HENRY JAMES
THE EARLY SHORT FICTION

In Henry James's first marriage story, "A Tragedy of Error" (1864)—which is also his first story—a faithless wife tries vainly to have her unsuspecting husband murdered; in his last, "Mora Montravers" (1909), a plodding, ineffectual fellow attempts futilely to brighten his loveless marriage by idealizing and sharing vicariously in the romantic misadventures of his shallow, even morally questionable, niece. Not only is neither story likely to make readers any more eager to rush to the nuptial altar than was their creator, but neither, as well, differs significantly from the great majority of the many portrayals of marriage James presented in the forty-five years between these two works. For James marriage was invariably a relationship with an inordinately high potential for conflict, confusion, and the disillusionment that can forever blight a life. That it should be so for him is not surprising, for marriage inevitably is shaped by, and inextricably bound up in, the world of conventional experience, a world that James himself regarded with suspicion and that his protagonists for whom he cared most come to see as providing the invaluable materials for the forging of a personal moral vision but nonetheless as a realm, finally, in which they cannot live. Peter Brooks's contention that "from the very beginning" James was attempting to delineate "dilemmas of moral consciousness" involving "meanings that could not be grounded and justified, either in any known system of manners or in any visible and universally accepted code of moral imperatives" points up that James was indeed, in Jacques Barzun's words, going "back over the realists' heads, to the romanticists, whom he wished to purge and renovate." James, then, by the very nature of his endeavor to define a moral vision not grounded in conventional experience—in fact, one transcending and even inimical to it—
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would not be likely to contemplate marriage with anything approaching the enthusiasm that a Howells tried with varying success to maintain.

But suspicion, predominant as it is, is only one side of James’s response to marriage; and to see this response in its totality, one might begin by recurring to Barzun’s thesis that James in going back to the romanticists hoped to “purge and renovate” them. Clearly, what such a process involved for James was an effort to follow the romantic course of establishing a personal moral vision with oneself as the sole arbiter of its validity without falling into the error, lurking for romantics, of losing all ties to the quotidian. To avoid such error, James was aware, one must know the world, frightening as it is, and never forget either its reality or its grimness. That James never did forget the reality of pain is evidenced in what he himself called his “imagination of disaster,” which is rarely far removed from any work of note he ever created. Perhaps the most striking description of just how stark a perception of the bleakness in existence James did maintain is in Theodora Bosanquet’s comment on what her employer perceived when “he walked out of the refuge of his study.” There, she notes, he observed unflinchingly “a place of torment, where creatures of prey perpetually thrust their claws into the quivering flesh of the doomed, defenseless children of light.” Frightening as he saw the world to be, though, James believed that one comes to moral growth through contact with it rather than avoidance of it. More, his works reveal his conviction that the movement through interaction with the world to moral development is not simply a linear one in which, finally, all significant contact with experience is left behind. Rather, he held, a valid moral awareness is maintained by remaining in nourishing contact with the perilous world of experience. One must be, then, in a condition akin to Whitman’s stance in *Song of Myself*, being “both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.” Thus, one notes the ambivalence toward experience that makes for a major tension in all of James’s fiction, a tension that is felt with particular keenness in the marriage stories; for if there was one area of experience that aroused particu-
larly strong feelings of ambivalence in James, it was the dealings of husbands and wives.

That the latter should be the case is eminently understandable, for with the intimacy it establishes, marriage brings one into perhaps a closer contact with the world outside oneself than one usually finds with any other human relation. Consequently, the possibilities both for pain and growth that are inherent in any confrontation with experience are increased multifold, a fact that may account for James's description of marriage in *The Portrait of a Lady* as a "form" that is both "ghastly" and "magnificent." Given James's view of the human capacity for evil and folly, the sort of difficulties he envisioned as endemic to marriage are not hard to imagine. Clearly, the predatory selfishness of some and the pathetic vulnerability of others frequently grow when the selfish and the vulnerable become increasingly enmeshed in experience, especially in a relationship that demands as much of limited beings as marriage inevitably does. Somewhat less obvious, but no less real for James, are the opportunities—opportunities, of necessity, intimately linked with pain—that he believed marriage offers. These derive from the fact that marriage, as James saw it, by generating for the married person a confrontation with experience outside the self ultimately can generate an enormously significant confrontation with self. As Robert Seidenberg has pointed out, one can be forced to find very quickly how tolerant, how generous, how unselfish, how brilliant, one really is. He asserts, "Only in marriage is one likely to experience . . . day-in-day-out confrontation with oneself through another, and it is this unavoidable confrontation that makes all the difference," a difference possibly destructive of "illusions about self-importance, courage, honesty, integrity, and generosity," and, hence, to one with James's moral concerns, of surpassing significance.

In a letter to Grace Norton, James once stated, "One's attitude toward marriage is a fact—the most characteristic part doubtless of one's general attitude toward life." He could say this, of course, because he knew marriage is experience—life—writ large. Because he was aware of how painful expe-
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rience, how painful life, could be, he added to Norton, "If I were to marry I should be guilty in my own eyes of inconsist-
tency—I should pretend to think quite a little better of life than I really do." Nonetheless, he also declared, in a letter to his brother William congratulating him on his engagement, "I believe almost as much in matrimony for most other peo-
ple as I believe in it little for myself." This is apparently a manifesta-
tion of his awareness that though he felt unsuited personally for marriage and was cognizant of the limitations of human nature, he saw in the confrontations of matrimony exceptional opportunity for union not merely between two persons but between the individual and the world, a vital communion, in other words, between the self and all outside it in which is attained nothing less than a transcendent love that can redeem a life. Since the stakes are thus so high and the odds against victory so great, the rare marriages in James's fiction that result in this redemptive vision for one or both partners make for perhaps the most striking affirmations in his work, and the rest of the marriages often rank among the most poignant and painful losses he delineates. Indeed, James's attitude toward marriage, then, is revelatory of his most characteristic attitude toward life. Like the mar-
riages that evidence its central facts with singular vividness, life as James saw it is steeped in defeat yet worth the living because of the possibility of attaining a triumph of surpassing beauty.

