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## HENRY JAMES AND SEXUALITY

In *Henry James and Sexuality*, Hugh Stevens argues for a new interpretation of James's fiction. Stevens shows how James's writing contains daring and radical representation of transgressive desires and marginalized sexual identities. He demonstrates the importance of incestuous desire, masochistic fantasy, and same-sex passions in a body of fiction which ostensibly conforms to, while ironically mocking, the contemporary moral and publishing codes James faced. James critiques the very notion of sexual identity, and depicts the radical play of desires which exceed and disrupt any stable construction of identity. In a number of his major novels and tales, Stevens argues, James anticipates the main features of modern 'gay' or 'queer' fiction through plots and narrative strategies in which heterosexual marriage is at odds with homoerotic friendship. This original and exciting work will transform our understanding of this most enigmatic of writers.

Hugh Stevens lectures in the Department of English at the University of York. He is a contributor to the forthcoming Cambridge Companions to Henry James and D. H. Lawrence, and has published in *The Henry James Review*. He is co-editor of *Borderlines: Gender, Sexuality, and the Margin of Modernism*.

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*University of York*



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*For my parents*

## *Contents*

<i>Preface</i>	<i>Page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xiii
1 Henry James and the languages of sex	1
2 Gender and representation in <i>The Wings of the Dove</i>	20
3 Sexuality and the aesthetic in <i>The Golden Bowl</i>	45
4 The eroticism of prohibition: masochism and the law in <i>Roderick Hudson</i>	61
5 Queer plotting: <i>The Bostonians</i> and <i>The Princess Casamassima</i>	90
6 James's late short fiction and the spectacle of modern homosexuality	117
7 Suicide and blackmail: James's 'poor sensitive gentlemen'	145
Conclusion: 'that queer monster the artist'	164
<i>Notes</i>	174
<i>Bibliography</i>	197
<i>Index</i>	215

## *Preface*

In the late 1980s, it would not have been obvious that Henry James was to become one of the most discussed figures in literary criticism concerned with sexuality, more specifically with same-sex desire and the development of homosexual identities. Since then, of course, ‘queer theory’ has gained a foothold in the academy, studies of ‘lesbian and gay writing’ are more and more frequent in English departments, and literary representations of same-sex desire and dissident sexual identities – in writing from the medieval period onwards – have received considerable attention by literary critics. James himself has become one of the writers most frequently associated with ‘queer’ literary criticism. As this study developed, so too did the intellectual apparatus with which to consider questions of sexuality in literary texts. Psychoanalytic approaches to sexuality have not been displaced, but critics have increasingly acknowledged that desire and sexuality are constructed differently in different historical periods and cultural locations. Such observations are now commonplace, but are worth repeating in a book on Henry James, for several reasons.

Literary criticism has been reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which James was implicated in the late Victorian culture of sexuality – a culture in which scientific constructions of sexuality gained increasing prestige, and in which a newly punitive legal régime contributed to the stigmatization of the sexual ‘deviant’; a culture which witnessed individuals who resisted such stigmatization and criminalization, and who mobilized under the very sign of deviance. This study hopes to demonstrate that while James was not a public participant in the early public manifestations of homosexual culture, his writing shows an informed response to changing notions of homosexuality. In the conclusion I argue that James, in his own select social circle, paradoxically constituted himself as ‘queer’ – as a desiring male subject involved with other men – without making an identity statement.

