
Part I

Fiction and Non-Fiction

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Bad Years in the Matrimonial Market: James's Shorter Fiction, 1865–1878

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When Henry James was asked to list an introductory selection of his work for a new reader he advised that his tales, the “little tarts,” should be read “when you have eaten your beef and potatoes” (Krook 1967: 325). After serious effort with the novels, that is, the ideal reader might indulge in something lighter by way of a dessert. To extend the culinary metaphor, we might consider James's early tales as *amuse bouches* – introductory savouries, evidence of style and content, challenge and innovation, perhaps, but, most importantly, a promise that staying the course will be rewarding.

Not all readers have been enthusiastic about these early tales. Rebecca West dismisses “those first stories” as “pale dreams as might visit a New England spinster looking out from her snuff-coloured parlour on a grey drizzling day” (West 1916: 24). West, in the year of James's death, might have been more charitable, given her real admiration for James, but the literary personality she ascribes here to James – female, morose, and sexually thwarted – was already current, and is one that still lingers, particularly amongst those who have not seriously read the novels. Philip Sicker's description of the heroes of the early stories as “a collection of demented artists, chronic invalids, drunkards, suicides, ineffectual dilettantes and hypochondriacs” (Sicker 1980: 26) adds an edge of excitement to the spinster parlor imagined by West, but not much cheer.

West's comment is less a considered judgment than a young writer's urge to be amusingly iconoclastic; but, for all its superficiality, it does at least point us to one important aspect of the early stories: in relation to fiction's traditional courtship/marriage paradigm, things do not turn out well for the protagonists. James's “little tarts” were not reassuring confections of the kind familiar to the readership of the magazines in which they first appeared. In “The Art of Fiction” of 1884, James observed that novelistic convention required “a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks”; such an ending was like that of “a good dinner, a course of dessert and ices” (James 1984a: 48).

From the first, however, James felt himself bound to frustrate readers of their usual fare. The editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, according to James's biographer, Fred Kaplan, grumbled about his "penchant for ending stories unhappily" (Kaplan 1992: 50). The early work looks forward to the central importance of narrative experiment in the great novels: these "pale dreams" constantly affront and deny narrative expectations, particularly in relation to the possibility of a happy marriage as acceptable closure.

In what follows I look at a selection of James's early tales and his neglected first novel, *Watch and Ward*, to focus on how the traditional narrative of courtship is deployed and the ways in which its problems are resolved. These stories fall roughly into four thematic groups: those with a Civil War setting; tales of the ghostly; tales of the early 1870s, exploring James's "International Theme," often involving concerns with tradition and the past; and tales which reflect his increasing focus on the problematic situation of women. There are no hard and fast boundaries between the groups: "The Last of the Valerii," for example, involves the past, the supernatural, and one of James's first American girls in Europe. Modern readers of the stories cannot avoid, of course, the urge to read back from later work, to find situations similar to those encountered in the novels. There is a certain artificiality in reading in this way, as it places the early fiction constantly at a disadvantage in relation to later achievements, but there are also positive aspects to this inevitable process. As Dorothea Krook says, James's treatment in the early work, while tentative, is also remarkable for "a degree of explicitness," providing "valuable corroborative evidence of [his] main preoccupations in the novels" (Krook 1967: 326).

Certain Jamesian obsessions stand out from the start, in particular the ambivalent fascination of strong, independent (often American) women, and the threatening prospect for a man of being closely involved with one of them. If magazine fiction seems to move ineluctably towards satisfying resolutions, the elements within the stories struggle not to accept such a desired pattern. From the start of James's career, things work out only at great cost. James's choice of the marriage-plot for the early stories was arrived at through a complex of causes. His early education, for example, had exposed him to the culture and literature of Europe, where the novel had evolved alongside the fortunes of the bourgeoisie, for whom the inheritance of property was of central concern and property problems made the fate of the *jeune fille à marier* crucial. There is no one, as Leslie Fiedler says, "to whom the phrase 'they lived happily ever after' is meaningless" (Fiedler 1982: 46), and in Europe that usually means they finally had enough property and money to start a new household. This format, however, was by no means the stuff of the American literary scene. The great works of American fiction, Fiedler points out, "tend to avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and woman." If in Europe Flaubert "was dreaming of Madame Bovary," in America "Melville was finding Moby Dick" (Fiedler 1982: 24, 28), Fenimore Cooper had headed for the wilderness, and Twain's Huck Finn was fleeing domesticity on the Mississippi.

