In the historical moment of Wilde's scandal, the other direction in which the shared indeterminacy of literary and sexual language could lead was to the utter denial of scandal, through the exaltation of literature as high artistic expression and the occlusion of sexual content. James articulates this alternative in two of his tales most explicitly concerned to demarcate the realm of the literary, The Figure in the Carpet (1896) and The Aspern Papers (1888). I take up these novellas, rather than James's full-length novels, both because of their overt interest in literature and criticism and because of their instructive affinities with Wilde analogous literary-critical work, The Portrait of Mr. W. H. 36 While for Wilde sexu-

35 A similar conclusion might be drawn from the career of Thomas Hardy, who claimed that he found attacks on his work for its sexual suggestiveness so intolerable that he simply ceased writing novels. Indicating the obsolescence of the genre, Hardy (writing of himself in the third person) states that this turned out ultimately to be the best thing that could have happened; for [the attacks] well-nigh compelled him, in his own judgment at any rate, if he wished to retain any shadow of self-respect, to abandon at once a form of literary art [the novel] he had long intended to abandon at some indefinite time, and resume openly that form of it [poetry] which had always been more instinctive with him, and which he had just been able to keep alive from his early years, half in secrecy, under the pressure of magazine-writing. He abandoned it with all the less reluctance in that the novel was, in his own words, "gradually losing artistic form, with a beginning, middle, and end, and becoming a spasmodic inventory of items, which has nothing to do with art." The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy, ed. Michael Millgate (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 309.

36 On the biographical, social, and intellectual context of the relations between James and Wilde, and each man's efforts to distinguish himself from the Other, see Jonathan Freedman, Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
ality is encoded in and as the literary, for James the sexual simply gives over its place to literature: the affect and the form of sexual speakability are transferred directly onto literature itself in James's tales, and literary secrets are invested with an energy ordinarily reserved for sexual objects. By contrast with Wilde's effort to justify sexual meanings in literary terms, James, by virtue of refusing sexuality, can lend its value to literature. And where Mr. W. H. explores characters' belief in a literarily inscribed sexual secret whose substance is known (the name of the homoerotic sexual object), the problem for James's narrators is their incapacity even to know the content of a (sexually transmissible) literary secret.

Wilde's deliberately indeterminate language, whose meanings can be equally literary or sexual, relies on an antecedent ambiguity, I have argued, about the distinction between literature and criticism. In highlighting interpretability as such, Wilde's writing is always open to-- and in danger of-- being read as sexual.

While Wilde argues for the endless openness of literary writing to interpretation, James instead insists on its closed integrity. James's stories of literary detection belittle criticism by making the narrators' quests appear ridiculous and misguided, and reassert the priority of art over criticism. James mystifies literary art, holding out for it an inaccessible, untranslatable sphere of pure aesthetics where there is no danger of being tainted with sexuality. So while sexual catexes are transposed onto literature, this project ultimately makes attempts at deciphering hidden sexual meanings seem insupportable. Like Wilde, James recognizes that an indeterminate literary meaning is always a potentially sexual one. But while this realization results in a playful and affirmative homoerotics in Wilde, James's castigation of the literary critic is by contrast bound up in a negative erosities-- an acute erotophobia grounded in an intensive antiheterosexuality. While the stories bear indications of sexual desire, including the non-normative, sexuality is so aggressively repudiated that to read these traces as encoding otherwise proscribed forms of eroticism is not entirely adequate. 37

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37 My argument has affinities with that of Sedgwick on "The Beast in the Jungle" (Epistemology of the Closet, chap. 4), which proposes that, "to the extent that Marcher's secret has a content, that content is homosexual" (201), and, more fully, "that the outer secret, the secret of having a secret, functions, in Marcher's life, precisely as the closet.... It is the closet of, simply, the homosexual secret-- the closet of imagining a homosexual secret" (205). Sedgwick makes this case on the basis of a relationship between a general discourse of unspeakability and homosexual signification in particular (202). In the stories under consideration here, James's concern with writing, as the literal register of the unspeakable, self-consciously evacuates the sexual content that might be attributed to the secrets, and this evacuation precedes even the homo/hetero distinction.