A somewhat confused relation between literary criticism and biography has obscured James’s relation to his culture. Until recently, critics and

biographers have argued that James's supposed abstinence from any form of sexual activity make him an unlikely author of fiction which self-consciously represents same-sex desire between men. Hence erotic moments in his writing are frequently read as unintended. Such a biographical approach is often implicit even in criticism of James which does not specifically refer to James's life. The consciousness of 'Henry James' at the moment of writing is beyond recovery. Nevertheless, I hope to show that James's *writing* is extremely self-conscious about the constraints and injunctions surrounding representations of the erotic and of the deviant. This claim will inevitably affect the way in which we think of James the biographical subject, but this study is more interested in the relation between James's writing and the culture of sexuality it responds to than in the intricacies of James's own psyche. The claims I make for James's writing do not stand or fall on the question of James's own sexual behaviour. Fiction is a mode of writing which teasingly promises to reveal the writing self even as it disavows that self; it is, after all, only 'fiction', and James's own tales about fictional creation remind us that readers will expect to see the writer in the writing even though that expectation can never be properly satisfied. The only biographical claim that follows from a reading which convincingly demonstrates that James's published writing engages with questions of same-sex desire and queer identity is tautological – James was a person who could write and publish such work. Yet this claim is in itself significant.

This study began as an inquiry into the representation of femininity in James's writing. As the study developed, I became increasingly concerned with the representation of same-sex desire in his writing. James's interest in the desiring female subject and his interest in the 'homosexual' subject are not unconnected – they both represent a fascination with the marginal, with alterity – but I would not like to make any essentializing links between them. Perhaps it is worth pointing out what his fiction conspicuously doesn't do – namely, it does not tell the story of the maturing male who makes himself through marriage and the establishment of a family. This plot is noticeably absent from James's oeuvre – it occurs, perhaps, in *The Golden Bowl*, but only to be seen there not as 'normal' but as hyperbolically perverse. At the risk of stating the obvious, the queerness and the perversity of James's writing neither begin nor end with questions of same-sex desire and of homosexuality.

As I write this preface, I am aware that much recent writing has appeared on topics this book addresses with which I have not been able to

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[More information](#)

---

*Preface*

xi

engage; this book is a contribution to a developing discussion, and I look forward to seeing how critical understandings of sexuality in James's writing continue to develop. I hope that the readings of James's writings offered here do more than contribute to our understanding of James the creative artist. I hope to portray a writer whose work constitutes an intelligent and challenging contribution to cultural understandings of sexuality, a contribution valuable not only to the culture in which he wrote, but to the culture in which we now live.



## *Acknowledgements*

This book began life as a doctoral dissertation, work on which was enabled by generous institutional support. The Cambridge Commonwealth Trust funded my initial three years at Cambridge. The Judith E. Wilson Fund of the English Faculty, Cambridge University, provided expenses for a research trip to the United States. Trinity Hall, Cambridge, awarded me a research fellowship which enabled me to continue work on this project.

Several libraries provided generous access to resources: the University Library and English Faculty Library, Cambridge, the British Library, the London Library, the Widener and the Houghton at Harvard, the Kinsey Institute and the University Library at Bloomington, Indiana, and the University of York Library.

A previous version of chapter 3 appeared in *The Henry James Review* (vol. 14, 1993), and an article containing some of the material in chapters 6 and 7 appeared as 'Homoeroticism, Identity and Agency in James's Late Tales', in Gert Buelens, ed., *Enacting History in Henry James* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

The personal debts are several. Kathleen Wheeler, my research supervisor, guided me through completion of the dissertation. Maud Ellmann, Adrian Poole and Tony Tanner showed a sustained and valuable interest in my work. I am particularly indebted to Jonathan Freedman, who read through two drafts of this work, and whose advice was invaluable in helping me to revise and reshape the argument.

At Trinity Hall and at York I have had supportive colleagues: in particular I thank John Lennard, Peter Holland, Hugh Haughton, Hermione Lee and Joseph Bristow. Anne Fernihough, Bridget Orr, Louise Watts and Clive Marsland gave valuable feedback at various stages of writing. This book is dedicated to my parents.

## *Abbreviations*

Full details of all works cited are given in the bibliography. The following abbreviations are used throughout the book:

- AN* Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*. Ed. Richard P. Blackmur. New York: Scribner's, 1934.
- CT* *The Complete Tales of Henry James*. Ed. Leon Edel. 12 vols. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962–64.
- HS* Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. London: Allen Lane, 1979.