

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87981-1 - Henry James, Women and Realism

Victoria Coulson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: ambivalent realism*

I am grieved to hear that Mrs Stoddard is ill; why do literary women break down so, and . . . *act* so? It almost seems as though only the unhappy women took to writing. The happiest women I have known belonged to two classes; the devoted wives and mothers, and the successful flirts, whether married or single; such women *never* write.

(Constance Fenimore Woolson to E. C. Stedman [1876?])<sup>1</sup>

The novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding.

(Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel')<sup>2</sup>

## RESTIVE CONSERVATIVES

This book explores the structural interdependence of writing, gender and cultural authority within a small, yet suggestively representative, group of late nineteenth-century expatriate American writers. It focuses on the textually mediated relationships between Henry James (1843–1916) and three of his most important female friends: his sister Alice (1850–92), career hysteric and author of a significant diary, and the novelists Constance Fenimore Woolson (1840–94) and Edith Wharton (1862–1937). At the heart of this book is the claim that the distinctively ambivalent private, professional and literary lives of Henry James, Alice James, Constance Fenimore Woolson and Edith Wharton adumbrate the contours of inarticulate discontent within a conservative but increasingly restive, and beleaguered, cultural establishment.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, both in Britain and the United States, the 'Woman Question' was a central focus of debate. In Britain topics such as marriage laws, property rights and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87981-1 - Henry James, *Women and Realism*

Victoria Coulson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

suffrage, higher education and job opportunities, and female emigration, were increasingly debated from the 1860s,<sup>3</sup> while in the United States rapid political and socio-economic change formed the background for significant upheavals in the family and in relations between women and men.<sup>4</sup> ‘Even the most contented [women]’, Martha Vicinus argues, ‘could not help but be affected by the intense debate on the position of women that swirled around them’.<sup>5</sup> By the 1880s, the legal structures of patriarchal tradition were being dismantled by feminist reforms through legislative acts which materially improved women’s status: the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 and the Guardianship of Infants Act in 1886.<sup>6</sup> There was a major setback to the cause of female suffrage when the women’s amendment to the Reform Bill was defeated in 1884, but this served only to redouble the commitment and energy of women activists. ‘Though the term was not introduced until 1890 or so, the movement that came to be called “feminism” became large and outspoken during the second half of the 19th century’ and Elaine Showalter has described the period of 1880–1910 as ‘intensely feminist’.<sup>7</sup>

From the 1880s, discussion of the nature and social role of women became more radical with the emergence of that icon of cultural change, the New Woman. ‘[S]ingle, highly educated, economically autonomous’, the New Woman was both ‘a specific sociological and educational’ phenomenon and a provocative cultural symbol of female independence:<sup>8</sup> a development reflected by the fact that between 1883 and 1900 more than a hundred novels were written about the New Woman.<sup>9</sup> With her ‘simultaneous challenges to the gender-based division of labor, the ideal of the bourgeois home, and the hierarchy of class’, the New Woman embodied a serious threat to the Victorian social order;<sup>10</sup> and she was joined in the cultural imaginary by such decadent figures as the homosexual and the aesthete, whose challenges to traditional constructions of masculinity were equally radical. At the *fin de siècle*, the conceptual foundations of separate spheres ideology were under attack; now the cultural avant-garde began to call into question the social construction of gender itself. Recent historians have borrowed George Gissing’s characterisation of the 1880s and 1890s as a period of ‘sexual anarchy’ to show that by the last decade of the century ‘the system of patriarchy was under attack not only by women, but also by an avant-garde of male artists, sexual

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87981-1 - Henry James, Women and Realism

Victoria Coulson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: ambivalent realism*

3

radicals, and intellectuals, who challenged its class structures and roles, its system of inheritance and primogeniture, its compulsory heterosexuality and marriage, and its cultural authority'.<sup>11</sup> As Rita Felski remarks, the result of this new historiographic focus is that a period 'once deemed ... conservative ... and still in the throes of Victorian ideology ... now looks much more exciting, innovative, and quintessentially modern'.<sup>12</sup>