Though there are no clearly marked stages in the develop-
ment of James's view of marriage, for his conception of it as an almost invariably bleak experience that is never entirely devoid of potential value for a sentient few is maintained consistently throughout his career, the marriage fiction be-
fore 1881 and The Portrait of a Lady is marked by blatant, even lurid, qualities of melodrama that largely disappear from his subsequent depictions of wedded life. That James would resort to melodrama at all in depicting an aspect of ex-
istence as inherently tied to the commonplace as is marriage is significant in itself. It reveals, obviously, how pervaded by menace he felt matrimony to be, but it shows something else
of import too, as Peter Brooks notes. “Melodrama,” he as­
serts, “starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a
frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of
moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue.” He
goes on to point out that the mode, however, “demonstrates
over and over that the signs of ethical forces can be discov­
ered and can be made legible” and that it “strives to find, to
articulate, to demonstrate, to ‘prove’ the existence of a moral
universe which, though put into question, masked by villainy
and perversions of judgment, does exist and can be made to
assert its presence and its categorical force among men.”
Though for James, early and late, “proof” of a moral universe
would always be exceedingly hard to come by, the effort to
define a highly personal moral vision that might be used in
adducing a transcendent ground for ethical behavior was
nonetheless not to be evaded. Thus, he turned to melodrama
to convey implicity just how arduous the pursuit of value and
how frightening the confrontation of good and evil are in a
seemingly disordered universe. The very blatancy with
which the melodrama of the pre-1881 stories is conveyed
therefore becomes symptomatic not merely of the heavy­
handedness of the apprentice author but of the vehemence
of his concern that marriage, one of the “traditional patterns
of moral order” of which Brooks speaks, was, even more than
other such patterns, perhaps, failing to “provide the neces­
sary social glue.”

What the early marriage stories also clue one to is that the
melodramatic persists in James’s marriage fiction after 1881,
albeit in a much more subtle manner, one frequently involv­
ing internalization of modes of melodramatic behavior and
conflict rather than overt manifestations of them. James’s
penchant for melodrama is, of course, evident in many of his
works both before and after 1881 having little to do with
marriage, and almost invariably his handling of the genre re­
lects his commitment to those concerns out of which, as
Brooks notes, the genre developed. However, it is in the mar­
riage stories that the arduous pursuit of value takes on es­
pecial significance and poignance. Again, this doubtless
manifests that the intimacy in marriage makes the potential
failures and triumphs inherent in the relationship exceedingly intense ones.

Further, the pre-1881 stories make clear early in James's career that, characterize marriage though he does in *The Portrait of a Lady* as both "ghastly" and "magnificent," the latter aspect of matrimony would be exceedingly rare in James's fiction. The few genuinely pleasant marriages in his work—those, for example, of the Freers in "Lady Barberina" (1884) and the Assinghams in *The Golden Bowl* (1904)—are marked by qualities of affectionate accommodation that James, like Howells, might find admirable but that clearly fall short for James, finally, of the moral grandeur that, because it is attainable in marriage, makes the institution "magnificent." This is especially evident in those pre-1881 marriage works in which James's use of such marriages in shaping apparently affirmative conclusions is so unconvincing as to call his intentions into question. That "magnificent" marriages would be even rarer in his works than the merely happy ones is again obvious from the tenor of James's pre-1881 marriage fiction. But, oddly enough, though both the blatancy of his melodrama in this period and the paucity of sufficiently sentient protagonists work with his predominant use of the short story form for his depictions of marriage to preclude the possibility of any sort of magnificence such as Isabel Archer and Maggie Verver attain through their extended confrontations with the consequences of their singular marriages, adumbrations of their victories are evident even in the early works. However, evident as they may be, the prevalent note in the pre-1881 marriage fiction is one of ghastliness, as it would be for the remainder of James's career, to be relieved only occasionally in the works to come by a few, generally uncompelling, pleasant marriages and two darkly triumphant ones.

Of course, just as melodrama is not restricted by James merely to his marriage fiction, neither is the ghastliness that he observed in life. Stark conflicts of will, innocence (often innocence culpable in its ignorance and egotism) preyed upon by the experienced, children suffering because of the cruelty and stupidity of adults, art in mortal conflict with philistin-
ism, love in conflict with lust, liberty in conflict with confinement—these obviously are the staples of all of James's significant work, not just of his marriage fiction. However, in the stories of wedded life, they are presented with a power that is, if not greater than in the fiction not involving marriage, at least different in kind, marked, as I have noted, by a peculiar intensity. That intensity is doubtless more marked in the marriage works of 1881 and beyond, but it is there early as well; and to appreciate the greatness of the later marriage fiction, it is useful to begin by observing its origins in the earlier, which, for all its imperfections, reveals some small successes even at the start.

"A lurid and fanciful melodrama," as one commentator has called it,14 "A Tragedy of Error" is not a terribly auspicious beginning for James's marriage works or for his fiction generally. The tale of a French adulteress who hires a cutthroat boatman to drown her loving husband, only to have her plan miscarry when the villain, mistaking her lover for his prey, kills him instead, has all the earmarks of apprentice work. Overly predictable, one-dimensional in its characterizations, unvaryingly lurid in tone, the story is an undeniably tedious one. But, for all this, there are two aspects of the work that are relatively effective, both bearing on James's ambivalent response to marriage. By establishing economically and graphically, first, just how dark, frightening and disordered the realm of experience can be and then implicitly both linking marriage to it and showing how a violated marriage merely exacerbates the chaos, James imparts to "A Tragedy of Error" a thematic significance that transcends the imperfections of the work and an intensity that, though not enough to offset the banality of much in the story, redeems it from total failure.

James's metaphor for the terror of experience in "A Tragedy of Error" is the sea. The woman's lover declares in a statement that is contradicted by nothing that occurs in the tale that life is essentially a situation in which "we are all afloat on a tumultuous sea . . . struggling toward some terra firma of wealth or love or leisure."15 The cutthroat boatman, formerly a sailor, is one who, having ranged far literally and
figuratively over the seas of experience, can tell many a tale capable of confirming the lover's dark vision. The world he knows, one in which a man might "drive a knife up to the hilt into your back, with an oath, and slice open a melon with it, with a song, five minutes afterward" (1:37), is one touched by a palpable evil of which James would never doubt the reality.

Marriage, rather than being somehow inviolate and isolated from this realm of experience tied metaphorically to the sea, is intimately linked with it, as James establishes in several ways. First, of course, the faithless wife lives in a home overlooking the sea. Further, her choice of a boatman to do the killing of her husband, her plan that the murder be by drowning, and James's presentation of her literally in a boat scheming with the hired killer all serve to point up that marriage is inextricably bound up in experience, partaking of all its menace. Finally, the boatman's contemptuous reply, when asked by the wife if he is married, "No, I thank you. I'm not cursed with that blessing" (1:34) conveys the inescapable impression that in his various excursions into the darkest reaches of experience he has seen enough of marriage to make the relationship seem a singularly appalling one. Nowhere, then, does James present any reason, as Howells attempts to, for believing that marriage offers something better than experience at large or that, in fact, it is not part and parcel of experience itself.