Instead, James's tales transvalue the force of desire into a literary quest. When these bachelor narrators refuse obvious heterosexual solutions to
their literary conundrums, it is neither because they are gay nor because they are impotent. Rather, it is inconceivable for the narrators to marry women in order to answer the literary questions that obsess them because sexual desire has been subsumed by what might be termed literary desire. Literary rather than sexual meanings take the value of the inscrutable-- the unspeakable-- in these stories. While the explanations are communicable within conventional marriages, the characters with whom the literary quests are primarily identified-- the narrators-- recognize that heterosexual revelation is for them an impossible solution: they seek, and cannot attain, answers to their questions in entirely literary terms.

The narrator of *The Figure in the Carpet* 38 tells of his search for the "general intention" (313) that inheres in the works of Vereker, an author whom he admires and who has told him of the existence of such a "secret" (283).

This "idea" or "intention" (281) is virtually ineffable and can be indicated in the narrative only in the form of a hypertrophic catalogue of displacements: "The thing's as concrete there as a bird in a cage," Vereker says, "a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mousetrap. It's stuck into every volume as your foot is stuck into your shoe. It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma" (283-84). The narrator fails to unravel the secret, but he puts his friend Corvick, and Corvick's fiancée, Gwendolen, onto the track; Corvick eventually discovers the solution to the puzzle, transmits it to Gwendolen after their marriage, and then dies. Gwendolen retains possession of the secret, refusing to pass it on either to the narrator or to her second husband. The story presents abundant evidence for an association of the literary secret with a concealed sexual content, and an interpretation that identified the sexual meaning of such hints would align with readings I

38 In The Complete Tales of Henry James, ed. Leon Edel, 12 Vols., 9: 273-315 ( Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1962-64); parenthetical references are to this edition. –

have presented elsewhere in this study. The logic of those readings has, in several cases, been to heed the Freud of Dora in recognizing sexuality in the very signs of its absence, negation, or denial-- to understand that these various ways of saying "no" to sex sustain a "yes" in a different register. Yet the refusal of sexuality in James's literary detection stories is so assertive and conspicuous that to read it simply as a disavowal which attests to the repression or closeting of sexual material would not suffice. An insistently Freudian reading might seek to assimilate refusal itself to sexual meaningfulness by taking it to indicate sexual inadequacy. But the "yes" to which this "no" gives way is literary rather than-- not a cover for-- the sexual. Unlike Wilde, who valorizes an indeterminacy available to sexual meanings,
James holds out the literary object as that which abrogates the critic's very capacity to derive meanings.

Where is this evidence for sexuality in The Figure in the Carpet? In its primary, negative mode, it takes the form of the narrator's acute awareness that his exclusion from comprehending the "general intention of [Vereker's] books" (313) aligns with his alienation from heterosexual romance—romance with respect to which he feels himself "a kind of coerced spectator" (303). "Was the figure in the carpet traceable or describable only for husbands and wives— for lovers supremely united?" (306). Vereker suggests as much, and Corvick makes marriage with Gwendolen the condition for telling her the secret. The narrator is ostentatiously barred from this marriage plot that makes the literary one accessible. In case he does not feel the smart of that isolation strongly enough himself, his exclusion is flaunted by the couple's brandishing the privilege of the heterosexual "we": explaining how Corvick solved the riddle while alone in India, Gwendolen says to the narrator, "I suppose I may tell you now— why he went and why I consented to his going. We knew the change would do it...would give the needed touch" (297). And then to drive home the point: "Did you hear in those few days of your blighted bliss," I wrote, "what we desired so to hear?" I said, "we" as a little hint; and she showed me she could take a little hint. "I heard everything," she replied, "and I mean to keep it to myself!" (305) Finally, when he entertains, for a moment, the idea of marrying the widowed Gwendolen for the purpose of obtaining knowledge of the figure, the narrator immediately recognizes the erotic impossibility of this prospect: "There was enough to make me wonder if I should have