James had no intention to attempt anything in this robustly American style, but his return to America from Europe with his family in 1860 coincided with the start of the Civil War, a topic that a hopeful writer for the magazine market might well have been expected to address.¹

Furthermore, the younger Jameses, Wilky and Bob, went on to enlist in the Union army in 1862, Wilky returning wounded in 1863. The question of James's "obscure hurt" of 1860, his non-participation in the war, and the relation of these events (or non-events) to his work has been the subject of discussion; most recently in Peter Rawlings's *Henry James and the Abuse of the Past*. Rawlings suggests that "[w]hether James was either unable or unwilling to take up arms is less significant than the use to which he put his negative experience of the Civil War in terms of the discourse of fiction-compelling obscurity" (Rawlings 2005: xi, xii) – which sensibly frees us from worrying at unanswerable biographical questions and directs our attention to the work. James himself in his autobiographical writings saw in the "hurrying troops, the transfigured scene . . . a cover for every sort of intensity" (Dupee 1956: 415–16).

The war, then, is less a background to stories such as "The Story of a Year" (1865), "Poor Richard" (1867), and "A Most Extraordinary Case" (1868) than an off-stage element, a testing, threatening obscurity, "a cover for every sort of intensity." As Rawlings says, war became for James "subservient to a campaign in which popular fiction, common assumptions about the unproblematic nature of representation, and the torrid zones of gender come under a reviling scrutiny" (Rawlings 2005: 46).

The start of "The Story of a Year" at once questions the assumptions of popular fiction: "when the hero is despatched does not the romance come to a stop?" John Ford and Lizzie Crowe – the "romance" – are introduced within an idyllic if damp landscape setting, and so besotted with one another that the young lieutenant disregards damage to his uniform and Lizzie is "reckless of her stockings." Ford marches off to war on clouds of imagined glory – "columns charging . . . standards floating" – clasping a vision of Lizzie as "Catholics keep little pictures of their adored Lady in their prayer-books" (James 1999a: 26, 27). His romantic illusions are early instances of the trap that unexamined imagery lays for the unwary, a theme that will occupy James to the end of his life.

James's narrator declines to follow his hero into battle, but the language of war is transferred to the domestic front: waiting for her soldier's return, "Lizzie became a veteran at home." The year's seasonal changes suggest "another silent transition" (James 1999a: 39) as she grows bored with Ford's battlefield letters and a life of suspended activity. Christmas brings invitations and Lizzie arms herself for a party in "voluminous white, puffed and trimmed in wondrous sort," puts on "her bracelet, her gloves, her handkerchief and her fan, and then – her smile" and conquers Mr. Bruce, who is not young, but, as her friend says, "beautifully educated" (James 1999a: 41, 42). Romance stops no more than do the seasons.

Ford is gravely wounded in battle and in Lizzie's muddled mind the two men now stand "like opposing knights" (James 1999a: 49). Her emotional confusion makes

her ill, and on accepting Bruce's proposal of marriage, she collapses. News arrives that Ford has improved and is on his way home, although on arrival he worsens. Lizzie fulfils her role of loving sweetheart and falls weeping at his bedside. But Ford, having been told of Mr. Bruce, gives up, like "an old wounded Greek who . . . has crawled into a temple to die," adoring his "sculptured Artemis" (James 1999a: 65).

So much for all the complications of the narrative: James's conclusion must, however, have perplexed readers of the *Atlantic*. Lizzie first appears to do the "right" romantic thing in breaking her engagement to Bruce after Ford's death, and angrily protests when he refuses to leave: "But for all that, he went in" (James 1999a: 66). Wedding bells are clearly imminent. Is this really a "happy ending"? The war hero has been defeated by the country lawyer, a denial of readerly expectations, but also of common ideas of war and the performance of masculinity. But it *is* Lizzie's happy ending: she has opted for the more viable mate. Rawlings puts Lizzie among James's "predatory women" (Rawlings 2005: 51), though she is hardly calculating enough for that. She wants to be – *we* want her to be – a sentimental heroine. But when James replaces the Madonna icon that starts the story, and which is central to the Christian family-ideal, with the virgin huntress, the "sculptured Artemis," at the end, he is evoking a natural force to whom issues of sentiment and morality are immaterial.

Lizzie is thinly drawn, but Gertrude Whittaker of "Poor Richard," the object of the eponymous Richard's love, is recognizably a Jamesian girl rather than a standard magazine heroine, being large, plain, rich, and clear-eyed. Richard – "an ill-natured fool, dull, disobliging, brooding, lowering" (James 1999a: 156) – makes a wretched hero in comparison with two other suitors, both soldiers. Leon Edel, in his introduction to *Watch and Ward*, sorts Jamesian suitors into three types: the Loyal, the Strong, and the Cunning (James 1979: 15). Here, Richard is loyal, Captain Severn, strong and Major Luttrell, cunning. Gertrude, though kind to the doggedly devoted Richard, falls in love with the scholarly Captain Severn, but through the deceit of Richard and Luttrell, Severn returns to battle without seeing Gertrude, and is killed. Richard confesses his lie, and in finding the courage to do so, finds his male identity, and – here is the shock – falls out of love. With Richard's retrieval of self-respect, Gertrude recognizes that he is "abundantly a man and she loved him . . . if he had opened his arms, Gertrude would have come to them." Instead, he goes off to war, and the narrator rather brutally declares, "with their separation our story properly ends" (James 1999a: 159, 208).

