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Female Friendship: An Alternative to Marriage and the Family in Henry James's Fiction?

by CLARE R. GOLDFARB

THE AMERICAN FAMILY absorbed significant changes in the nineteenth century. As a man pursued his work further from home in an increasingly industrial society, a woman became central to the shaping of life within the home. Sociologist John Demos has written that the "'True Woman' became the centerpiece in a developing cult of Home" (52). Family life was distinct from the workplace; male and female each had a part to play in a system of interlocking parts, home and the workplace.

Even Charlotte Perkins Gilman, influential turn-of-the-century American feminist and relentless critic of the cult of domesticity, defended the sanctity of family life when she wrote that "the home should offer to the individual rest, peace, quiet, comfort, health. . . . The home should be to the child a place of happiness and true development; to the adult a place of happiness and that beautiful reinforcement of the spirit needed by the world's workers" (3).

Unfortunately, the division between the world of work and the world of home was rarely that neat. The idyllic scenes at the fireside of Louisa May Alcott's March family did not necessarily reflect the scenes at real-life Victorian hearths. Not every woman was content to be an "angel in the house."¹ The nineteenth-century family was no utopia, but the mythos of Victorian domesticity was persistent, and it was widespread.

Those women who found homelife confining and unsatisfactory could opt for a single life; they could also find satisfaction in their friendships with women. In a recent article Carole Lasser discusses the female friendships which absorbed the energies of many women in the nineteenth century. "Traditions of solidarity based on common events in the female life cycle and similar task assignments on farms and in households underlay a profound sense of connections among women" (160). These networks often extended beyond family to friends.²

Were such powerful friendships homosocial, or were they homoerotic?

1. For discussion of the "angel in the house," see, e.g., Carol Christ, "Victorian Masculinity and the Angel in the House," *A Widening Sphere*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 146–62.

2. For some contrast in points of view on female friendships, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1, No. 1 (1975), 1–29; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1977); Blanche Wiesen Cook, "Women Alone Stir My Imagination: Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition," *Signs*, 4, No. 4 (Summer 1979): 718–39.

Contemporary scholars argue about the degree of sexuality in such relationships, and conclusions, of course, differ widely from writer to writer. In *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, Lillian Faderman argues that in the nineteenth century, and for centuries before that time, emotional and sensual exchanges between women were a common form of affectional expression" (177). But Anna Mary Wells is on the side of those who would rationalize those passionately sexual overtones in correspondence, journals, and diaries written by women to their beloved friends.³ Rather than continue the argument here, I would argue for the variety of relationships within the overall topic of female friendship; the homosocial model applied to many friendships, but certainly erotic impulses characterized others.

* * *

MAJOR American writers of the nineteenth century portrayed marriage and the complex relationships between men and women, and some writers examined alternatives to the institution which was so often found wanting within the pages of their novels and tales. The male bonding of Huck Finn and Jim served as a model relationship and an escape from a world dominated by "civilization." But few of those writers commonly included in the traditional canon of American literature examined female bonding, female friendship. Henry James is one of those major figures who did consider female friendship as an alternative to married life.

James rarely depicts happy and successful marriage in his novels and tales. Given a choice, many of his characters renounce married life and choose to be single. Lambert Strether's renunciation in *The Ambassadors* is archetypal. He leaves Paris at the end of the novel, ready to live a life which he has chosen for himself. Wiser and sadder than he was at the beginning of the novel, Strether accepts bachelorhood.

Acceptance of spinsterhood also occurs in the pages of James's fiction. In *Woman and the Demon*, when Nina Auerbach discusses the figure of the spinster as portrayed in Victorian literary, biographical, and autobiographical works, she might well have included Catherine Sloper of Henry James's "Washington Square" among her examples. Professor Auerbach defines a myth which worked subversively in the age, a myth in which "the old maid transcends the laughter and tears with which cultural complacency endows her to 'establish her own landmarks' with the audacity and aplomb of an authentic hero" (Auerbach, 112). At the end of the tale, Catherine dismisses Morris Townsend and settles for a comfortable spinsterhood in her comfortable Washington Square home. Catherine might even take the time to read and agree with an unlikely ally, Victorian feminist and philanthropist Frances Power Cobbe, who wrote in an essay titled "Celibacy V. Marriage" that

