

The Poetry of Names in *The Spoils of Poynton*

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DURING THE LAST TWELVE YEARS there has been considerable interest in Henry James' *The Spoils of Poynton*, first published in book form in 1897. While critics have argued over the neuroticism and idealism of the protagonist, the symbolism of the fire which finally destroys Poynton Park, and the significance of the Maltese Cross,¹ hardly any effort has been made to investigate the significance of the place and character names to see whether they shed any light on the problems of interpretation.

That Henry James loved to use names for their suggestive value in characterization of both people and places and in extension of theme and tone is known by all Jacobites. One has only to look at Christopher Newman in *The American*, Isabel Archer and Caspar Goodwood in *The Portrait of a Lady*, and Hyacinth Robinson in *The Princess Casamassima*, to see just a few of the more obvious examples of this technique. It has been briefly commented on by many scholars, but it was Leon Edel, who, in the first volume of his biography of James, attributed "this passion for finding the right names for his fictional characters" to his objection to the "confusing proliferation of Williams and Henrys" in his family, and his "sense that wrong names had been bestowed within his family experience."² Whatever the reason, James' passion for names is

¹ See, for example, P. F. Quinn, "Morals and Motives in *The Spoils of Poynton*," *Sewanee Review* (October, 1954), 62:563-77; Winthrop Tilley, "Fleda Vetch and Ellen Brown, or, Henry James and the Soap Opera," *Western Humanities Review* (1955-6), 10:175-80; E. L. Volpe, "Spoils of Art," *Modern Language Notes* (November, 1959), 74:601-8; A. H. Roper, "Moral and Metaphorical Meaning of *The Spoils of Poynton*," *American Literature* (May, 1960), 32:182-96; James W. Gargano, "The Spoils of Poynton," *The Sewanee Review* (Autumn, 1961), 69:650-660; Arnold L. Goldsmith, "The Maltese Cross as Sign in *The Spoils of Poynton*," *Renaissance* (Winter, 1964), 16:73-77; and Robert C. McLean, "The Subjective Adventure of Fleda Vetch," *American Literature* (March, 1964), 36:12-30.

² *Henry James: The Untried Years* (Philadelphia, 1953), p. 19.

repeatedly demonstrated by the way he stored catalogues of them in his *Notebooks*, drawing on them later as one might draw on a savings account.

The name of the heroine of *The Spoils of Poynton* was first found in the *Notebooks* as "Veitch (or Veetch)," buried among many other names in one of the catalogues.³ In his second *Notebook* entry on *The Spoils*, James mentioned the heroine's name specifically for the first time, calling her Muriel Veetch.⁴ Her name as it finally appears in the book is Fleda Vetch.⁵ Why, inquisitive readers have since asked, did James use such a curious, unflattering name for the protagonist of his book which, a comedy of manners at first, becomes a serious study of the quintessence of moral idealism? Why add to the burdens that the protagonist has to bear, the ugliness of such a name?

Oscar Cargill sought the answer to this question and concluded, "a character originally named Muriel Veetch (certainly an unattractive name) and rechristened Fleda Vetch was not meant to represent perfection in taste, whatever her native sensibility."⁶ Cargill at first seems to be on the right track, as James describes Fleda at the beginning of the novel. When Mrs. Gereth finds her sitting disconsolately on a bench on the grounds of Waterbath, she observes that the girl "had no beauty."⁷ Though Fleda was "guiltless of looking hot and fine" like the more ostentatious Brigstocks, her dress was unappealing. She "was dressed with an idea, though perhaps with not much else." In short, of the five girls on this weekend party, "the prettiness of this one [Fledda], slim, pale, and black-haired, was less likely than that of the others ever to oc-

³ F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, eds., *The Notebooks of Henry James* (New York, 1947), p. 132.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁵ Oscar Cargill, in *The Novels of Henry James* (New York, 1961), p. 241, pointed out in a footnote that "James had used the name 'Vetch' before. Anastasius Vetch is the radical fiddler in *The Princess Casamassima*. James may have used the name in his case with the fodder-vine in mind, which is employed as a cover crop on forbidding soil; Vetch's small art flourished in improbable circumstances; it is possible that James thought that a rather barren soil had nourished Fledda's sensibility".