James's "appended paragraph," filling in future events, is extraordinarily disconcerting. Richard has a good war, returns, but heads for a new life in the West; Gertrude becomes the woman found so often in James's life and work – rich, independent, and living in Italy, for whom "a little romance is occasionally invoked to account for her continued celibacy." Richard's discovery of a male identity has directed him to physical effort, to male society, away from female zones, and James does not suggest he is any the better for this. Both are thus given reasonable but separate outcomes: "This is not romance," as Gertrude observes of Richard, "it's reality" (James 1999a:

208, 178). Reality, then, unusually for the world of magazine fiction, need not include getting married.

Romance of a kind does conclude “A Day of Days,” written just before “Poor Richard,” but not romance and marriage. For the space of a fine September day Adela Moore and Thomas Ludlow enjoy one another’s company. Ludlow is due to leave for Europe and admits it would be “very heroic, very poetic, very chivalric to lose his steamer” – but for an idea, a fancy? “Why spoil it?” (James 1999a: 104) he thinks, and leaves. It is a perfectly inconclusive conclusion, in which both characters keep an ideal image of one another in perpetuity, foreshadowing by nearly forty years James’s darker, sadder ending in “Altar of the Dead.” The story is one of the most satisfying of this period in its representation of ideal companionship, in which sexual complications and possibilities remain forever suspended in an autumnal glow. It is also as defiant of literary convention, as devoid of plot and comfort as a Beckett play.

We can look at the failure to find good marriages in another way, and argue, as Philip Sicker does, that the quest for love in James’s fiction “is a continued quest for identity” (Sicker 1980: 10). Even if the quest is inconclusive – if it ends in marriage bad or indifferent, in separation or in death – identity, James seems to be saying, is nevertheless forged by way of the “great relation between men and women.” It was this relation which James accused nineteenth-century Anglo-American novelists of evading, of keeping “so desperately, so nervously clear of,” preferring to deal in wild-life adventure, mystery and murder, “tortured childhood and purified sin” (James 1984a: 107, 1402). And because so much of the “great relation” passes unseen, within the consciousness of characters, elements of the supernatural, which is always, for James, a matter of consciousness, can also be woven into his fiction. In “A Most Extraordinary Case,” for example, we see the supernatural at work in the effect Caroline Hoffman has on Ferdinand Mason.

Mason, a wounded war hero, returns to be nursed by his aunt, Caroline’s guardian. Caroline is one of James’s big healthy girls, sumptuously beautiful this time, and Mason duly falls in love. Although Dr. Knight declares Mason is recovering, every contact with the girl unaccountably weakens him, though she is attentive and kind. She, on the other hand, blooms: “she has the inviolable strength of a goddess,” Knight says, “it’s the sound of Diana on the forest leaves.” When Caroline becomes engaged to Knight, Mason admits defeat: “to have broken down in his country’s defence will avail her nothing”; she needs “a being complete, intact, well-seasoned, invulnerable” (James 1999a: 296, 284). Resolved “to purchase one short hour of enjoyment” with Caroline, the sickly Mason enters the ballroom, as if it were a battlefield, and conducts himself “with unprecedented gallantry.” His aunt, alarmed, remarks how “these dreadful girls . . . like a man to look as if he were going to die.” The “battle” indeed ends in his death, but James concludes – almost mockingly – with marriage: “Miss Hoffman’s wedding was not deferred” (James 1999a: 289, 301, 303). In “A Most Extraordinary Case” the supernatural is internalized; over-excitement could almost have accounted for Mason’s relapses. It is “the revealed *effect*” (James 1987: 191), as James says in his notes on *The Sense of the Past*, that is significant and alarming:

Freud's "uncanny," in other words, where events are susceptible to neither rational nor supernatural explanation.

The career of Margaret Aldis of "De Grey: A Romance" of 1868, is more explicitly "uncanny" than that of earlier heroines, and setting the story in the historical past licenses the ghostly, as does Paul De Grey's Catholicism and European ancestry. James indeed uses a familiar Gothic ploy, placing the poor orphaned Margaret with the De Greys, so that when the heir, Paul, returns to America from his European trip, the two fall in love. It is not parental ire that is roused but a family curse: the true love of all male De Greys will die within a month of betrothal. Margaret, refusing to flee, takes the missal containing this prediction and overrides it with a curse of her own.

Instead of fading away her mousy looks develop a mature beauty, and Paul finds his "exquisite feeling of pity [for] . . . her appealing weakness, her heavenly dependence" altering to respect. He had plucked "this pallid flower" and "dipped its slender stem in the living waters of his love" and she has flourished: he hastens the wedding lest fear overtake love. Clearly, James is signaling that "something wicked this way comes," but we might wonder why a girl's emergence from pitiable dependence into strength and beauty should be menacing, and how a society can erect for itself so feeble an ideal of womanhood.