3. See *Miss Marks and Miss Woolley* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1978) as well as Lasser, p. 162.

if a woman have but strength to make up her mind to a single life, she is enabled by nature to be far more independently happy therein than a man in the same position. A man be he rich or poor, who returns at night to a home adorned by no woman's presence and domestic cares, is at best dreary and uncomfortable. But a woman makes her home for herself, and surrounds herself with the atmosphere of taste and the little details of housewifely comforts. (qtd. in Auerbach, 145)

In her middle age Catherine gains a victory over her faithless suitor as well as over her cruel father. She is aware that the "great facts of her career were that Morris Townsend had trifled with her affection, and that her father had broken its spring" (200). Male figures have created the void in Catherine's life, a void she fills up with a quiet life of her own. Refusing to become a Miss Havisham shut up with a decaying wedding cake in a decaying house, Catherine goes out into society and gains the affection of young men and women as "a kind of maiden aunt" (206). She transforms the male-dominated preserve of Washington Square into a female one. Having played the role of daughter and niece and renounced the roles of wife and mother, she becomes neither a man-hater bent on revenge nor a "demon mother" like Miss Havisham who "has the power to lay waste the younger generation, remaking the future in her own deformed image" (Auerbach, 114).

Unlike another James female, Claire de Cintré of *The American*, Catherine Sloper has neither renounced humanity nor elected life in a nunnery. As Soeur Catherine, Claire de Cintré will spend her life among women, surrogate sisters in the Carmelite convent. The two Catherine's seem very different, but each has chosen her own lifestyle, and each is an example of female survival in a world dominated by traditional family lifestyles. The life of a spinster or of a nun was an alternative to that more acceptable role of "angel in the house."

* * *

THERE were other possibilities. Jamesian females develop relationships that present both positive and negative models of social interaction. From his earliest work through his major phase, female relationships provided James with numerous opportunities to consider models of kinship other than marriage. In his earliest novel, *Watch and Ward*, Mrs. Keith becomes a fairy godmother to a sensitive and romantic young girl, and in *The Portrait of a Lady* Lydia Touchett repeats that fairy godmother role. *The Portrait of a Lady* contains bleak examples of family life; it also contains several same-sex relationships which are strong and positive. The friendship between Henrietta Stackpole and Isabel as well as between Pansy Osmond and Isabel are two such sustaining relationships.

"The female friendship of the nineteenth century, the long-lived, intimate, loving friendship between two women, is an excellent example of the type of historical phenomena which most historians know something about, which few have thought much about, and which virtually no one has written about" (Smith-Rosenberg, 2). Since 1975, the date of Smith-Rosenberg's ground-breaking work, researchers have added articles, papers, and books to the bibliographies on

relationships among and between women.⁴ Although different points of view emerge, Smith-Rosenberg's overview of the relationships as ranging "from the supportive love of sisters, through the enthusiasms of adolescent girls, to sensual avowals by mature women" (2) remains sound. For too many years historians may have ignored female friendships as a socio-cultural aspect of American society, but Henry James paid a great deal of attention to the subject both in his fiction and in his personal life.

Critic Jean Strouse writes that James was uneasy over the friendship between his sister Alice and her companion Katharine Loring, a friendship that for him was perhaps too sensual an avowal by mature women. For James it was a friendship "as complete as any between women that he had ever known" (Strouse, 248). Lillian Faderman finds no uneasiness in James's feelings about his sister's friendship; in fact, Faderman writes that "as he got to know Katharine well, James became more and more grateful for her relationship with Alice" (196). However a reader judges James's attitude, that same reader has no room for equivocating about Alice's feelings. For Alice James, friendship with Katharine was a cherished bond. She spent the year before her death with her constant companion, Katharine, and called it "the happiest I have ever known" (quoted in Faderman, 196).