Other historians have stressed that these radical elements represented a tiny social minority. Yet, vociferous, eloquent, provocative, they nevertheless constituted a radical elite, a cultural avant-garde leagued against what Kate Millett calls 'enormous odds of cultural resistance'.<sup>13</sup> Discussing the situation in the United States, Diane Price Herndl stresses that the vast majority of women were not New Women: 'Even at the height of the first women's movement, only a very small percentage of women (around 4–5 percent) actually went to college', and only half of those who graduated went on to pursue professional careers.<sup>14</sup> Rather than bringing about direct, radical and widespread alterations in the patterns of everyday life, the avant-garde was applying significant pressure to the cultural establishment, making it not only self-conscious, but also self-consciously threatened by the prospect of change; and the result was a reactive hardening of prescriptive gender roles and an increased surveillance and policing of hegemonic norms. Whereas the mid-Victorian preoccupation with stereotypes of women may be seen as indicating a concern with the 'imperfect enforcement' of gender roles,<sup>15</sup> the radical minority challenge to hegemonic social values at the *fin de siècle* produced a correspondingly more severe reaction from dominant elements of the culture. Drawing on Michel Foucault's argument about the agonistic interdependence of socio-sexual deviance and medico-juridical surveillance, Showalter describes how '[a]t the same time that new opportunities for self-cultivation and self-fulfilment in education and work were offered to women, doctors warned them that pursuit of such opportunities would lead to sickness, sterility, and race suicide ... From the 1870s onward, [a] generation of doctors ... presented a constellation of rigid views on gender roles'.<sup>16</sup> The second half of the nineteenth century thus presents a changing complex of contradictory and ambivalent attitudes in relation to the politics of gender. A widespread mid-Victorian debate about stereotypes of femininity

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87981-1 - Henry James, Women and Realism

Victoria Coulson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

develops into a radical interrogation of the social construction of sexual difference; and as this social critique becomes more radical it becomes less acceptable to majority opinion, while retaining cultural centrality as a topic of political and artistic debate. There is thus a paradoxical tightening-up of hegemonic norms around the *fin de siècle*, as the 'Woman Question' becomes radicalised.

It is in this context that the 'ambivalent realists' of this book claim their place as peculiarly symptomatic of their culture. With the exception of Alice's passionate interest in Irish politics, Woolson, Wharton, and Alice James were social conservatives and never identified themselves with any form of avowed feminist thought; yet for each of these women there was a disjunction between a conscious commitment to conservative values, and the lived experience of the social and psychological disorientations that nevertheless ensued. All three women found that compliance with the traditional imperatives of respectable femininity led not to social success and personal happiness, but rather to various forms of dissatisfaction and marginality. Alice James's lifetime career of hysterical illness can be understood as an obedient response to the expectation that femininity be a kind of sexualised passivity; yet the paradoxical self-assertiveness with which Alice embraced this identity took her beyond social centrality and towards the marginality of chronic invalidism. Constance Fenimore Woolson achieved both popular and critical acclaim for her literary work, but she could never fully reconcile her intellectual ambition with her loyalty to conservative gender roles, and thus her authorial success inevitably figured to her as a sign of her failure to marry. Alice and Constance came to think of themselves as spinsters: a painful but perversely reassuring gender identity that clings to social legitimacy by asserting some relationship with sexually validated femininity – a *failed* relationship. In contrast, Edith Wharton made an outwardly successful Society marriage; but it was rumoured to be a *mariage blanc*, and it ended in divorce when her husband became mentally ill. Marriage failed to protect Edith from social shame; and, as did her affair with William Morton Fullerton, it ended by confirming her sense of the disappointments of sexual intimacy. Through their different experiences of the coercions and failed promises of femininity, these women came to develop a restless and never fully articulable ambivalence towards the social authority of gender expectations.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87981-1 - Henry James, Women and Realism

Victoria Coulson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: ambivalent realism*

