhymes and suchlike are somehow connected to older, occult rituals. It is the slow stripping away of the known world to reveal the uncanny which creates the unnerving atmosphere of the story, until the revelation in the denouement. But as with the other tales, is what is presented the “truth” or a “familiarization” via a collection of diverse materials by someone of unsound mind?

The use of the Punch and Judy tradition in the short stories above allows each author to “tap into” several different narrative threads, including childhood memories, alternative readings of specific aspects of the tradition and the long association of puppets with the uncanny. As such, the stories are not only linked to a deep vein of folklore but also allow readers to create connections between the three different narratives. While this is obviously a device utilised by the author of *Slapstick* through its intertextual relationship with *Disappearance*, the trope of itinerant players being linked to a wider occult tradition and unseen entities is apparent throughout. Likewise, the significance granted by Watt to certain figures such as the Ghost or Shallahbalah forms intriguing associations with the events of James’s story and, inevitably, to those of Harman’s. The clever

¹⁷ While many readers may associated the term “mythos” with H.P. Lovecraft, here the phrase is used in the general meaning of a form of mythology (including a form of oral tradition) and not meant to suggest any connection to Lovecraft’s work.

deployment of the Punch and Judy tradition by the three authors creates both a sense of familiarity which in turn is twisted, through the interplay with the uncanny elements, into a sense of unease and ultimately, terror.

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