James does point up vividly, however, that a violated marriage only aggravates the disorder and menace that experience is. Thus, in debasing and seeking to destroy her marriage, the wife here not only becomes a plotter with a low-life villain but, in effect, his equal. The narrator comments darkly, "You cannot touch upon certain subjects with an inferior but by the sacrifice of the barrier which separates you from him. There are thoughts and feelings and glimpses and foreshadowings of thoughts which level all inequalities of station" (1:40). That she has indeed become his equal is rendered graphically when the boatman (certainly no subtle villain) grabs a jug of milk away from his young nephew, down it, and when told it was for an infant in the family, mutters,
"I wish the baby'd choke" (1:31). His abrogation of familial ties and responsibilities obviously parallels the wife's and links her with him in a realm of utter formlessness and chaos. Typifying this condition further is the wife's vulnerability to the gossip of her spying servants. Their delighted chatter of her name being bandied about in the streets, their excited accounts of her gulping "brandy by the glassful" (1:28) as she becomes increasingly agitated at the prospect of the impending return of her long-absent and unsuspecting spouse, all reveal a social order gone topsy-turvy, with servant elevated over employer. Finally, even the mistaken identity murder itself, with all of its implications of randomness and gratuitous horror, emphasizes the aggravation of the confusion in an already chaotic world that occurs when marital commitments are violated.

"A Tragedy of Error," then, is no paean to marriage. Not only does the central situation itself here make it impossible to see marriage as other than frightening, but the conclusion, when the shocked wife sees a figure emerge from the distance and (her husband being lame) "come limping toward her with outstretched arms" (1:47), drives home the horror with a terribly effectual final turn of the screw. His damaged leg, at once a reminder on James's part of the vulnerability of one mate to another and of the possibly unpleasant physical intimacy that marriage involves, makes the limping figure both pathetic and threatening, an all too accurate embodiment of a fragile relationship too rarely sustaining and ordering and yet one from which it is disastrous to seek escape. As the latter point reveals, therefore, "A Tragedy of Error," although not a paean to matrimony, is not a single-minded rejection of it. By establishing with some vividness and even subtlety the menace of marriage as inextricably part of a menacing world and, as well, the inherent dangers of leaving the relationship, James reveals the complexity of his response to matrimony, a complexity that is inevitably a feature of the many marriage works to come.

James's next two marriage stories, "My Friend Bingham" (1867) and "A Problem" (1868), ostensibly at least, present marriage in far more affirmative terms than does "A Tragedy
of Error." In them marriage seems a means of reconciling conflicts, assuaging sorrows, and either initiating growth of character or signifying that it has taken place. In each a melodramatic tale involving the death of a child and the weakness of adults is brought to an apparently happy conclusion through the healing offices of marriage. But, as a brief look at both reveals, there is much in them that undercuts the seeming affirmations of the virtues of matrimony, much that makes the marriages presented seem little better than that delineated in the earlier story. Ultimately, indeed, the endings of these two stories strike one as sufficiently suspect to make one question James's intentions. He may be attempting consciously to show with more than a little irony that typically "happy" marriages can exist only if human failings and the terrors of existence are glossed over or blithely ignored. On the other hand, these stories may, in fact, present a situation in which either James's shortcomings as a youthful author or his deeply rooted misgivings about the benefits to be derived from seemingly pleasant marriages lead him to undercut inadvertently his own conclusions. Another possibility, finally, is that James, though still a relatively unsophisticated writer at this stage of his career, fully intends that these stories be ambiguous ones, thereby calling into question the implicit case for marriage with which each closes. Unfortunately, neither story gives one enough to go on to resolve the question of James's intentions with any degree of certainty. Whether he means them to be or not, consequently, the tales are not without their ambiguities, and the affirmative visions of marriage in them are not entirely convincing.

Viewed from one angle, "My Friend Bingham" does actually seem to be a story in which the title character's moral growth is linked to the marriage he makes. At the outset of the tale, Bingham is apparently one bent on going through life without significant involvement or commitment. His having "forsworn marriage" after being jilted, his "fastidiousness of mind" and "formalism of manner" are all cited as betokening that he is "one who has not been obliged to address himself to practical questions" (1:168) and who, pre-
sumably, is well pleased that he has not been. All this seems
to change, however, when, walking along the shore one day
and hunting aquatic birds, Bingham accidentally shoots and
kills the only child of a young widow. Before long his sym-
pathy for the woman turns to admiration of her quiet cour-
age and strength of character, and this, in turn, leads to love,
mARRIAGE, and the development of a Bingham less inclined to
superficiality. Nothing mars the couple’s subsequent happi-
ness, not even the fact, which the narrator, Bingham’s friend,
attributes to a “fantastic principle of equity,” that Bingham’s
wife “has never again become a mother” (1:190). When last
seen, Bingham, in the final words of the story, is described as
a “truly incorruptible soul,” a “confirmed philosopher,” and,
lastly, as one who “has grown quite stout” (1:190). Thus,
from the angle of vision at which we are presently regarding
it, “My Friend Bingham” seems to delineate a sort of Emersonian system of compensation, with marriage here providing
the reward. Horror, then, is real; but within it, so the story appears to suggest, lie the seeds of solace and spiritual
growth. By precipitating suffering and not seeking to evade
the consequences of his action, by, in fact, wedding the grieving mother and entering into extended involvement with her sorrow, Bingham matures. No longer is he an uncommitted
or “light” man; even his new stoutness seems to bespeak an
increase in his substantiality. Marriage, hence, from this almost Howellsian perspective, is seen to provide solace in a
difficult world as well as a means of both fostering and signifying moral growth.

But, as I have noted, there is a good deal in “My Friend Bingham” which shows that the work may be something
quite different from the story just limned, that it may indeed
be a troubling account of human shallowness as not the least
frightening aspect of a world replete with inexplicable hor-
ror. Seen from this perspective, there is no compensation,
only loss, and there is no growth on Bingham’s part, only the
too quick accommodation to things as they are of a man who
is irremediably insubstantial. Clearly, even the narrator him-
self (perhaps speaking for James) has doubts over how the
story is to be taken, suggesting at the outset of his account
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that he has often asked himself “whether in the events here set forth, the element of pain is stronger than that of joy.” He avers that “an affirmative answer . . . would have stood as a veto upon the publication of my story for . . . the literature of horrors needs no extension.” On the other hand, though, he notes that he hesitates to “assume the responsibility of a decided negative” and has “therefore determined to leave the solution to the reader” (1:165).