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁷ Henry James, *The Aspern Papers* and *The Spoils of Poynton* (New York: Laurel, 1959), p. 128. Since all future references are to this same edition, hereafter page numbers will be inserted in parentheses after each quotation.

casian an exchange of platitudes." When, ten chapters later, Mrs. Gereth pleads with Fleda to seduce her son Owen and take him away from his fiancée, Mona Brigstock, she urges the unattractive spinster to spruce up and not go around looking like a fool. "She applied a friendly touch to the girl's hair and gave a businesslike pull to her jacket. 'I say don't look like an idiot, because you happen not to be one, not the least bit'" (215).

Granted that James gave a plain heroine a homely name, the question still remains, why *Fleda Vetch*? Why not *Muriel Veitch* or *Veetch*? As is so often the case with James' characters, both the first and surnames are meaningful. Several critics have commented on the theme of flight and escapism in *The Spoils of Poynton*, with Fleda trying to escape from the temptation of Owen Gereth, an engaged man whom she loves. She flees to her father's, her sister's, to Ricks – wherever she thinks Owen cannot find her. Her first name, containing the past participle of the verb *to flee*, suggests this theme and the uncertainty of her character in the face of temptation. Whether James knew that the name *Fleda* comes from the Teutonic *Fleta* is unimportant, but it is interesting to note that the latter means "swift as an arrow: takes flight."

Fleda's surname is more complex and suggests various possibilities. Any good dictionary in the 1890's (e.g., Skeat's *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*) could have told Henry James that *vetch* is a kind of climbing, twining, winding plant of the genus *Vicia*. *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives us as one definition of *vetch*: "The bean-like fruit of various species of the leguminous plant *Vicia*," and adds the useful information that the word was occasionally used by writers like Chaucer and Rowley as a "type of something of little or no value."

The name *Vetch*, meaning "something of little or no value," is certainly appropriate for Fleda's selfish father and sister Maggie. It also seems appropriate for a plain, unattractive heroine, but the amusing riony here is that the Brigstocks, Owen, and Mrs. Gereth come to realize the true value, the real fineness, of this genus *Vicia*, who refuses to take selfish, unscrupulous advantage of her position as mediator between Owen and his mother, and insists that her rival be the one to break her engagement before Fleda will accept Owen's marriage proposal.

Another probable reason for James' selecting the name *Vetch* in characterizing Fleda can be found in the climbing, twining, winding nature of the plant. This characteristic is seen in Fleda's having to depend on the generosity of others for her support. Her mother dead, Fleda "hadn't so much even as a home, and her nearest chance of one was that there was some appearance her sister would become engaged to a curate whose eldest brother was supposed to have property and would perhaps allow him something" (134). Fleda does have a father who pays some of her bills, but he does not "like her to live with him . . ." (134). Thus James' heroine depends for her support upon the generosity of comfortable people like the Brigstocks and Gereths. This kind of leech-like existence might account for James' original intention of calling the girl *Veetch* rather than *Veitch*. This probability is reinforced by the revelation to Fleda by her sister that "people *were* saying that she fastened like a leech on other people – people who had houses where something was to be picked up . . ." (168).

A final possible reason for James' selection of the name *Vetch* is the fact that it looks and sounds like the verb *fetch*. James would certainly have known that *vetch* is a dialectal English variation of *fetch*. Once James decided to change the heroine's name from *Veetch*, he planted some internal evidence of his intentions, as he so often did. The key passage occurs right after Mrs. Gereth has made the stunning revelation that she has stripped Ricks and sent all of her treasures back to Poynton. This magnificent gesture is intended as a final bribe to Fleda. With the spoils returned to Poynton, Mona will break her engagement to Owen, who will then be free to propose to Fleda. When she accepts, the treasures will belong to her and, in the opinion of Mrs. Gereth, giving them to Fleda is the closest thing to "committing them to a museum" (281). The sacrifice is breath-taking, but Fleda recognizes it for what it is. "There was an expression she had heard used by young men with whom she danced: the only word to fit Mrs. Gereth's intention was that Mrs. Gereth had designed to 'fetch' her. It was a calculated, it was a crushing bribe; it looked her in the eyes and said simply: 'That's what I do for you!'" (280).