Margaret throws herself into wedding preparations, taking "an active, violent delight in procuring quantities of the richest stuffs – a fierce defiance of impending calamity."² Virginia Fowler has pointed out how James's American heroines offer an alternative not only "to the old corruption of Europe" but also to the "rampant materialism of America" (Fowler 1984: 8). Nevertheless, to be American is to be implicated in materialism, as we see in "Daisy Miller," *Portrait of a Lady*, and *Wings of the Dove*. Displaying a length of satin, Margaret cries: "Isn't it a lovely pink – it's almost red . . . the colour of my love – of my death!" (James 1999a: 349). It is Paul, however, who fades and dies; Margaret becomes insane. The color of the silk represents not only death but also the money that she has innocently drained from Paul. James's conclusion substitutes madness for marriage, satisfying the curse; but in fact the curse is no more than a device to drive the plot. Marriage is impossible, not on account of ancient maledictions, but because Paul is wedded to a moribund image of womanhood, superimposed on the girl's living reality. Through access to his love and money, she prospers to become the spirited American girl, soon to be familiar to James's readers, but – fatally for Paul – unable to coexist with fiction's domestic Angel. And as will so often be the case in James's later work, we cannot be sure whether there is not indeed something quite alarming about such girls.

For her time, Margaret is unusually independent, but questions of female education and rights were live issues in the post-Civil War years.³ In James's first novel of 1871, *Watch and Ward*, Nora, another orphan child, is rescued by Roger Lawrence, a man of leisure and means. Roger, from an early age, has been fixed on the idea of marriage: "There glimmered mistily in the young man's brain a vision of a home-scene of the future" – placid wife, golden haired babe, and "in the midst, his sentient self." After

his proposal to the accomplished Miss Morton fails, he stumbles upon Nora, left defenseless and bereft by her father's suicide. Like Paul De Grey, he is drawn to her situation as "a little forlorn, precocious, potential woman." He adopts her "for better or for worse," thinking of the day "when she should break into tears and tell him . . . that she loved him." He writes to Miss Norton – now Mrs. Keith – that he has "begun at the beginning; it will be my own fault if I have not got a perfect wife" (James 1979: 27, 33, 46, 52). In the stories that follow, dolls and statues often figure as metaphors for the century's construct of womanhood. Roger here becomes something between Shelley's Frankenstein and Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, creating a child-wife to meet his requirements.

He sends Nora off to school, while he himself travels; *en route* toying with a South American beauty, who has "the charm of absolute naiveté" but is "as illiterate as an angel," and has dirty fingernails besides. On his return, he redecorates his house for Nora in "chintz and muslin, flowers and photographs and books" (having the kind of "modest taste for upholstery" which we will later encounter in Gilbert Osmond). He wants to remind Nora "of all that she owed him." Unable to voice this crass truth, he tells himself that "her little nameless services and caresses were a kind of acknowledgement and promise"; but though Nora feels her duty is to make him happy, she also warns that "I am not your little girl" (James 1979: 56, 61, 62, 64). Nora herself is attracted by two men: Fenton, a confidence-man, down on his luck, and Hubert, handsome clergyman friend of Roger's.

It is Fenton who spots what lies ahead. "What in the world did he expect to *do* with you?" he asks – "Do you expect to marry him?" When she recoils, saying she will always be a child to Roger, Fenton laughs: "he will like a child of twenty." The American girl, however, needs a European "finish"; so before proposing marriage – before "calling in his debts," as it were – Roger sends her to Europe with Mrs. Keith who will, she promises, make her "the most charming girl in America" (James 1979: 85, 88, 113). Because Roger has fallen ill, it is Hubert who first sees the finished product. Nora seems to him "a Western Pallas Athene," sprung fully armed – and recalling earlier stories one feels nervous for Roger at the arrival of a goddess. When she understands what he proposes for her, however, Nora feels as if "a sudden horror had sprung up in her innocent past, and it seemed to fling forward a shadow which made the future a blank darkness. She felt cruelly deluded and injured . . . all this was an intolerable thing" (James 1979: 145, 180, 190). She flees, first to Fenton and then to Hubert, who both back off in panic. On the street, with nowhere to turn, whom should she see but Roger, a providential *deus ex machina*, into whose arms she falls. The last paragraphs are barely readable, as Nora sobs that she is "a wiser girl" and Roger murmurs "My own poor child!" (James 1979: 237, 238). And this time there are wedding bells and Roger gets his "placid wife."