Should the reader wish to, he would have little trouble in reaching the “affirmative answer” that the speaker suggests would shift this tale into the realm of the “literature of horrors,” for James gives one more than ample opportunity to do so. One has difficulty, for example, in accepting the notion that any marriage can palliate or offset significantly the horror of the child’s death, which is made all the more terrible to contemplate by the circumstances surrounding it. These include, first, a setting in which all pleasant views are “so completely obstructed by the rank, coarse herbage, that [the] prospect was reduced to a long narrow band of deep blue ocean traversing its black fibres, and to the great vault of the sky” (1:169); second, an awful coincidence in that Bingham fires just as the narrator is reciting the lines in which Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner declares that he shot the albatross with his crossbow; and last, the pathetic behavior of the child at the moment of the shooting, as, suddenly rising up with “his little hands extended and his face raised toward the retreating bird,” he takes the shot directly in the head and throws his hands back to it, reeling “downwards out of sight” (1:172). The resultant impression here of a universe in which weird, inexplicable disaster is all too common makes Bingham’s subsequent behavior and marriage seem something less than the response of a deeply feeling individual. Certainly, Bingham’s initial outpouring of grief is short-lived, and it is not long before he is eating voraciously and seeing in the immensity of the nighttime sky something reassuring, “a sight for bereaved mothers.” He asserts to the narrator as he looks at it, “Somehow, my dear boy, I never felt less depressed in my life. It’s none of my doing” (1:178). The distances between stars, then, the desert places without, open in him no sense
of corresponding desert places within. Instead, they simply lead him, apparently, to the comfortable conclusion that nothing matters enough ultimately to warrant one's taking things, even the death of a child, too seriously. Viewed from this angle, then, Bingham's ostensibly happy marriage to the mother of the deceased boy, a marriage that for many men in his situation might be an intolerable, constant reminder of that hideous moment on the beach, becomes an indicant not of moral and spiritual growth but of a lack of human responsiveness. Similarly, his increased stoutness and his "incorruptibility" might be construed as signs of an imperviousness to spiritual and emotional torment and a sinister capacity for thriving in the midst of suffering, and the reference to his being "a confirmed philosopher" only an ironic comment on his propensity for suppressing any incipient stirrings of personal guilt, personal feelings.

The marriage of such a man as is revealed when the story is read from this second vantage point would presumably serve no worthwhile purpose as far as James is concerned. Rather than enabling him to grow through providing a realm of both valuable experience and solace, marriage in this case would serve merely as a means by which an inveterately shallow man avoids a useful confrontation with himself. In the context of this reading of the tale, the childlessness of the Binghams is less a sign that some finally equitable system of compensation is at work (or a means by which James prevents an affirmative ending from being saccharine) than it is merely one more inexplicably unpleasant event in a universe pervaded by inexplicable unpleasantness.

Whether it is by design that "My Friend Bingham" lends itself to such diametrically opposed readings is, as I have noted, impossible to ascertain. Suffice it to say, whatever James's intentions, his seeming affirmation in it of marriage as a context of comfort, order, and moral growth is open to question. Nor in "A Problem" is James's presentation of the supposed salutary effects of marriage any more convincing, for in this work, which James Kraft characterizes as "one of James's oddest and most banal tales," the estranged young husband and wife who finally reach an accommodation with
each other, presumably growing in the process, are such a childish, insipid pair that one finds it difficult to believe them capable of the growth that their reaffirmed marriage seems to bespeak. Again, consequently, an apparently happy union is depicted, purposely or not, as tinged with more than a little ghastliness and with none of the magnificence that, alone in marriages, could win James’s full loyalty.

In this work a pair of newlyweds find their marriage haunted by dark prophecies. First, an old, drunken, evil-looking, Indian squaw fortune-teller declares with a certain relish that their firstborn will be a daughter who will die in early childhood. Later, although their first child—indeed a girl—weathers a critical illness, their vague unease about ominous predictions remains and is aggravated disastrously when the wife’s confession to her husband that a fortune-teller predicted long before her marriage that she would wed twice brings a confession from him about an identical prediction for his own future. Racked by jealousy over loves envisioned for the surviving mate, the pair turn on each other bitterly, creating a rancor that leads the wife into unabating querulousness and suspicion and the husband into increasing dissipation and self-indulgence. Inevitably, a separation ensues, which ends when their little girl does, in fact, die of a sudden illness. Shaken, standing together now in a communion of grief before a clergyman to view the remains of their child, the pair realize their affection for each other and embrace as the minister, raising his hand “with a pious sacramental gesture,” bestows his approval. Thus, as a friend comments later, “the terrible problem is at last solved” and each has “been married twice” (1:386).

The problem of this young couple may indeed be solved to their own satisfaction, but severe difficulties remain for the concerned reader. Is one to believe that the “remarriage” of this pair brings the story to a satisfyingly happy ending? If so, James apparently expects his readers to overlook a good deal. The viciousness of the squaw, the death of the child, the fatuity and irrationality of the couple, even the eerie possibility that the fortune-teller may somehow have some efficacy, all raise questions about the nature of existence and the
capacity for human folly that are never addressed adequately by the conclusion of the story. If indeed James believes that married love conquers all, he has hardly made a plausible case for that conviction and has, in effect, presented virtually a parody of it. The reunion of husband and wife here betokens no effort—at least no effort that James delineates—on the part of either at self-examination or the mature scrutiny of the human condition generally that can lead to self-control and moral development. Consequently, the ostensible point that marriage brings one into a framework of difficulty that can finally engender both personal growth and the formation of a pleasant union that offers comfort in a troubled world never compels the reader to believe; and thus the marriage here seems little more than an evasion of painful realities. Again, as with Bingham's perhaps similar marriage, it is impossible to say whether this apparent undercutting of his conclusion is intended by James as an ironic commentary on the notion that all difficulties can be resolved by a happy marriage with all living happily ever after. But even if it is not so intended, the conclusion is so weak as to manifest a lack of real conviction either that happiness can be found in most marriages or that, if found, it is not ignoble.

James's first three marriage stories, then, establish matrimony as a relationship that he regards as inevitably linked with death, conflict, confusion, and evasion. Though he touches on the possibility of mutual accommodations occurring in marriage that manifest personal growth and ensure at least a modicum of happiness for a couple, he seems unconvinced that marital happiness is anything but exceptional and that it and genuine development of character are not mutually incompatible. His next three marriage tales of the period before 1881, "The Last of the Valerii" (1874), "Madame de Mauves" (1874), and "Crawford's Consistency" (1876), show a narrowing of James's focus. Sensing, perhaps, that happiness in marriage is more often than not beyond the reach of the people with whom he is most concerned, the sensitive ones, James in these stories explores more closely than in the first three the possibility that marriage as an experience generating particularly intense responses can lead one
with especial efficacy to a fuller awareness of oneself and of the nature of existence generally—an idea of particular significance in treatments of marriage, as, in different ways, it is also explored by Howells, Wharton, Herrick, and Chopin. The results he presents are no more auspicious than those depicted in the first three works, and once again they occur in a context of often blatant melodrama. As yet, James does not perceive states of internalized melodrama or the quiet, essentially romantic, and highly personal triumphs that can be derived from even the most painful confrontations with experience.

Heightening the reader's sense that the wedding altar is the entrance to alien territory is the fact that each of the marriages presented in these stories unites disparate types. Differences of nationality, class, sensibility are central, of course, to much of James's fiction having little to do with marriage and are used often, like marriage, to delineate areas of experience foreign to the protagonist into which he or she is initiated with valuable educative results sometimes ensuing; however, when James ties these differences, as he does here, to marriage itself, the most consistently intimate confrontation with otherness he can imagine, the focus on whether or not the experience is suitably educative is particularly close. And what James seems to conclude at this stage of his career is that, unfortunately, the initiation that marriage involves frequently brings one to know pain, but little else. Such moral or spiritual development as the protagonists do undergo is slight, stunted, quickly blighted, and certainly not worth the suffering to which they are exposed. In the future the sufferings undergone by his protagonists in markedly similar situations would strike James in at least two cases as bringing more than sterile pain, as being, in fact, nothing less than prods to a growth of character that would come for these figures, one suspects, in no other relationship than matrimony. But here, in these three stories, finally, marriage seems only a form shrouded in a ghastliness that is unremitting.