When James drew the friendship between Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant in *The Bostonians*, "one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England," (*Notebooks*, 19), he might have been drawing upon observations of his sister's attachment to Katharine. It is difficult to find overt disapproval of that relationship in James's autobiographical writing, but critics of *The Bostonians*, including F. W. Dupee and Louis Auchincloss, find that the friendship between Olive and Verena is perverse and redolent with sexual overtones. Such readers neither consider the complete novel with its depictions of failed and unhappy heterosexual relationships nor its final prediction of unhappiness for Verena as the wife of Basil Ransom.

Faced with that bleak future, Verena may look back to her friendship with Olive for memories which include creature comforts as well as the broadening of her intellectual horizons. As for the orphaned Olive Chancellor, friendship with Verena provides a kinship bond she will never have with a male. But neither woman succeeds in achieving what she wants from the relationship. Despite her money and her beautiful home with its well-arranged interior, Olive can only offer Verena what William R. Taylor and Christopher Lasch call "an ideal of pure friendship based on a shared sensitivity" (31).

When Olive buys Verena from her itinerant parents, an arrangement reminiscent of a contractual marriage, she offers as her motive that "shared sensitivity" to women's rights. Although reform may provide the ideological setting for that friendship, Olive's cozy fireplace and perfectly served dinners give Verena a setting in which she develops a sense of well-being she cherishes, and for a time

4. See, e.g., "'Let Us Be Sisters Forever': The Sororal Model of Nineteenth-Century Female Friendship," *Signs*, 14 (Autumn 1988), 158-81; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977).

the friends inhabit a world where they seem to work together for a common goal. Together the two nineteenth-century women, neither with real status or power in the larger world of male concerns, try to “possess status and power in the lives and worlds of other women” (Smith-Rosenberg, 14).

In the world outside the fictional creation of Henry James, a “Boston marriage” was not uncommon. That term, which describes the relationship between Olive and Verena, described a “long-term monogamous relationship between two otherwise unmarried women” (Faderman, 190). Such women were usually feminists, independent of men, and involved with working toward some goal of social amelioration. In her discussion of the Boston marriage, Faderman says that we do not know if such relationships included sex, only that such women generally spent their lives with other women, and thus the “bulk of their energy and attention” was spent on other women (190).

Despite the luxuries of the Back Bay, the world of women James portrays in *The Bostonians* is not an appealing one. With characters such as Mrs. Farrinder, the opportunistic lecturer; Miss Birdseye, the sympathetic but ineffectual reformer; and Mary Prance, the sexless, highly critical doctor who thinks very little of the ideology shouted at her, the female society of *The Bostonians* is dreary and narrow.

Verena eventually exchanges that world for a heterosexual relationship, abandoning Olive for Basil Ransom and forfeiting friendship as well as a future promise of status and power. There are no sureties in her future with a struggling lawyer, and there will probably never be a comfortable parlor resembling Olive’s. As Basil takes Verena away from Olive on the evening of the speech that is to launch her career, Verena is in tears. The final sentence of the novel belongs to James. “It is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these were not the last she was destined to shed.”

There is no happy ending to *The Bostonians*. Verena and Basil have distinctly different outlooks on many things, including friendship. For Basil female friendship is abhorrent and nothing more than an obstacle to his marriage. To Verena, although friendship has provided ideals and a comfortable alternative to her shabby family life, it cannot hold out against the alternative of heterosexual love and marriage. And so an unpromising marriage displaces friendship and sisterhood in *The Bostonians*.

Friendship as a substitute form of family life does not work in *The Bostonians*, but in other novels a friend may serve another function, that of a role model. For James’s heroines, however, such role models often prove unworthy. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer and Lydia Touchett discover that Serena Merle has been a treacherous friend with whom a lasting relationship is impossible. Wanting to resemble another person is not the way to develop an individual’s soul or heart. Uncritical admiration and blind trust in a friend may prove disastrous.