The refusal of conventional narrative expectations seems to have been avoided here, and the novel is unsatisfying and finally unconvincing as a result. James tried to forget it, calling the novel "thin" and "cold" (James 1979: 9), belonging to a period of trial

and error. It did however run to several editions and does represent an aspect of James's experiments, since all the elements of a challenge to narrative conventions are there: they are just compromised by the ending. What we also see here is a shift from the victim-man, wracked and destroyed by romantic suffering, to the free-spirited girl, trapped by ignorance, and whose future is trammelled by the imperatives of the marriage market.

James's girls now move to Europe, appearing most presciently in "The Last of the Valerii" of 1874. The love-lives of the men of the early tales have, as we have seen, been a miserable business. They are an unheroic lot, "bewildered, mentally or physically disabled" (Sicker 1980: 26). Even their military credentials fail to shore them up, and they find themselves, according to Rawlings, "occupying the feminine-gendered position of victim" (Rawlings 2005: 67). The Italian Count Camillo, however, in "The Last of the Valerii," shifts the ground on which James's victim-heroes stand. He marries American Martha, and while he is extremely handsome, in a sculptural way, "it's the villa she's in love with," her mother says, "quite as much as the Count." As for the Count, the narrator, Martha's godfather, believes that while he loves her, he cannot have overlooked her "pretty fortune" (James 1999a: 799), given the disrepair of his own.

Love – whether of money, dresses, art, buildings, or antiquity, let alone that between or among the sexes – sets in motion forces that have incalculable consequences, marriage being only one, not necessarily conclusive, result. Once married, Martha sets about restoring the villa and disinterring its Roman remains. The Count warns her to let the statues be: "What do you want of them? We can't worship them. Would you put them on pedestals to stare and mock at them?" (James 1999a: 806). He has earlier defined himself as a pagan, and to the narrator he seems to have "no beliefs nor hopes nor fears" (James 1999a: 803). For the Count, the remains are ancestral beliefs, now supplanted, but to be respected, in contrast to Martha's touristic art-collecting passion that wants them on display.

Undeterred, Martha persists and her workers uncover a superb statue of Juno. When the Count sees the goddess, he orders her put in a garden-house, which only he may visit, revering her "as if she were a sacrosanct image of the Madonna."⁴ James has made clear that this is not Venus, but Juno, neither a Christian mother-figure nor a pagan seductress, but a jealous goddess-wife. The Count becomes withdrawn and "from his wife he kept his face inexorably averted," meeting her touch "with an ill-concealed shudder" (James 1999a: 812, 813). The narrator grows to hate the Count's blood-soaked "interminable ancestry . . . the long fitfully glaring dusk of early ages" and is shocked when Camillo declares himself "the happiest of men," now at peace in his garden with "the old Romans and the old gods" (James 1999a: 814, 815).

James said he wanted to create a "palpable imaginable *visitable* past" (James 1984b: 1177) in his fiction, not, as he wrote to Sarah Orne Jewett, a pastiche of "little facts that can be got from pictures & documents, relics & prints" (Horne 1999: 360). Camillo now lives in a past that is visitable and, to him, preferable to the present.

"You admired his antique simplicity," the narrator says crossly to Martha, "you see how far it goes . . . Camillo is a pagan!" For Martha, however, the gulf between them is not religious but representational: "Juno's the reality; I'm the fiction!" (James 1999a: 822). The *effect* that the Juno has on Camillo reconstitutes the past within the present, and replaces it: he becomes the ancient Roman more authentically and alarmingly than if he were tricked out in toga and sandals. Martha has thus become science-fiction to the Count, a visitant from the future, a theme that James was to revisit in his last novel, *The Sense of the Past*.

The Sense of the Past remained unfinished partly because James could not find a way to return Ralph Pendrel to his twentieth-century fiancée, Aurora, from his nineteenth-century cousin, Nan, more real to him than Aurora. But Martha "plucks victory from the heart of danger" and "smothers" Juno's beauty "in the dreadful dust" (James 1999a: 823, 825) of a Christian burial. Camillo returns as she sits embroidering like a Victorian angel-wife, and buries his head in her lap – an ending of "dessert and ices," surely, as matrimonial order is restored and the narrator tiptoes out? In James's "appended paragraph," however, Camillo conceals a fragment of the statue; and if we look ahead forty years to the conclusion of *The Golden Bowl*, where Prince Amerigo buries his head in Maggie's breast to blot out Charlotte, "happily ever after" seems unlikely. The past, the other self, is suppressed but not forgotten or destroyed, the line between victor and victim blurred. The American girl has become an occupying force – for the moment.