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to marry Mrs. Corvick to get what I wanted. Was I prepared to offer her this price for the blessing of her knowledge? Ah! that way madness lay—so I said to myself at least in bewildered hours" (306). Beyond the narrator's repudiation of heterosexuality, other erotic possibilities seem as little promising. In light of Corvick's requirement that Gwendolen marry him to obtain the secret, the notion of a comparable homosexual arrangement with the narrator is raised only to be rendered preposterous: "It seemed more than a hint that on me as well he would impose some tiresome condition" (300)—though what that condition might be is never determined. The relationship most infused with homoerotic potential is the narrator's flirtation with Vereker, whom he hopes to charm with his critical essay: "The only effect I cared about was the one it would have on Vereker up there by his bedroom fire" (277). Indeed, the initial literary enticement—when Vereker first alerts the narrator to the existence of the figure—takes the form of a seduction, late at night in a bedroom: "My dear young man," he exclaimed, "I'm so glad to lay hands on you! I'm afraid I most unwittingly wounded you by those words of mine at dinner."...I protested that no bones were broken; but he moved with me to my own door, his hand, on my shoulder, kindly feeling for a fracture; and on hearing that I had come up to bed he asked leave to cross my threshold and just tell me in three words what his qualification of my remarks had represented. (279)
In spite of all the suggestiveness of these passages, they amount to a repudiation of homoeroticism to the same extent that the explicit rejection of marriage does of heterosexuality (“that way madness lay”). For the narrator identified with the writing position of this tale, the only way to resolve a literary problem is with a literary solution, and when the mystical quality of this literariness is designated by its sheer ineffability, no space remains for an erotics similarly recognizable by its unspeakability. When the narrator states, as he does several times, "I sat up with Vereker half the night" (275), the line can only have reference to his reading, try as one might to bend its valence.

Moreover, the tale's most sexually suggestive moment indicates that marriage itself—as much as less sanctioned forms of erotic transaction—devolves from the literary enterprise. In describing the honeymoon revelation of the literary enigma, the narrator suggests how even conventional heterosexual intercourse is bound up with the literary quest: "This was above all what I wanted to know: had she seen the idol unveiled? Had there been a private ceremony for a palpitating audience of one? For what else but that ceremony had the previous ceremony [the wedding] been enacted?" (305). The usual wedding-night unveiling of sexual mysteries is subordinated to the disclosure of the literary secret—without, however, losing any of its erotic force. All the characters take for granted that marriage derives from a desire to apprehend and to convey the figure far more than it does from a wish to express passion or romance. 39

The Aspern Papers reinforces the sense of sexual terror that results from an unanswerable literary quest. Another bachelor narrator tells a tale of literary pilgrimage—a search in Venice for undiscovered material on a long-dead poet, Jeffrey Aspern, whom he and a male friend back home, Cumnor, idolize. The narrator ingratiates himself to an elderly woman, Miss Bordereau, and her middle-aged niece, Miss Tita; the former was in her youth a lover of Aspern's, and the object of some of his poems. She is thought to possess a cache of love letters from him—papers the young critic feels a desperate desire to read and to publish. In order to get close to the women, he becomes their lodger and, only somewhat unwittingly, induces the niece to fall in love with him. The old woman dies and the niece offers to trade him the papers for a betrothal, but the suggestion is unthinkable to him. He soon repents his rejection of her, but she has already burned the letters, and so he must be satisfied with the miniature portrait of Aspern he has bought from her, which he keeps above his writing desk to remind himself of what his failure of desire has cost him.
As in Figure in the Carpet, the content of the literary secret remains hidden from the narrator as well as from the reader, and the heterosexual contract requisite to obtaining that knowledge is here even more vividly recounted and repudiated. Knowledge of a heterosexual romance (As-

39 While the eponymous figure remains entirely metaphorical, the figures in the story—the characters—are themselves embodiments of literality. Corvick, for instance, says of Gwendolen: "She's quite incredibly literary, you know—quite fantastically!" I remembered his saying of her that she felt in italics and thought in capitals" (293). Desire derives from the characters being literary figures rather than deep psychological subjects, as the following privileging of "the book" over "the man" makes evident: the fact of the secret's existence "fell in...completely with the sense [Corvick] had had from the first that there was more in Vereker than met the eye. When I remarked that the eye seemed what the printed page had been expressly invented to meet he immediately accused me of being spiteful because I had been foiled" (286-87).