"The Last of the Valerii" is a story that at once looks back to Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* and ahead to *The Golden*
In it a childlike, sluggish Italian count is aroused from his lethargy by his young wife, an energetic American prone to romantic visions of self-sacrifice; and he thus comes into possession of his mature, authentic identity. Did the story end here with the count, like Hawthorne’s Donatello, rescued from a charming but debilitating and unduly prolonged state of youthful fecklessness and, perhaps, like Amerigo, ready to be awakened to the rewards of marital love, it would be James’s first genuinely convincing depiction of marriage as precipitating growth of character. However, the story does not end on anything like so positive a note as this. Threatened by her husband’s newfound identity, one that marks him as a man who, like his ancestors before him, has a fierce, pagan devotion to beauty and the art that seeks to shape it and do it reverence, the wife takes measures that render him once again the tractable, ineffectual, mildly uxorious fellow she married; and the story closes with the count vaguely troubled over what he has lost but with no hope of getting it back. In effect, then, James shows here, as he will in several subsequent works, that marriage often is not merely unproductive of valuable development in the married but is inherently inimical to the love of beauty and the creativity that give life meaning to so many, married or not.

When first glimpsed, the newlyweds, Count Valerio and Martha, are thoroughly pleased with each other. But happiness in marriage for James is, as we have seen in the earlier tales, suspect, the result, possibly, of husband and wife being somehow insensitive or undeveloped. That such may indeed be the case with this pair is apparent on closer observation of them. Their typical daily activities, described by the narrator, a painter who is Martha’s godfather, are revealing:

She played dominos with him after dinner, and carried out in a desultory way a daily scheme of reading him the newspapers. This observance was subject to fluctuations caused by the Count’s invincible tendency to go to sleep,—a failing his wife never attempted to disguise or palliate. She would sit and brush the flies from him while he lay picturesquely snoozing, and, if I ventured near him, would place her finger on her lips.
and whisper that she thought her husband as handsome asleep as awake. (3:95)

The unmistakable impression here of an unnaturally childlike individual being mothered by his doting bride is reinforced when the narrator notes that the count has “no beliefs, nor hopes, nor fears,—nothing but senses, appetites, and serenely luxurious tastes” (3:95) and that he carries in his pocket a collection of “fragments of antique pavement” (3:97) that by the half-hour he tosses in the air and catches on the back of his hand. Nor is Martha, for all her maternal air with the count, without a certain disturbingly childlike quality herself, as manifested by the sentimental romanticism that leads her both to marry so unlikely a fellow as the count in the first place largely because of the dark, exotic past of his family and to wish vaguely and grandiously to do “something more for him than girls commonly do for their lovers,—to take some step, to run some risk, to break some law, even!” (3:92). Her inchoate longings in this line lead her, comically enough, considering her husband’s indifference to his religion, to declare heroically that she will even become a Catholic if he wishes her to, a resolution that grows out of no religious devotion but simply out of a propensity for self-dramatization and an attraction to what she considers to be the strange foreignness of the church.

That such happiness as their marriage has brought this pair presupposes an almost culpable denial both of the grim lessons of human history about the ephemerality of happiness and of their own capacities to achieve something more than the unnatural prolongation of adolescent pleasures is evidenced through the setting and the misgivings of the narrator about this marriage. The walks of the count’s villa, lined with “disinterred fragments of sculpture” standing in “the perpetual twilight like conscious things, brooding on their gathered memories” and seeming to “whisper heavily the whereabouts of their mouldering fellows, still unrecov­ered from the soil” (3:94), are a visible reminder that life is not all pleasant naps, domino games, and the reciprocal joys of doting, maternal wife and amiable, childlike husband. The
very fragments of ancient paving stone with which the count habitually plays are, if not *memento mori*, at least small tokens of the limitations imposed on human dreams and plans rather than the mere toys that the count makes of them. Hence, when the narrator, who believes his goddaughter to be a “creature susceptible of the finer spiritual emotions,” asks himself “what was becoming of her spiritual life in this interminable heathenish honeymoon” (3:96) with a man asleep to whatever potential for maturity he has, the setting itself reinforces his sense that the couple are leading too light a life, a spiritually atrophied one based on a mutual refusal to acknowledge the somber burden of human history and put aside childish things.

The implicit question running through James’s account of the strange happiness of these newlyweds, obviously, is whether their marriage can bring them to fuller awareness of their mature identities and thereby evolve into a union based on acknowledgment rather than denial of their authentic natures and ties to human history. In the context of this question, Martha’s urging her husband to hire a crew to undertake a series of systematic excavations on his grounds seems symptomatic less of a desire to add some sculptures to the count’s already extensive collection aboveground than of a response to what the narrator perceives as a “dawning sense . . . that she was the least bit strangely mated” (3:97). Her efforts to fathom the nature of her husband by delving into his ancestral past—and, perhaps, in doing so to find out more about herself and why she married him—indeed bring both of them to knowledge of themselves. Unfortunately, this new knowledge is so inimical to the continuation of their marriage that Martha feels compelled to suppress it, thereby both reestablishing their former condition so redolent of overripe pleasures and implicitly conveying James’s grim vision at this stage of his career that marriage and real growth through the confrontation with experience that wedlock affords are incompatible.

The crisis for both Martha and the count is precipitated when the unearthing of a lovely statue of Juno awakens the pair to the count’s true nature, which has been lying as dor-
man in him as was the statue in the earth. No longer a somnolent child jokingly referring to himself as a pagan, the count awakens to the dread but exhilarating truth that underlying his twinges of "superstitious" (3:98) awe of the secrets buried in his ancestral grounds have been the promptings of a nature that is genuinely and atavistically pagan. Unleashed in the count by the sight of the Juno is a devotion to ancient beauty and to the worship of the old Roman divinities that is so passionate as to make all aspects of contemporary life seem empty to him. Before long he keeps the severed hand of the statue in a silver box as a relic, and the Juno itself he keeps under lock and key and visits alone for private nocturnal devotions in which he actually prostrates himself before it. Detesting now the Christianity he used to accept nominally with mild amusement, the count declares of believers, "I should like to pull down their pictures, overturn their candlesticks, and poison their holy-water!" (3:110).

More, the count seems constantly to be making "invidious comparisons" between the marble goddess and his contemporaries that result in his "despising mankind"; and, notes the narrator, "from this untender proscription his charming wife was not excepted," for soon he is glimpsed responding to her "persuasive caress" with "an ill-concealed shudder" (3:106). Thus has the count's marriage brought him to a new knowledge of himself, one, unfortunately, that unfits him for the relationship that prompted his self-perception.