If "The Last of the Valerii" begins with a marriage undertaken for mixed motives, the conclusion, while apparently reverting to a marital status quo, uncovers fault-lines that James continued to probe. William Thackeray, as Jenni Calder points out, "was the first novelist to reject marriage as a happy ending," though still accepting it as an ideal. But after George Eliot's depiction of Lydgate's destructive union in *Middlemarch* of 1871, and George Meredith's removal of marriage "from the iron grip of social expectations" (Calder 1976: 26, 210) in the 1860s and 1870s, marriage had become a novel's problem not its resolution. Legislation in Britain in favor of women's rights over children and property had intensified and polarized debates.⁵ The American girl of this period, as beneficiary of liberal American attitudes to gender relations and with immense spending powers, had become the object both of envy and attack, as well as the means by which European aristocrats mended their fortunes. Martha, in "The Last of the Valerii," is as yet a sketchy version of this American girl, but this is an important hint of the character who was to find her iconic moment in "Daisy Miller" of 1879.

Martha is not referred to as "the Countess" in "The Last of the Valerii" until she has buried Juno and become in truth the Count's wife. But Euphemia de Mauves is almost exclusively "Madame de Mauves" throughout the story of that title of 1874. The salient fact of her marriage, already in the past at the start of the story, when Longmore first sees her, is the nail on which the plot hangs: her married state is therefore foregrounded. James is not particularly interested in marriage as an institution, but what does concern him are its effects on the individual, its human relations,

its unseen intimacies and cruelties, the web of involvements, loyalties kept or betrayed. Longmore, an American in Paris, becomes “involved” with Euphemia: attracted by her gentle beauty, but confused by her behavior, “at once alert and indifferent, contemplative and restless.” Mrs. Draper, another American, puts this down to unhappiness: “‘What else is possible,’ [Longmore] asked himself, ‘for a sweet American girl who marries an unclean Frenchman?’” (James 1999a: 830, 831).

James’s fight against “a superstitious evaluation of Europe” is not just against uncritical American worshipfulness, but also against assumptions, like those of Longmore, about wholesome Americans and nasty foreigners – literary as well as popular stereotypes. The marriage-plot here underlines the conflicts in James’s international drama, the contrast, as Wegelin sees it in “Madame de Mauves,” between “the integrity of American idealism and opportunistic French realism” (Wegelin 1958: 32, 39). Mrs. Draper describes Euphemia’s situation as “the miserable story of an American girl, born to be neither a slave nor a toy, marrying a profligate Frenchman, who believes that a woman must be one or the other,” and encourages Longmore, “to draw the sadness from [Euphemia’s] desperate smile” (James 1999a: 832, 833), an undertaking he accepts, though instinct warns him against it.

The narrative shifts to Euphemia’s early history, blurring perspectives and unsettling our prejudices. As a girl “she dreamed of marrying a title . . . because she had a romantic belief that the best birth is the guarantee of an ideal delicacy of feeling. Romances are rarely constructed in such perfect good faith and Euphemia’s excuse was the primitive purity of her imagination”; James, however, goes on to call this romantic belief a “pernicious conceit.” In the New York Edition of the story he expands the passage to underline the naivety of Euphemia’s notions, and replaces “imagination” with “moral vision” (James 1908: 224).

Longmore’s emotions become further involved, encouraged by Euphemia’s cynical sister-in-law – a dry run for the Countess Gemini of *Portrait of a Lady*. Baron de Mauves, having mended his fortunes “by pretending to fall in love” is “a thoroughly perverted creature,” pursuing an adulterous career in Paris. He is not averse to Longmore’s suit, however, as long as it remains discreet, but Madame de Mauves is steadfastly “pure” in her rejection of it. She insists that her marriage had been “a perfect love-match,” and Longmore, reporting to Mrs. Draper, believes that the Baron can’t forgive a “little American bourgeoisie” for having “fancied him a finer fellow than he is, or than he at all wants to be” (James 1999a: 862). For Longmore, the crisis comes when she refuses his plea to flee her hateful marriage, believing this act would taint their relationship, and leaving him no option but to return to America. Integrity and purity are satisfied, the American victims of decadent “old” Europe “have their goodness now,”⁶ though without wedding bells. James’s stories, however, do not stop “when the hero is dispatched” and his conclusion throws all into disarray.

Reporting back to Longmore two years later, Mrs. Draper describes meeting a friend of the de Mauves, who had called Euphemia “the charming little woman who killed her husband.” Baron de Mauves, apparently moved by his wife’s steadfast virtue,

had reformed and begged forgiveness, but she continued steadfast: “she was stone she was ice, she was outraged virtue”; and so he blew his brains out. This would seem the cue for Longmore to return to Europe, but he remains, his fervor chilled “by a feeling for which awe would hardly be too strong a name” (James 1999a: 903). Does he hesitate through humility, or fear of purity more baleful than the corruption it confronts? At all events, marriage to pure, faithful, beautiful Madame de Mauves has been and is impossible, her “moral vision” frozen into received images and ideas – about marriage and social class, of herself and of what constitutes *virtu* in human relations. It is not her nationality that is tested, but her humanity; neither Longmore nor the reader can reach for national stereotypes to account for the *débacle*. As Wegelin observes, “Madame de Mauves” is transitional, “its author had objectified only a part of his American point of view,” but it is a story that “points across the whole of his career” (Wegelin 1958: 46). This is where we can surely not resist the temptation to read back from the major fiction. And reading back deepens our understanding as we reach for comparisons. Isabel Archer’s return to Osmond takes on a note of menace; Morris Townsend looks sadder; Mrs. Ambient more intelligible; Maggie Verver’s stratagems are an intelligent replay of Euphemia’s; and Madame de Vionnet’s more poignant wistful desire to be the woman Strether had idealized. All can be read as a return to the broken figure of de Mauves.