The story's overarching pun on the trope of "the figure" generates both its untranscendable metaphoricity and the figurality (personification) of the literary.

-pn and Miss Bordereau) is available only through such a romance (the narrator and Miss Tita); yet this exchange is rendered impossible by the narrator's appetite for information about the literary figure having entirely nullified his capacity for sexual desire. The former desire, forged in confederation with Cumnor, itself takes the form of romance, but romance that again falls fully under the aegis of literary detection. As he explains his preoccupation with Aspern to his patroness, Mrs. Prest,

the narrator notes: I could see that she was amused by my infatuation, the way my interest in the papers had become a fixed idea.

"One would think you expected to find in them the answer to the riddle of the universe," she said; and I denied the impeachment only by replying that if I had to choose between that precious solution and a bundle of Jeffrey Aspern's letters I knew indeed which would appear to me the greater boon. She pretended to make light of his genius and I took no pains to defend him. One doesn't defend one's god: one's god is in himself a defence....

The most I said was that he was no doubt not a woman's poet. (276-77) 40

The narrator's "infatuation" with the dead poet is overwhelming, but rather than enabling him to surmount all obstacles and throw himself before the "piece of middle-aged female helplessness" (369) that is Miss Tita, this literary obsession obviates such a prospect. There is no chance for a positively charged sexual passion in one so literarily preoccupied; the narrator's defensive repulsion, articulated in frankly misogynistic terms, testifies to the erotophobia induced by the literary question:
What in the name of the preposterous did she mean if she did not mean to offer me her hand? That was the price--that was the price! And did she think I wanted it, poor deluded, infatuated, extravagant lady?...I had not given her cause--distinctly I had not. I had said to Mrs. Prest that I would make love to her; but it had been a joke without consequences and I had never said it to Tita Bordereau. I had been as kind as possible, because I really liked her; but since when had that become a crime where a woman of such an age and such an appearance was concerned?...Whether I had given cause or not it went without saying that I could not pay the price. I could not accept. I could not, for a bundle of tattered papers, marry a ridiculous, pathetic, provincial Old woman. (376-77).

Like The Figure in the Carpet, this tale circulates around an unknown and unknowable literary secret whose form recapitulates that of the usual, presumptively sexual, secret. The metaliterary aspect of these works—their object lessons in how not to read James's stories themselves—strives to shame readers into feeling that even an inquiry into the content of these secrets is inappropriate. The fact that such literary secrets are attainable through heterosexual unions only reinforces the point, for this heterosexuality is a wholly negative, radically unavailable alternative to the type of the literary critic concerned with such questions. The contentlessness of the secrets in James's stories—by contrast with the secret in Wilde, which is discernibly sexual—enables these tales to pose problems of knowledge, rather than, as in Wilde, of belief. 41 The endings of the respective works bear out this difference between the yearning after knowledge and a quest for faith. The narrator of The Portrait of Mr. W. H. concludes by bemusedly pondering his own capacity for belief in the homoerotic account of the poems: "But sometimes, when I look at [the picture], I think that there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare's Sonnets" (169). Belief in the theory of the sonnets constitutes the subjectivity of the proselyte, and while this faith serves as a conduit for desire between men, it also throws up a barrier to the realization of that desire: in the process of securing belief—committing it to writing, in the form of a letter—its possessor gives it over to the other, and the potential for a connection between them dissolves. As usual in Wilde's work, the narrator winds up renouncing the homoerotic possibility, or at best finds himself in a state of permanent irresolution about it.
James's tales mock the very sort of literary riddling in which Wilde's story engages, a search for information that appears to confuse the text for the person of the author. In each of the James stories, the narrator-critic's undertaking is at one point aligned precisely with a search for the meaning of Shakespeare's sonnets, and James alludes to such a search in order to indicate its absurdity. The narrator of Figure in the Carpet says of the author Vereker, "He was like nothing...but the maniacs who embrace some bedlamitical theory of the cryptic character of Shakespeare" (291). Likewise, the narrator of The Aspern Papers writes of Miss Bordereau: "It was incontestable that, whether for right or for wrong, most readers of certain of Aspern's poems (poems not as ambiguous as the sonnets--scarcely more divine, I think--of Shakespeare) had taken for granted that Juliana had not always adhered to the steep footway of renunciation" (309).