Attempting to restore the marital condition destroyed by the unearthing of the Juno, Martha, more willing to be the conventional nineteenth-century wife than she earlier would have thought possible, again acts, this time ordering workmen to reinter the statue. Results are immediate; finding the Juno gone, the count is no longer the proud pagan. Hesitating before his wife only a moment, "as if her very forgiveness kept the gulf open between them," he then "strode forward, fell on his two knees and buried his head in her lap" (3:121-22). Years later, when next seen, the count is responding to the question of a guest about the Juno's hand, still unburied but now on view in his cabinet. Asked if it is "a Roman," he replies "with a frown," in the last words of the
story, that it is “a Greek” (3:122). All, then, thanks to Martha’s second initiative, seems to be as it was before. Though now, as his frown indicates, less than perfectly happy, the count has once again denied his authentic identity; and, as his tearful genuflection before Martha implies, he has given up the adoration of his goddess for a childlike surrender to devotion to his motherly wife. Martha too has given up something significant. By reinstituting her “interminable heathenish honeymoon,” she robs herself of the opportunity to grow through confronting the suffering and loss inherent for her in her husband’s change. Renouncing her husband might well have been the gift of love for which she had wished so romantically, and, though painful, it might have ensured the spiritual growth that eludes her.

The marriage of this pair endures, consequently, marked by a happiness that is still essentially childish, though now ever so slightly tinged with faint discontent. The pain is not severe, however; were it so, it might be a stimulant to growth. Instead, it is merely sterile, unproductive. There will be no change, no development in this marriage ever again; nor will there be passion or beauty, for at this stage in his career (as well as in many works long after), James sees the demands of marital domesticity as incompatible with passion, beauty, art or growth, as incompatible with all potential value save a highly suspect happiness for the inadequately sentient and a pain for the rest that is only too rarely educational. Clearly, Valerio is the “Last of the Valerii,” the last in his line, that is, to hear and heed, however briefly, the time­less call to the demanding but joyous worship of beauty. With all this said, it is difficult, therefore, to agree with the assessment of one commentator that this story is “slight in content.” Though marred by a slightly clumsy melodramatic treatment of the count’s adoration of the Juno and his scorn for the modern world and all in it, the story certainly is devoid neither of craftsmanship nor content. The implicit conflicts it embodies, its devastating ironies, its somber Italian atmosphere, all are manipulated skillfully by the narrator, himself an artist who has remained a bachelor, to show misgivings on James’s part about marriage that are anything but
inconsequential either in terms of his future work or in terms of any sensitive inquiry into problems inherent in marriage.

No less strange a union than that of the count and Martha and certainly no more likely to allay misgivings about marriage is the tie between the couple in "Madame de Mauves," an American girl of stringent morality and the philandering French nobleman she marries. Though James's concern here is as much with the often dangerous clash of distinctive national types as it is with the difficulties of husbands and wives, he sees, as I have noted, that the dangers in this clash are particularly marked for one who finds himself or herself married to one from a different culture that has ways that are often impervious to the understanding of an outsider. For James, of course, both a different culture and a marriage are simply exceedingly intense types of experience, carrying, therefore, in acute form all the dangers and potential benefits that are inherent in any confrontation with experience. But as "Madame de Mauves" reveals, the chances of gaining something of value from the often painful contact with things foreign diminishes appreciably if one's marriage is the central means of the contact, for the demands established by the special intimacy of marriage are too great, James believes, for most to be capable of meeting with fullest sensitivity in the best of circumstances, much less when they are from different backgrounds. In this tale, an even darker one than "The Last of the Valerii," there is not even a pretense of accommodation, happiness, or valid insight growing out of the conflict between the married pair. Unable to win his wife's love or forgiveness, even when he gives up his philandering, the shamed, unhappy baron finds no recourse but suicide. Unbending, incapable of compassion, his widow goes on unchanged, deriving what chilly comfort she can from her implacable rectitude. Again, the entrance into the alien realm, the experience writ large that is marriage, brings only pain, pain the more hideous for being unremunerative.

That the marriage of this couple will demand adjustments from both is apparent immediately. In a manner anticipatory of that of Isabel Archer and Gilbert Osmond, they misread each other from the first, entering into a marriage that nei-
ther would make were the other’s traits clearly understood. Euphemia Cleve (her name, apparently, an allusion to Madame de LaFayette’s Princesse de Clèves, similarly a blind devotee of duty) lives absolutely committed to romantic ideality. Convinced that “Americans were vulgar” (3:128), she seeks to bestow in marriage her not inconsiderable fortune on “a son of the Crusaders who was to suffer her to adore him,” a “gentleman rather ugly than handsome, and rather poor than rich” whose “ugliness was to be nobly expressive, and his poverty delicately proud” (3:130). Her conviction that the Baron de Mauves is just this man, one who would accept her fortune only with “a world of stifled protestations” (3:130), needs merely her glance at his decrepit ancestral home to be complete. Finding it “as delightful as a play” (3:132), Euphemia, who enjoys imagining herself in a drama fully as much as the young Isabel Archer likes fancying herself in a novel, decides to marry this chevalier sans peur et sans reproche she takes the baron to be and live with him in perfect communion at the shrine of romantic devotion to principle. For his part the baron, an urbane, likable fellow, but a feckless and impecunious sybarite nonetheless, fails to see Euphemia’s single-mindedness, regarding her, instead, as a pliant young thing whose naïveté and beauty will charm him while her fortune solves his financial difficulties. “He found,” James states, “that he needed pastimes, and, as pastimes were expensive, he added heavily to the list of debts to be cancelled by Euphemia’s millions” (3:143). Neither, obviously, perceives that the other has been shaped by cultural influences incomprehensible to one from a different background. The narrow puritan resolve at the core of Euphemia’s romantic attachment to the ideal is as alien to the baron as his notion that a man may have dissolute pleasures and still be a good fellow and acceptable husband is to her. In depicting the dismal union of this misled pair, James shows that the marriage prompts them neither to the accommodations that can make for happiness in marriage nor to the educative pain that can make for magnificence.

Though neither mate, obviously, is without fault in the marriage of this luckless pair, the main obstacle to any hope for success in their marriage is Euphemia. Deaf to the time-
honored arguments of her sister-in-law and the baron's grandmother about the necessity of both accepting the world as she finds it and facing all with a tolerance that will allow her to maintain her dignity, to make all comfortable, and to keep a proud family name from being laughed at, Euphemia isolates herself behind her monolithic moral code, regarding her husband with a cool disdain that baffles this hapless lover of ease, pleasure, and good cheer. So baffled is he, in fact, that he blunders to the egregious conclusion that Euphemia simply needs an affair of her own to set all right and adopts desperately the crass and abortive expedient of trying to initiate a liaison between his wife and Longmore, another naively moralistic and romantic young American, who clearly is infatuated with her. Failing in this when Longmore's uneasy, tentative overtures are coolly rebuffed by Euphemia as unworthy of her compatriot, the baron is moved to a perplexed reverence and, perhaps, even love for his intransigent spouse. He repents of his ways, appeals to her for forgiveness, and, when she "inexorably" (3:208) refuses to give it, kills himself in despair.