The story’s conclusion leaves everything in the air: blame and sympathy cannot be apportioned, there is no outlet for the reader’s sympathies. For whatever reasons the married state was entered, it is a minefield. Social expectations, popular culture’s representation of gender relations, cannot bear much reality, as James sees it, and this is surely an important step in that process by which he sets about stripping marriage of all supports and disguises.

The Civil War had played its part in James’s early attempt to articulate a modern manhood, though, as we saw, military conflict was to become a metaphor for the other battle of the sexes. In the postwar years, the performance and measure of American masculinity had shifted to the world of commerce, and to concomitant success in the roles of suitor, spouse, and father. James was as uneasy with business as he had been with war, but at least war had an end and the civilized life could be resumed. What James now became aware of and explored through his fiction was the abyss of difference that was opening up in advanced capitalist society between male and female spheres: women were to be kept ignorant of the world of work and money, and men deprived of and indifferent to cultural matters; a state of affairs not easily mended and inimical to a civilized society. In opposition to the “quintessential American matrix of married domesticity and commercial or professional industry,” as Eric Haralson describes it, James’s fictions were increasingly to valorize “the disaffiliated aesthete” (Haralson 2005: 31, 3).

I have not, so far, touched on the question of James’s own celibacy, though many of the stories I refer to are from the years before Minny Temple’s death, when James’s marriage to any one of a number of women might have seemed a possibility.

James was aware of the anxiety of family and friends to see him settled. He wrote to Grace Norton in 1880 that he would not marry; "I am too good a bachelor to spoil." She must have persisted, since he expanded on the topic four years later: "I shall never marry . . . if marriage is *perfectly* successful it is the highest human state," otherwise "it is an awful grind, an ignoble, unworthy condition" (James 1974–84: II: 323; III: 54).

Crawford, in "Crawford's Consistency" of 1876, is an aesthete who has, according to his friend the narrator, "done a thing which required a good deal of charitable explanation": he has given up business because "he hated buying and selling," an apparently innocuous decision *not* to do what society expects of him. Instead he fills his house with books, and, though not a success by late nineteenth-century American standards, as "master of an all-sufficient fortune and of the best education . . . good-looking, gallant, amiable, urbane," he is, his friend the narrator says, "the most propitious victim to matrimony" (James 1999b: 127, 128). The narrator has "extreme admiration and affection" for Crawford, though as a poor doctor for whom marriage is a distant prospect, he also envies him. But since Crawford *can* afford it, he urges him to marry. Crawford replies that he is happy as he is: "A man should only marry in self-defence . . . a desire to lead a single life is not necessarily proof of a morose disposition" (James 1999b: 126, 130).

Crawford, yielding to social pressure, falls for Elizabeth Ingram; to the dismay of the narrator, however, for lovely as she is, "she had always inspired me with a vague mistrust." He has no time himself for a "blooming statue," an "inanimate" ideal like Elizabeth; in marriage he, the narrator, will be "the planet . . . not the satellite." The doctor has rightly diagnosed the pernicious nature of current icons of femininity. His objection is not that these are unreal, but that the male position is unacceptably submissive. He describes Elizabeth as having been kept "behind high walls," because the Ingrams were poor, and "their daughter was their golden goose." As provider of the "eggs" Crawford is a good match, though as a disaffiliated aesthete, "not a splendid one." For all that, it was "a bad year in the matrimonial market . . . the ideal suitor did not present himself" (James 1999b: 126, 127, 133) and so the marriage is agreed.

Elizabeth then breaks the engagement, and the distraught Crawford demands her reasons: "I do not love you," she replies. The narrator is outraged: "had she literally no more sensibility than an expensive wax doll? . . . there was something monstrous in her quiet, flute-like utterance of Crawford's damnation" (James 1999b: 138, 139). We do not "go behind" Miss Ingram; she is seen only in the hostile glare of the narrator's eye, but she in fact *releases* Crawford from the future hell of a loveless match. Crawford, however, self-destructs, marrying a woman of the streets, savagely described by him as "the last word, the flower" of American civilization. In the woman's account, Crawford had offered her money to marry him: he had, the narrator says, "dragged her out of her friendly obscurity, and placed her unloveliness aloft upon the pedestal of his contrasted good manners" (James 1999b: 149), a revenge upon the "monstrous regiment of women," perhaps, but pointlessly cruel. When "bad years"

then hit his finances, she feels cheated and becomes a fury. It is a short step to poverty, violence, and her death from drink. In the narrator's eyes Crawford has never lost his "equanimity," but to the reader, not perhaps sharing the doctor's "extreme admiration and affection," Crawford has surely only replaced the commerce he hated with barter in the marriage market – "consistency" of a sort. Unable to purchase the love of the imagined Angel, in savage fury he has procured the Whore, disregarding human reality in either case – "a thing which requires a good deal of charitable explanation."