The narrator of The Aspern Papers ends similarly gazing upon a literary portrait--though here the portrait reflects the failure of his desire to obtain the knowledge he sought, rather than the failure of his faith to sustain that desire. The literary question of the story is left unanswered, not undecided, and he remains isolated in his self-recrimination: "When I look at [the picture]," the last sentence reads, "my chagrin at the loss of the letters becomes almost intolerable" (382). The Figure in the Carpet finishes on a more mean-spirited note, for this narrator attains a measure of relief by spitefully transferring the irresoluble quest onto someone else--Gwendolen's widower: "I may say that to-day as victims of unappeased desire there isn't a pin to choose between us. The poor man's state is almost my consolation; there are indeed moments when I feel it to be almost my revenge" (315). Having been punished and excluded by the institutions of heterosexuality, this narrator exacts his vengeance upon it. It is all the more invidious for being a pyrrhic victory: rather than smashing the privileges of matrimony, the narrator simply recruits one of its former adherents for the cause of sexually debilitated literary compulsion.

No doubt this denial of the sexual affirms its continued importance to, and its ongoing conditioning of, literature as the location of unspeakability. By considering the fundamental question about literary meaning as one of knowledge rather than as one of faith, James asserts the unassailable inscrutability of the literary object as a powerful defense against the encroachment on literature of sexual indeterminacy. The literary may be deeply intertwined with the sexual, he seems to say, but that relationship is unfathomable, and one had best avoid looking into it too deeply. The literary quest itself forms the site of self-constitution for James's narrators, blocked as they are from erotic attachments; but the subjectivity thus produced is fearsomely atomized and abjected, disengaged in solipsism and "unappeased desire." While literature sustains irresolution for Wilde, in James it is disfiguring and self-consuming.

What consequences does the difference between Wildean and Jamesian literary unspeakability have for the construction of scandal? In both cases scandal is displaced away from the literary, but in different directions. In Wilde's case, the literary object becomes scandalous: hence the reception of Dorian Gray both at its publication and in the trials. In James's literary-critical stories, the scandal is never permitted to blossom--
it is preempted, held in abeyance, or dissipated. Even the James narratives less overtly preoccupied with the epistemological status of literature manage at once to engage the usual theme and structure of the Victorian scandal story and to refuse the full efflorescence of that scandal. To take the most familiar example, in The Portrait of a Lady (1881), the scandal that drives the plot--the fact that Madame Merle is Osmond's lover and Pansy's mother--is exposed, but its effects are not realized. Madame Merle departs to avoid the scandal, and the novel ends before Isabel confronts Osmond. Missing from this famously truncated story is the public effect of the sexual revelation; it is as if Eliot had wrapped up The Mill on the Floss without showing us the reaction of the world's wife to Maggie's return. While Eliot's concern is with the ethical consequences of the scandal, James's evasion serves to transpose consideration of the scandal's effects back onto the aesthetic realm. Again, in The Wings of the Dove (1902), the scandal toward which the novel builds--of Merton Densher and Kate Croy's plot against Milly Theale--dissolves in the novel's termination. Where scandal actively contributed to sexual unspeakability in the works I have considered in prior chapters, for Wilde and James it falls into crisis, on the one hand collapsing into the literal scandal surrounding the author and on the other evaporating into an aesthetic of the self-regarding literary artifact.

If James's work represents a defense against scandal that functions by completely absorbing sexual into literary unspeakability, another writer on the brink of modernism, Sigmund Freud, develops a reverse strategy, which subsumes the literary to narratives that overtly place sex at their center. Freud's discovery of sexuality as the primum mobile, coupled with the narrative form of his case studies--the earliest of which, the Studies on Hysteria (1893-95), are contemporary with the stories I have considered here--reacts against the ideology of sexual unspeakability institutionalized in literature.