The repeated inability of Euphemia to make any sort of accommodation with her mate or with things as they are imparts to the failure of this marriage to bring her either happiness or education an aura of terrible inevitability. All (including, as we have seen, even her maiden name) argues against any capacity for change in her. Her own admission that her "conscience" will "effectually prevent" her "from ever doing anything very fine" (3:171), her propensity for arguing for reason and restraint with a manner so "strangely intense" as to reflect "a kind of passion" (3:195), and her persistent refusal to accept the fact that she is in France, married to a baron rather than, as she comes to wish fondly, "the daughter of a poor New England minister, living in a little white house under a couple of elms, and doing all the housework" (3:169), all are symptomatic of her tenacious refusal to dwell anywhere else, finally, than in what she calls "a nameless country of my own" (3:146). As an unyielding inhabitant of this rarefied, unanchored realm, she becomes implacably as chilling a figure to her husband as his sister was to his
brother-in-law, who, in an action foreshadowing the Baron’s own death and helping to generate the sense of inevitability permeating the work, committed suicide rather than continue having to face her. Though it is crude, certainly, to characterize her, as one observer does at the end of the work, as “the charming little woman who killed her husband” (3:208), it is true nonetheless that it is no more in her to forgive him as a reformed philanderer than it is in her to accept him, or indeed any actual man, as a tolerable substitute for the hero of her romantic-cum-puritanical imaginings.21

Heightening one’s sense of Euphemia’s intractability and of the failure of marriage to initiate improvement in her is the development of her countryman, Longmore, a fellow who, luckier than the baron, remains single. Initially Longmore comes to France with a Woollett-like destestation of things foreign and particularly of things French—regarding the Baron, for example, as an “unclean Frenchman” (3:127)—and he quickly falls into a naïve infatuation with Euphemia in which he virtually canonizes her; but he gradually develops into one capable of real insight. The passions aroused in him by his adulation of Euphemia as a lady of sorrows do not abate barrenly, therefore. Instead they lead him to an unsettling appreciation of the pleasures of a French painter and his lovely mistress, an obviously contented pair whom he observes vacationing together at a country inn amid scenes of sunlit bucolic beauty that are far removed in space and mood from the dim, chill, terraced gardens in which he usually sees Euphemia. Newly receptive to the possibilities of life because of what he observes while in the countryside, Longmore, though certainly never to become a licentious man (James, of course, is advocating not promiscuity but humanity), is capable by the close of the tale of regarding Euphemia with a highly equivocal “awe” (3:209). Such regard implies a willingness to keep one’s distance from its object, and the story ends without the slightest implication that Longmore now or at any time in the future is any longer the sort who would consider closing that distance.

Edward Wagenknecht speaks of James in this story as presenting more “impressively” than any Catholic novelist the
"ideal of indissoluble marriage." It is difficult to see where in fact this ideal is presented save in the mind of Euphemia Cleve de Mauves, a woman whose defense of the ideal seems calculated by James to make it suspect to most readers. Such happiness as one sees in the story—that of the artist and his lover—is extramarital. Such real growth as one sees—that of Longmore—occurs in one who is single. That the baron does change through his confrontation with his wife argues no defense of marriage here, for were his growth significant rather than a ploy of James to attack Euphemia and emphasize the grimness of this union, James would doubtless focus on it more closely and show the baron to have gained a capacity for a renunciatory mode of existence that would preclude the possibility of suicide. Rather than bringing, then, either the happiness or the personal development that might conceivably derive from a confrontation with significant experience, this marriage brings only pain, death, and, for the survivor, confirmed blindness to her own shortcomings. More, the very inevitability with which, as we have observed, all this occurs itself argues implicitly against a fundamental assumption underlying marriage: the notion that a capacity for personal improvement is inherent in most and that marriage can help foster it. For many, apparently, James believes, devastating shortcomings are ineradicable and, in fact, only exacerbated by marriage, leading to a situation in which matrimony brings far more suffering for those involved than remaining single would have. Nor, despite the arguments of the baron’s sister-in-law, does marriage here serve as a form bringing social stability. Suicides rarely help maintain social order, and the two marriages touched on in this work both end, of course, with the self-destruction of the husband. (That the baron’s suicide is not at all in keeping with his character as developed by James up to this point testifies to James’s willingness here to subvert even literary form to convey his grim vision of matrimony.) James, then, in “Madame de Mauves” as in “The Last of the Valerii,” sees the entrance into the alien territory of marriage as resulting in an unhappiness that carries with it no compensations.

Similarly lacking in significant compensations is the pain that the title character in “Crawford’s Consistency” brings
upon himself by entering into an incongruous marriage that he knows will be disastrous and that does turn out to be probably the most grotesque of James's many marital horrors. Crawford, a mild-mannered young New York gentleman of scholarly pursuits, is jilted by the only girl he has ever loved, the vapid, mindless beauty Elizabeth Ingram, who, automaton-like, accedes to her mercenary parents' demand that she seek a more lucrative match. Immediately thereafter, for reasons that the narrator, who is Crawford's friend, confesses he finds inexplicable, Crawford weds himself to a blowzy, coarse, cheaply attractive, lower-class woman whom he picks up at a third-rate restaurant, a woman, moreover, whose faults are perfectly obvious to Crawford himself. Predictably the marriage is a torture for the poor man. In the best of circumstances, his wife is a greedy boor with a taste for liquor and for loud, ungrammatical self-congratulation who makes him the joke of good society; but when Crawford loses the greater part of his money in a bank failure, she turns into a shrill virago who abuses her pathetic mate verbally and physically, actually breaking his leg and leaving him with a permanent limp when she pushes him down a flight of stairs. Through it all, until his wife's death (not surprisingly, of delirium tremens) and beyond, Crawford is thoroughly consistent, a perfect, uncomplaining gentleman and the wonder of his friends.

Crawford's motive in all this, though the narrator sees it as shrouded impenetrably in obscurity, is not indiscernible. Behind this hideous marriage lies contempt, contempt for conventional notions of matrimony in good New York society and contempt for himself for ever putting aside when he first met Elizabeth his long-held dictum that "a man should only marry in self-defense" (4:17). His marriage is a backhanded swipe at Elizabeth, her parents, and all those who maintain a social order that helps foster the link between financial considerations and notions of what makes for an acceptable marriage. By marrying this boardinghouse denizen, Crawford implies that the Ingrams and the society that shaped them are of no greater worth than his harridan bride—indeed, that, stripped of all social graces, they are identical to her in their underlying coarseness, avarice, and
identical to her in their underlying coarseness, avarice, and unjustifiable self-esteem. He notes, in fact, that she "resumes a certain civilization," that she is its "last word—the flower" (4:34)—in other words, the final product of her class and its chief beauty, just as Elizabeth is of hers. Further, this linking himself to this woman may be, paradoxically enough, at once a manifestation of deep sexual longings (she exudes a strong, almost animal, sensuality) and of his contempt for himself for having them and for having allowed his responsiveness to Elizabeth's beauty to blind him to her mindlessness. The role of marriage, then, as a crude financial arrangement, as a means by which a spuriously "good" society maintains itself, and as a chance for the legal release of animal drives are all bitterly parodied by Crawford in the union he makes, one that enables him at the same time to inflict on himself the cruelest of punishments.