5

Thus, seeking the traditional entitlements and rewards of femininity, each discovers herself in a kind of internal exile. Without ever consciously rebelling, each woman resists or complicates gender conventions enough to provoke the criticism of other, more compliant women, who came to stand as punitive embodiments of her own conservative loyalties. Both Alice and Edith – at different times – were objects of disapproval for Alice’s brother William’s wife, Alice Howe James (known in the James family, with rather pointed distinction, as *Mrs Alice*). Mrs Alice was deeply uncomfortable about Alice’s Boston marriage with Katharine Loring; and after Henry’s death, Mrs Alice refused to accept Edith Wharton as editor of a collection of Henry’s letters, on the grounds that she had heard that Mrs Wharton had been unfaithful to her husband. Constance’s younger sister Clara – a rather conventional woman, widowed, with a daughter – functioned as a similar figure of feminine reproof to her older sister. Constance also found herself besieged by a legion of phantasmatic female critics and rivals: the wives of the literary men with whom Constance corresponded throughout her writing life, whether these women actually existed or not (for the unmarried Henry James, Constance repeatedly evoked ‘a sweet young American wife’<sup>17</sup>). For his part, Henry James’s attitude towards heterosexual masculinity was vexed and complex: his compliance with the social imperatives of masculinity is problematised at every point by a profound imaginative kinship with women, an affiliative communion with feminine structures of subjectivity that is unparalleled elsewhere in the work of nineteenth-century male writers; and recent scholarship has charted his emotional – and possibly physical – resistance to male heterosexuality.

Henry James’s queer selves have been emerging into critical daylight since Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s pioneering work on male homosocial desire in fiction and ‘The Beast in the Jungle’ (*Between Men*, 1985; *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1991). Today there is a fruitful absence of consensus as to what, exactly, it means to read James ‘as’ a ‘homosexual’, with claims ranging from positivist biographical assertions of physically enacted same-sex desire (such as Sheldon M. Novick’s *The Young Master* (1996), or, in more literary-critical mode, the collection edited by John R. Bradley, *Henry James and Homo-Erotic Desire* (1999)) to the most subtle arguments about cultural modality and imaginative alliances

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87981-1 - Henry James, Women and Realism

Victoria Coulson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

(a suggestive recent example being Eric Haralson's *Henry James and Queer Modernity* (2003)). These various works represent a salutary turn in Jamesian studies from an unexamined orthodoxy of presumptive heterosexuality (which coexisted oddly with the equally prevalent feeling that James's masculinity was somehow not quite right) to the current climate of critical debate in which the only point of agreement is that when we think of James and sexuality we can, often, profitably *chercher l'homme*. This book does not aim to articulate a queer James: my focus is on the structures of social identity which, though invariably bound up with the construction and experience of sexuality, can most usefully be thought of in terms of gender. Clearly this is nothing more than a pragmatic distinction; to quote Haralson, whose own work explores in depth the political function of the 'sex/gender regime', 'James's consistent and ever more subtly emphatic writing against what seems to be primarily norms of gender identification and enactment cannot help but assail norms of sexuality as well.'<sup>18</sup> My decision to leave open the question of the relations between feminine subject-positions and male homosexual desire may – I hope – enable a productive ambivalence in the reader at the same time as it honours James's own fertile equivocations.

This book is, among other things, an intervention in the increasingly sophisticated discussion of the gender politics of James's writing and the work of gender in the construction of Jamesian subjectivity (there is a useful ambiguity here – to which I turn later – which puts into question the boundaries between James 'himself', and his characters, and his texts). James has encountered some famously hostile readings in the past two decades by critics who have condemned various aspects of his on- and offpage dealings with women; the most influential of the inaugural attacks was Alfred Habegger's vilification in *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'* (1989). Habegger describes 'Henry James's appropriation, masterly and distorting, of American women's fiction', and while he may suggest that the focus of his attention will be 'the *interaction* between [James] and a whole insurgent culture of female writers', this quickly degrades to 'chronicl[ing] the *long war* that was fought . . . between him and the women', and builds to the assertion that 'James's fiction embodies a covert act of force directed against women'.<sup>19</sup> Habegger's sustained anger about the simultaneous exploitation and marginalisation of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87981-1 - Henry James, Women and Realism

Victoria Coulson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: ambivalent realism*