James' selection of the surname *Gereth* is puzzling. If he intended it as an echo of Geraint, in Arthurian legend a knight of the Round Table, its purpose here is mock heroic. More likely, James had in

mind a rare English word *gerent* (from the Latin *gerere*, to manage), which means “a person who manages, directs, governs, or rules.” Such a person is Adela Gereth, Owen’s “Mummy.” Her first name suggests the noble birth and manner of the Teutonic Adelaide or Adeline.⁸ Her surname is most appropriate for the woman who manipulates and maneuvers the spoilation of Poynton (“I succeeded because I had thought it all out and left nothing to chance,” she boasts to Fleda [179]), and who tries to control and direct the lives and destinies of others (“‘You slash into it [life],’ cried Fleda finely, ‘with a great pair of shears, you nip at it as if you were one of the Fates!’” [289]).

Mona Brigstock’s name is a wonderful example of James’ comic invention. First there is the humorous reference to da Vinci’s famous painting of the *Mona Lisa*, with her impenetrable Giaconda smile. James takes this fascinating enigma and turns it into a negative, unflattering quality of the story’s antagonist. With da Vinci in mind in the opening chapter, James has delightful fun at the expense of the athletic Mona, who scrambles up a steep embankment with Owen at Waterbath before going to church. The reader sees Mona for the first time through the critical eyes of Fleda Vetch and Mrs. Gereth.

Miss Brigstock had been laughing and even romping, but the circumstance hadn’t contributed the ghost of an expression to her countenance. Tall, straight and fair, long-limbed and strangely festooned, she stood there without a look in her eye or any perceptible intention of any sort in any other feature. She belonged to the type in which speech is an unaided emission of sound and the secret of being is impenetrably and incorruptibly kept. Her expression would probably have been beautiful if she had one, but whatever she communicated she communicated, in a manner best known to herself, without signs. (131)

The appropriateness of Mona’s first name (a much better choice than the original Nora) becomes especially evident when one remembers that it is her monomaniacal nature that provides the

⁸ *Owen*, from the Latin meaning well-born, is a name commonly found in Wales. James originally planned to call him *Albert*, which has similar connotations of high birth.

plot with its central conflict. Her obsessive desire to own the spoils of Poynton as her legal right causes Owen to break with his mother and solicit the aid of Fleda. Poynton, James says, "was something she had set her heart upon, set her teeth about – the house exactly as she had seen it" (312).

The surname *Brigstock* is all part of the early fun of *The Spoils of Poynton*. The name is a compound of two words, each reinforcing or supplementing the other. There are two possible explanations of the first part, *brig*, either or both of which James could have intended. According to the *Dictionary of American English*, *brig* was used as the term for guardhouse or prison as far back as 1852. The second half of the name, *stock*, reinforces the idea of imprisonment, suggesting the wooden stocks which for centuries were used to gird the feet and hands of prisoners. From these two images of confinement to James' picture of the plight of Owen Gereth is one short step. James writes: "He was hollow, perfunctory, pathetic; he had been girded by another hand. That hand had naturally been Mona's, and it was heavy even now on his strong, broad back" (193). Thus James' use of names becomes an important part of his scenic method, his constant effort to dramatize, to pictorialize the conflicts of his characters.⁹

The other possible reason for James' choice of *brig* as the first part of the surname is its Italian origin, the word *brigata*, from *brigare*, to strive after, contend for, quarrel or fight, from *briga*, strife. Mona Brigstock's contending for the possession of Mrs Gereth's beloved art objects supplies the novel with its basic plot situation. She becomes, in the eyes of Owen's mother, a barbarian, a pirate, a brigand (from the Italian *brigante*) who covets the treasures of Poynton Park.

Country homes and cities in James' fiction, such as Garden-court, Weatherend, and Woollett, testify to his equal care in selecting place-names. In his preface to the New York edition of *Roderick Hudson*, James wrote: "To name a place, in fiction, is to pretend in some degree to represent it – and I speak here of course but of

⁹ It is also possible that James used the last part of the name *Brigstock* to underscore the characterization of Mona and her mother. Their stupidity and vulgarity are commented on more than once, and one of the common definitions of *stock* is "A person who is dull, stupid, or lifeless like a block."