Sex now explicitly drives narrative and outstrips self-conscious literary meaning, with which Wilde had so carefully sought to hold sexual signification in balance, and with which James had so sedulously obscured it. Psychoanalysis disdains the evasions and displacements in which literature had for so long found a stimulus, imagining as its task instead to speak openly about sexual meanings and motives. Its candid rebuttal of diffidence makes psychoanalysis look in one respect like pornography, which also renounces coy literary connotation. Both Freudian reading and pornographic representation castigate their imagined antagonists as repressed, but while the former aims to expose such evasion dispassionately, the latter counters repression with a garrulous sexuality whose end is arousal.
The imperative to interpret sexual meanings, which impels literary criticism like this work itself, derives from Freud's insistence on drawing out such significance. Despite Freud's urging that sexual reticence be overcome, the ongoing manufacture of scandal testifies to the durability of the epoch of repression. As both a site for the production of sexual meanings and a component of the ideology of sexual unspeakability, scandal, for all its punitive moralizing, exposes not only the costs but the capacities of sexual restraint. If this study is indebted for its proficiency at reading sexuality to a Freudian framework, it owes as much to a Wildean critical practice that knows itself to be in the presence of literature precisely when sexual meanings are being rendered unspeakable.

"The Figure in the Carpet." Short story (13,900 words), published in Cosmopolis (Jan-Feb 1896); reprinted in Embarrassments, 1896; revised and reprinted in The Novels and Tales of Henry James, Volume XV, 1909. (Characters: George Corvick, Drayton Deane, Gwendolyn Erme, Mrs. Erme, Lady Jane, Miss Poyle, Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Vereker.) Critic George Corvick gives the critic-narrator the job of reviewing Hugh Vereker's new novel. Later, the narrator meets Vereker at a party, and the novelist apologizes for a remark, overheard by the narrator, that his review contained only the usual twaddle. Vereker continues by saying that no critic has discovered the figure in the carpet of his oeuvre. The narrator rereads Vereker, fails to detect any figure, tells Corvick, and later learns from that man that he has discovered the secret, which, however, he will confide only to Gwendolyn Erme, his fiancé, and then only after their marriage. But on their honeymoon, Corvick is killed in a dogcart accident. Gwendolyn says she has the secret but will not tell the curious narrator; she marries an inferior critic named Drayton Deane. Death strikes again: Vereker dies of fever in Rome; his widow then dies; and Gwendolyn dies giving birth to Deane's second child. When the narrator quizzes Deane about the reputed figure in the carpet of Vereker's works, that imperceptive critic denies having any knowledge of it. In a long Notebook entry (24 Oct 1895) James sketched the situation for "The Figure in the Carpet": "the author of certain books . . . hold[s] . . . that his writings contain a very beautiful and valuable, very interesting and remunerative secret, or latent intention, for those who read them with a right intelligence--who see into them, as it were--bring to the perusal of them a certain perceptive sense"; further, James outlined his plot in detail. Confiding more thoughts to his Notebook later (4 Nov 1895), James advised himself to write ten chapters totaling 11,000 words. Ultimately the story ran to eleven chapters totaling 13,900 words. In the preface to Volume XV of The Novels and Tales of Henry James, James refuses to
provide personal evidence about how "this anecdote" corresponds to his observation of society's attitude toward literature, but instead the calls his tale "a significant fable" illustrating an "odd numbness of the general sensibility," even a "marked collective mistrust of anything like close analytic appreciation." The puzzling fable, which is at times serious, but at other times fantastic and darkly comic, has especially intrigued

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and divided critics who love ambiguity. What is the figure in the carpet? Whose business is it to explicate the figure? Is there any figure? Can looking for an alleged figure in an author's works spoil casual reading of them? Is this story autobiographical? If so, do James's celebrated prefaces reveal or conceal master figures in the huge carpet of his writings?

FIN ------------------------------------------------------------------------------------