For a later set of friends, Christina Light, heroine of *The Princess Casamassima*, and the aristocratic Lady Aurora, friendship seems more promising. Friendship for these two may present an alternative to their unhappy family lives,

and each one sees the other as a role model. Lady Aurora is an ideal of charity for the Princess who longs to attain what Carole Lasser has identified as a third level of sisterhood, the public level of working together toward a common goal. "Sharing a vision and looking to each other for support in their often unpopular positions, activist women found kin terms particularly apt" (165). But for Christina Light the foray into a sororal relationship is only another phase in her lifelong attempt to escape *ennui*.

The women in *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima* experiment with alternatives to traditional kinship bonds, for James presents no satisfactory marriage and no complete family unit in either book. He also shows no character who finds fulfillment in friendship. And yet friendship between women who have the ability to examine their lives may be an enlightening experience, and friendship may provide some shelter from an often hostile society.

In *The Spoils of Poynton* Mrs. Gareth and Fleda Vetch are alike in their sensitivity to art and to people. And, despite her dispossession from Poynton, Mrs. Gareth lives in a beautiful little house and offers Fleda a refuge from her father's shabby West Kensington flat with its "old brandy flasks and match-boxes, old calendars and hand-books, intermixed with an assortment of penwipers and ashtrays, a harvest gathered in from penny bazaars" (5: 145). Although Mrs. Gareth's lovely home is no substitute for what Fleda would prefer, namely Mrs. Gareth's son, that home remains her only alternative at the end of the novel.

Like Fleda Vetch, the unnamed girl who works "In the Cage" is sensitive, intelligent, and outside the great world of marriages to desirable men. Before she chooses to enter a commonplace future with a grocer, aptly named Mr. Mudge, the girl shares her imaginative and romantic dreams with a widowed friend.

The two women join in a sisterhood of recognition, a recognition of their "shared femaleness" (Lasser, 164). For the girl and for Mrs. Jordan, as well as for Fleda Vetch and for Mrs. Gareth, the future is bleak. For them friendship is, or has been, a momentary stay against the reality of a world without love, a world without imagination, for women who possess insight and sensitivity but who lack the means to enter the society they think is the "great" world. James draws relationships between women based on their heightened awareness to aesthetics and to social experiences. He also tries to keep such women, those on whom "nothing is lost," away from marriage even when they are in love. For the marriage bond traps the imaginative woman; witness Isabel Archer returned to Rome at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady* and Verena Tarrant thrust tearfully into her cape by her future husband.

Marriage remains a dubious condition at best for James's heroines of the major phase. Milly Theale and Kate Croy of *The Wings of the Dove* and Maggie Verver and Charlotte Stant of *The Golden Bowl* nevertheless prefer that institution to female friendship. Each of the four women is passionately in love with a man. Milly and Maggie also cherish their female friends, but James does not allow friendship to develop either as an alternative or as recompense for an unhappy relationship. In *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, he depicted female friendship as dangerous, if not potentially tragic, for his

heroines. Both Milly Theale and Maggie Verver are betrayed by women who use friendship for their own purposes. If a show of friendship will further their own affairs with the men they love, then both Kate Croy and Charlotte Stant are willing to make such a show. For both Kate and Charlotte, the men they love take precedence over the friends they profess to cherish.

* * *

FINALLY then James explored the possibilities of alternatives to traditional family life and rejected the notion of female bonding, the possibility of an enriching relationship among women. Not for him "a female world of varied and yet highly structured relationships [which] appears to have been an essential aspect of American society" (Smith-Rosenberg, 1–2). James does not allow his female characters to affirm a sororal bond, nor does he allow friendship to compensate for the myriad unsatisfactory heterosexual relationships he depicts in his works. If there is implicit sexuality in Olive's friendship for Verena in *The Bostonians*, there is explicit sexuality in Basil's feelings for her, and it is to Basil that Verena finally succumbs. Although there appears to be only unhappiness ahead for his pallid heroine, James seems to prefer the unsuccessful struggle to be the "angel in the house" to the empowering support of a female friend. The most satisfying life for a Jamesian heroine may lie ahead for Catherine Sloper who has survived and defined her life outside of marriage, outside a "highly structured relationship" to another human being, male or female. However central sororal relationships were to nineteenth-century women, for Henry James friendship was not a viable alternative to the Victorian cult of domesticity.

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