A "shameless potboiler," as James himself characterized it, 24 "insignificant," as, more recently, Peter Buitenhuis has called it, 25 a clumsy melodrama lacking in subtlety or sufficiently delineated and believable character, as is obvious to any reader, "Crawford's Consistency," nonetheless, ought not to be ignored, for it brings to a stark conclusion the skein of James's troubled response to matrimony in the pre-1881 marriage stories. Its very crudeness of conception—particularly at a stage of his career in which James was gaining some real control of his craft—manifests graphically his doubts and fears about wedlock. Elizabeth, for example, ends the story a homely spinster, all her beauty and her parents' hopes of a lucrative marriage for her blasted when smallpox cruelly scars her face, a conclusion to her husband-hunting career barely justifiable as a gross form of poetic justice but far more understandable as an expression of the vehemence of James's distaste for her and the form of conventional marriage to which she and her parents are committed. Similarly, although Crawford's physical abuse at the hands of his wife is a perhaps too lurid touch, it is simply the brutal culmination of a pattern in which husbands are defeated by their mates that runs through the marriage fiction before The Portrait of a Lady and seems, despite the plethora of unhappy wives in
his work, a manifestation of especially terrible fears on James's part about the husband's lot in matrimony. Count Valerio gives up his pagan identity and heritage for his wife; the Baron de Mauves gives up his illicit pleasures and then, literally, his life for his unyielding mate; Elizabeth Ingram's father is dominated by his overbearing spouse; and Crawford, finally, whose marriage to Elizabeth would presumably have been no happier than Mr. Ingram's or the marriage he does, in fact, make, is left physically impaired, with a limp recalling that of the vulnerable, schemed-against husband in "A Tragedy of Error." Further, the very shrillness of James's portrayal of Crawford's wife conveys more vividly than in either "The Last of the Valerii" or "Madame de Mauves" that the sufferings undergone in this uneasy union of disparate types are horribly lacking in adequate compensation. Crawford may well be even more "agreeable" than previously, as "a clever old lady" (4:45) of the narrator's acquaintance suggests; but this, unlike such profound moral growth as Isabel Archer will undergo in her own horrible marriage, which this work, like "Madame de Mauves," oddly prefigures, seems little more than a manifestation of Crawford's willingness to be hurt while proving that he remains above the turmoils of involvement in marriage, the relationship for which he has come to have such contempt. Indeed, what one sees most in this failed but frightening tale is waste—the waste of Crawford's potentially useful life as he ensnares himself in a deadening marriage and, one suspects, the waste of a potentially good story as James, apparently ensnared in his own terrible personal misgivings regarding marriage and unable yet to envision such unique triumph through matrimony as Isabel will attain, allows useful material to be marred by an unduly shrill treatment.

Thus, "Crawford's Consistency" portrays in extreme form James's suspicion permeating "The Last of the Valerii" and "Madame de Mauves" that although all initiations into alien realms of experience are dangerous, marriage is the one most fraught with peril, particularly when it involves the union of mates from widely different backgrounds. Needless to say, the unhappiness running through all James's pre-1881 mar-
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riage fiction also culminates with particular intensity in "Crawford’s Consistency," making the story in this area too a fitting capstone to the depiction of wedlock before The Port­trait of a Lady. 26 For all this, though, nothing in the tale so epitomizes the tenor of James’s marriage fiction in this period as the passage in “Madame de Mauves” in which Euphemia recapitulates for Longmore the process of initiation that her marriage vows set in motion for her:

“My marriage vows introduced me to people and things which seemed to me at first very strange and then very horrible, and then, to tell the truth, very contemptible. At first I expended a great deal of sorrow and dismay and pity on it all, but there soon came a time when I began to wonder whether it was worth one’s tears.” (3:169-70)

The poignance of this statement of marital pain, this inadvertent confession of Euphemia’s that in failing to bring her happiness marriage also caused the atrophy of her capacity for warm emotional response, bespeaks something more in James than a detestation of marriage. It makes clear that under­lying the ghastliness of the marriages in both “Madame de Mauves” and “Crawford’s Consistency,” as well as in the other pre-1881 marriage fiction, there is a terrible sense of loss on James’s part, as a context of experience that he sees to be rich with the potential for both happiness and spiritual growth leads all too often to mere unhappiness. The very fre­quency with which James writes of marriage both before 1881 and thereafter and, as well, his continuing propensity to depict it in terms of melodrama reveal his continuing hope, however tenuous, that marriage might indeed be a relation­ship that redeems for some the sad wastage that is so much of human experience.

1. Noting the great number of marriage works James wrote, Munro Beattie, in his essay “The Many Marriages of Henry James,” asks, “Might it not appear that of the major story-tellers in our language marriage was especially of the essence for Henry James?” (Marston LaFrance, ed., Patterns of Commitment in American Literature [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967], p. 93).


4. Perhaps an example close to home of this sort of romantic would be Emerson, whom James's father characterized as a "man without a handle."

5. Quoted in Brooks, p. 5.


7. Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1881). Though it is Goodwood who uses the term "ghastly" (p. 433) and the narrator, describing Osmond's view of the "form," who uses the term "magnificent" (p. 356), the words are both apt characterizations of James's view of matrimony.


13. James's only novel touching on married life before 1881 is *Confidence* (1879). In this exceedingly slight work, the briefly seen marriage of the Wrights, supposedly a happy one (though unconvincingly so) after some difficulties, gives no evidence of any capacity for magnificence.


16. One who views the story from this angle is Fogel, who, apparently untroubled by the complex ambiguities in "My Friend Bingham," see Bingham's marriage as "the act and sign of reconciliation" (p. 146).


18. In light of the count's obvious self-suppression, it is difficult to credit Fogel's contention that he "has been saved by his wife from his enthrallement to a statue of Juno . . ." (p. 148).


20. Kraft, pp. 55-56. Also worth noting, I suspect, is the fact that the name "Euphemia" is derived from a Greek source meaning "good repute."

21. One who admires Euphemia and would take strong exception to my characterization of her is Edward Wagenknecht, who has a provocative chapter on this tale in his *Eve and Henry James* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978). Among


26. Revealingly, perhaps, the most convincing untroubled marriage in the works of this period occurs in “Longstaff’s Marriage” (1878), in which the bride, wed while on her deathbed, quickly expires.