7

women's art and cultural experience stands as an honourable refutation of the proposition that men cannot be feminists. But the target of Habegger's critique is profoundly misjudged, and can be justified only through a critical deformation that leads to such tone-deaf claims as that *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881; 1908) engineers Goodwood's kiss to compel Isabel's return to Osmond, or that *The Bostonians* (1886) devotes itself to the recapture of Verena and her rendition to the heroic Ransom. Such readings repudiate the complexity and ambivalence of James's fictions, erasing the anguish and the solidarity that are persistently tangible at these scenes of feminine struggle and which make it possible to apprehend Verena's marital extinction as an implicit tragedy and Isabel's ostensible capitulation as almost her first act of strategic resistance after a lifetime of unconscious collaboration with the agents of her defeat.<sup>20</sup>

In marked contrast, some of the most attractive recent work on James has sought to emphasise the emotional and political possibilities of his writing. In her *Henry James and the Imagination of Pleasure* (2002), Tessa Hadley argues that it is James's 'erotically polymorphic' imagination that makes possible his 'deep and sympathetic treatment of women', while '[his] freedom from "definitional frames" of hetero- and homosexuality gives him [a] special purchase on the whole urgent business of gender definition and gender identity in his society'.<sup>21</sup> In a similarly optimistic vein, Jonathan Freedman suggests that James's fiction perceives the 'tragic ... entanglements of human intimacy' as open to transformation by virtue of their frailty: 'And that remaking, for James, is the utopian point of the exercise – one that projects the making of social value through and well beyond the nineteenth-century nuclear family ... and hence foreshadows new possibilities of relation whose lineaments we are only now beginning to discover.'<sup>22</sup> Yet as they honour the pleasures of the Jamesian text, construing a vision of James 'liberat[ing] himself to step over the boundaries ... into the open space outside' and of the 'utopian potential' of his fictional project,<sup>23</sup> these critics occlude the anxiety and violence in James's fictional world; they look away from the 'gleam of [the] bare blade' that 'passe[s] across [Maggie's] vision ten times a day' (*GB* 305), and close their ears to Charlotte's silent scream as she is led into exile by Adam, a cord looped around her beautiful neck. For James, and for his closest



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87981-1 - Henry James, Women and Realism

Victoria Coulson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

female friends, 'the elation of liberty and the pain of exclusion [are] indistinguishably mingled' (*PL* 24): inner marginality offers pleasure at a high price, and the political potential of their experience is both generated and constrained by their intimacy with the punitive effects of power.

This book proposes that James can best be understood as both subject to, and the compelling artist of, a potent ambivalence about the social authority of conservative gender patterns. Neither condemnation of James's 'elusive male authoritarianism',<sup>24</sup> which fails to engage with the resistant potential of cross-sex affiliations and imaginative community, nor overly utopian readings that wishfully underestimate the overbearing authority of culture, offer a sufficiently nuanced perspective on James from which to apprehend the psychological and aesthetic complexity of his work. '[I]t wouldn't be thinkable except as free and wouldn't be amusing except as controlled':<sup>25</sup> this is the bind in which ambivalent realism finds its generative force, its constrained and unquenchable energy. This book explores the imbrication of cultural boundaries and resistant subjectivity, reading the lives of Henry and Alice James, Constance Fenimore Woolson and Edith Wharton, as the subtle and restless testing of limits – as the creative process of negotiating with the cage. For these late nineteenth-century figures drew together not only in their shared uneasiness towards dominant patterns of gender identity – and, on James's part, a long imaginative affiliation with women – but also in their affinity for a certain form of textual representation, which I term 'ambivalent realism'.

'Ambivalent realism' is a mode of representation characterised by the productive equivocation of its semiotic structures; it is, therefore, especially hospitable to the expression and negotiation of ambivalence towards authority. The book examines these writers' idiosyncratic textual practices in relation to their social modes of being, to map out the structural kinship between contemporaneous forms of femininity and of realist representation. All four writers found in ambivalent realism a way of negotiating their muffled restiveness and self-division; their uncertain sense of failure and reprieve; their conflicting impulses towards complying with, and resisting, authority. Ambivalent realism is generated by, and covertly explores, the failures of ideology: the flaws and gaps in the texture of social consensus, the disjunctions between conscious conservatism and the lived experience of marginality.<sup>26</sup>



