

## The Taming of the Screw: The Parasitic Signifier in Gothic Literature

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In our quest to uncover the origins of the Gothic sublime, the *frissons* experienced by any reader of O'Connor or McCullers, we must begin with the proto-Gothic *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare's first experiment in the horror genre. The Shrew of the title is poor Katherina, who is misanthropomorphosed, to coin a malapropism, into a rodent, a transformation that would later inspire Kafka's beetle, Langelaan's fly, *inter alia*. But it is *The Taming* that suggests the truly sinister character of the drama that unfolds. While the appellation "Rover" conjures up images of a yapping mutt and "Polly" of a babbling parakeet, there is no name, not even "Katherina" itself, that conjures up the image of a whisking shrew. They are not domesticable animals; you cannot yoke a shrew, as the famous proverb goes. We are dealing with a drama of the supernatural.

Domesticated animals are parasites, feeding off of table scraps, and drinking their host's precious tap water. So in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the ur-text of parasemiology, the title character is a literal parasite, for an animal once tamed is forever a beast of burden to its owner. And throughout early Gothic literature we find pets or vampires, *visible* parasites: these parasitic signs were Visigothic. In later Gothic literature, these signs become more abstract: they become *parasigns*, signs at once parasitic and parapsychic. Like the genial swindler fleecing the hotelier, ordering Lobster Thermidor and never paying the room service bill, the parasign operates within a story like a leech. Take a perfectly ordinary description of a garden in Trollope, florid and unobtrusive, but then introduce a parasign "into the mix" and it will drain the surrounding text of its significance. Meaning leaches away, leaving a pale and pallid prose, now ghostly in all facets, a phantom literature, and doubly haunting for it.

In pleasing symmetry with *The Taming of the Shrew*, the parasitic sign in *The Turn of the Screw* is also found in its title. We can see the sign "in action":

Here at present I felt afresh—for I had felt it again and again—how my equilibrium depended on the success of my rigid will, the will to shut my eyes as tight as possible to the truth that what I had to deal with was, revoltingly, against nature. I could only get on at all by taking "nature" into my confidence and my account, by treating my monstrous ordeal as a push in a direction unusual, of course, and unpleasant, but demanding, after all, for a fair front, only another turn of the screw of ordinary human virtue. No attempt, nonetheless, could well require more tact than just this attempt to supply, one's self, all the nature. How could I put even a little of that article into a suppression of reference to what had occurred? How, on the other hand, could I make reference without a new plunge into the hideous obscure?

Amid this flowing abstract prose of meaning indeterminate, Henry James introduces a single concrete noun, the screw. Naturally we are then led to ask, what is being constructed with this screw? An armoire? A rosewood bergère armchair? A dark walnut encoignure? No, what James is constructing is a story, and the mention of the screw removes the reader from the haunted manor and draws her attention to the story's fabrication. So the screw itself is a parasign; it signifies artifice, the unreality of the narrative world. We are reading a ghost story which is itself a ghost, a palimpsest we can barely discern once we are reminded of its inherent pretense. This is the parasitic sign *par excellence*: this is where we find the hideous obscure, the direction unusual, the Gothic sublime.