There is, for James, an atypical neatness to this story. The anonymous doctor, however, lurks as potentially interesting. James is using the nineteenth-century novel's ploy of a reliable professional man as narrator, but this narrator's passionate prejudices – about women and about Crawford – throw into question his whole account. Living vicariously through Crawford, his friend's final degradation is his own; the matrimonial markets have surely closed for him too, psychologically if not literally.

In the grotesque ending of "Rose Agathe," of 1878, it seems that James can only find a way out through the surreal and absurd. The narrator – again unnamed – sees his friend apparently falling in love and eloping with the pretty wife of a Parisian hairdresser, an adventure he encourages with vicarious zest. In fact his friend adores a wax bust in the hairdresser's window, which he finally buys and installs in his home. This lunacy, in retrospect, is preferable to the narrator's callous encouragement of an imagined seduction, perfectly expressed by his assumption that when his friend says "one never knows what one may pick up," he means sex, not shopping.

Marriage, then, the desired ending for readers and publishers of periodicals, neat narrative termination that traditionally closes one part of a life, leaving the rest to guesswork, has reached an impasse. James was not alone in his resistance to the wedding finale. Meredith's *The Egoist* of 1879 eviscerated the whole courtship/marriage process, and even Trollope, arch purveyor of fictional "dessert and ices," begins the last chapter of *Ayala's Angel* of 1881 wearily sending yet another two couples down the aisle: "If marriage be . . . the only ending, as this writer takes it to be, which is not discordant – surely no tale was ever so properly ended as this one. Infinite trouble has been taken . . . arranging these marriages" (Trollope 1929: 624). He nevertheless continued to confect his inevitable "only endings," meriting James's accusation in his essay of 1914, "The New Novel," against his Victorian *confrères*, of being "as sentimental, as romantic . . . as shamelessly 'dodgy' . . . just in order *not* to be close and fresh, not to be authentic" (James 1984a: 130).

James, as we have seen, resisted "dodginess" from the start. These early stories direct our reading and understanding in various ways, but in no way more seriously or more disturbingly than in their exploration of the bad deals that marriage can offer. He chooses the traditional courtship/marriage paradigm as the "adventure" undergone by the greater part of humankind, the experience in which individuals are tested and measured in all their depths and shallows – the opportunity to hunt whales or track savages is not, after all, given to many. We have not got the psychological depth and cultural complexity that the major novels will offer us here, but the bones of matter

are exposed to us already. Powerful, challenging women simply can't match their desires with those of weaker, intelligent, sensitive but so often secretive and deceitful men. Clever, decent men can't reconcile themselves to the banalities of late nineteenth-century domesticity, or the traps for individual freedom in the world of business. The fictional mold for the exploration of the psychological problems that interest James is the matrimonial market: but these were bad years for matrimony in James's fiction – and so they would continue to be through a career that leads to the richer delights of the later greater works.

NOTES

- 1 This may be the point at which to address F. R. Horowitz's *The Uncollected Henry James* (London: Duckworth, 2004), a group of unsigned magazine stories written between 1852 and 1869 and attributed to James by Horowitz. The attribution is implausible, and the stories' sole merit is to expose the dismal fare available to magazine readers, and by contrast to highlight the superiority of James's earliest writings to this kind of dross.
- 2 James here introduces two elements into the story that were to continue to preoccupy him: dress and money. In James's first ghost story, "A Romance of Certain Old Clothes" of 1868, two sisters fight over a man. Actually, the fight is for the gorgeous dresses of one sister's trousseau. To acquire these, the other must eliminate her sister and marry the man; which she does, but is mysteriously struck dead as she opens the trunk of clothes.
- 3 The first American conference of feminists was held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848.
- 4 James had translated Prosper Mérimée's "The Venus of L'Ille," a story of rivalry between a bronze Roman Venus and a young bride, in which the bridegroom is found dead with marks of a metal body upon him.
- 5 The most notorious of the reactionary attacks on new Womanhood was Eliza Lynn Linton's articles in *The Saturday Review* of 1868, under the title *The Girl of the Period*, a phrase that became a byword. William Dean Howells saw Daisy Miller and her compatriots as James's transatlantic equivalents.
- 6 The concluding lines to Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, when a wife watches her Puritan New England husband go to his death.

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