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87981-1 - Henry James, Women and Realism

Victoria Coulson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: ambivalent realism*

9

The ambivalent realists thus constitute a social, emotional and aesthetic community of interest, whose kinship stems from much more than mere geographic or social proximity. As academic perspectives change, it has become at once more thinkable to align James's work with that of others, and very much less acceptable to explore the work of Woolson or Wharton in relation to James's. Chapter 3 discusses in detail the traditional construction – within James studies – of Constance Fenimore Woolson as thwarted spinster admirer of the cavalier Henry: in reaction, Woolson specialists are understandably reluctant to cede James any more of the limelight, particularly if this means implying significant relationships between Woolson's literary work and his.<sup>27</sup> The notable exception is Lyndall Gordon's *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art* (1998), with which my work shares a foundational perception of the importance of women's experience to James's writing. Gordon reads James's life and work in the light of his relationships with Minny Temple and Constance Fenimore Woolson, to argue that James exploited his special capacity for intimacy with brilliant, marginal women in order to recreate real people as fictional characters. Having transmuted these vulnerable pioneers into icons of the Jamesian *imaginaire*, James turned his back on their real-life avatars, eluding their expectations of continuing emotional involvement. Gordon's book forms a major contribution to the biographical study of James, Temple and Woolson (indeed, it is the first extended account of Woolson's life); it is a *tour de force* of empathetic life-writing – imaginative, scrupulous and compelling. But Gordon's conviction of James's culpability leads her to a misreading of his relationship with Woolson, whom she perceives far too simply as a victim. While apprehending the *creative* importance of the Woolson-James relationship to each of its participants, *A Private Life of Henry James* does not recognise the psychological complexity of their intersubjective collaboration.

From a periodising perspective, the more unexpected inclusion here may be Edith Wharton, who is considered by much recent criticism to belong to the post-James generation of the early modernists – a perspective often aligned with the rescuing of Wharton from her traditional role as a semi-amateur sub-Jamesian whose work at its best offers an unsubtle reprise of the Master's. Millicent Bell deprecates the tradition of criticism in which Wharton's 'literary

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87981-1 - Henry James, Women and Realism

Victoria Coulson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

sophistication was often confused with a supposed resemblance of her art to that of the most sophisticated of American writers, Henry James', and argues instead that 'resemblances [are] less significant than the differences'.<sup>28</sup> There is a valuably corrective force in the view of Wharton as a writer working in the era of modernism whose later fictions engage thoughtfully with some of the characteristic preoccupations of the radical experimentalists of the 1920s and 1930s; but we lose an important sense of Wharton's distinctive cultural ambivalence if we elide either the traditionalism of her overt political commitments or the resilient circumspection of her textual dissent. Further, my decision to include Wharton with writers born twenty years before her is grounded in my sense of the powerful transitionality of the late nineteenth century, a period in which Victorian textual practices – as much as social forms – were uneasily breeding their own critiques. This book shares with Haralson's *Henry James and Queer Modernity* an animating perception of the significant links and connections between the most complex, questioning writers of the 1870s and 1880s, and the literature of the subsequent half-century; as Haralson writes of his chosen group (Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, James, and Gertrude Stein), '[w]hat differentiates the work of these American authors from most of their predecessors is their alert receptivity to [the] queerness . . . that modern life casts up: a receptivity – sometimes despite powerful internal resistance – . . . to modernity itself'.<sup>29</sup> With Haralson and with other recent revisionists,<sup>30</sup> I want to resist what Ann Ardis calls 'classic modernist "narratives of rupture"' <sup>31</sup> which imagine a violent birth for modernism from the repudiated body of nineteenth-century literary forms. This book implies rather that modernism has its roots, its auguries, its restless beginnings in the expatriate lives of the ambivalent realists and in their work, with its disavowable estrangement from the status quo; its anxious, alert apprehension of change; and its discovery of feminine experience as a synonym for the resisting self which would eventually issue in the liberation of the unconscious by modernism.

But while Haralson views James as an ambivalent prophet whose work could best begin to speak to a later generation of self-consciously 'modern' writers and subjects, I want to show that the textually mediated relationships between Alice and Henry James,