the use of existing names, the only ones that carry any weight."¹⁰ When James had to invent his own, he stressed their representative, or connotative, value as can be seen in *Ricks*, *Waterbath*, and *Poynton Park*. *Ricks* is the "little" country house that had been willed to the late Mr. Gereth by an old maiden aunt of his. Owen wants to give it to his mother "as the refuge of her declining years" (156) in return for the exquisite Poynton Park. He realizes that "It wasn't a place like Poynton - what dower house ever was? - but it was an awfully jolly little place..." (156). Located deep in Essex, three miles away from a small railroad station, *Ricks* is filled with art objects bought by the maiden aunt who lacked Mrs. Gereth's income but not good taste. Unfortunately the rooms are small and the walls papered. Mrs. Gereth can only moan silently as she gazes at the single plate of glass which is the parlor window, the ugly geraniums in pots outside, the "junction of the walls and ceiling guiltless of curve or cornice" (163), the homely mantel-pieces, and, above all, the doors. "On the subject of doors especially Mrs. Gereth had the finest views: the thing in the world she most despised was the meanness of the single flap. From end to end, at Poynton, there were high double leaves. At *Ricks*, the entrances to the rooms were like the holes of rabbit-hutches" (164). From the exiled Mrs. Gereth's point of view, what could be a more appropriate name for this rustic abode than *Ricks*, the name for stacks and piles of hay or straw?

The name *Waterbath* is as delightfully humorous as that of its owners, the Brigstocks, and characterizes them beautifully. The very redundancy of the name is characteristic of these ignorant, tasteless people who overdo things, such as their decorating their home. In describing "the intimate ugliness of *Waterbath*" (129), James chuckles at its "imbecilities of decoration, the aesthetic misery of the big commodious house," and its "stupidity" (127).

It was an ugliness fundamental and systematic, the result of the abnormal nature of the Brigstocks, from whose composition the principle of taste had been extravagantly omitted... The house was bad in all conscience, but it might have passed if they had only let it alone. This saving

¹⁰ *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James*, ed. Richard P. Blackmur (New York, 1934), p. 8.

mercy was beyond them; they had smothered it with trumpery ornament and scrapbook art, with strange excrescences and bunched draperies, with gimcracks that might have been keepsakes for maid-servants and nondescript conveniences that might have been prizes for the blind. They had gone wildly astray over carpets and curtains; they had an infallible instinct for disaster, and were so cruelly doom-ridden that it rendered them almost tragic. . . . The worst horror was the acres of varnish, something advertised and smelly, with which everything was smeared; it was Fleda Vetch's conviction that the application of it, by their own hands and hilariously shoving each other, was the amusement of the Brigstocks on rainy days. (129-30)

It is Mona's dream when she leaves Waterbath and takes possession of Poynton to do some remodeling, adding two things that the latter sadly lacks, a billiard room and a winter garden. Fleda envisions the latter with horror as "something glazed and piped, on iron pillars, with untidy plants and cane sofas; a shiny excrescence on the noble face of Poynton. She remembered at Waterbath a conservatory where she had caught a bad cold in the company of a stuffed cockatoo fastened to a tropical bough and a waterless fountain composed of shells stuck into some hardened paste" (149-50).

The last of the significant place-names is *Poynton Park*, with its "exquisite old house . . . early Jacobean" (134). A "complete work of art" (133), Poynton took "twenty-six years of planning and seeking, a long sunny harvest of taste and curiosity" (134). Upon her first visit to Poynton, Fleda is enraptured with its "perfect beauty" (140). ". . . Mrs. Gereth left her guest to finger fondly the brasses that Louis Quinze might have thumbed, to sit with Venetian velvets just held in a loving palm, to hang over cases of enamels and repass before cabinets. There were not many pictures - the panels and the stuffs were themselves the picture; and in the great wainscoted house there was not an inch of pasted paper" (141). Changing the name from *Umberleigh* to *Poynton*, James managed to lighten the image and suggest all the beauty and exquisite taste of the furnishings. The word *point* implies all kinds of distinguished connotations, and James' changing the *i* to *y* adds just the right note

of aristocratic, Old World refinement. In contests (and *The Spoils of Poynton* centers around a contest of sorts), a point is the unit of measuring achievement. In animal shows, *point*, according to Webster, is "a physical characteristic or quality of an animal, used as a standard in judging breeding." In the appraisal of diamonds, points are assigned to the stone's value. In general, a point is "a distinguishing feature; characteristic."

With the abundance of evidence in this one short novel, it is obvious that Henry James has imaginatively succeeded in *representing*, not merely naming, his characters and places. The painstaking care he took in the selection of names results not in the mere humor of caricature, but, at its best, an almost poetic extension of meaning and a subtle reinforcement of tone and theme. In the study of Henry James' techniques, the choice of names must not be overlooked.

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