HENRY JAMES
THE LATER SHORT FICTION

DESPITE THE TRIUMPHS attained by Isabel Archer and Maggie Verver in the midst of troubled marriages, isolated triumphs that provide virtually the sole justification of James's persistent but always tenuously held hopes for wedlock, the great part of his marital fiction from 1881 on presents as bleak a vision of matrimony as that in the earlier works. One still sees marriage presented predominantly as a relationship of perhaps irremediable difficulties and as disturbingly linked to, if not engendering, danger for children, suffering, death, and the failure to achieve or to maintain a humane social order. One still sees too all this presented in what is often an essentially melodramatic context. But nonetheless there is a change. As a result, doubtless, of James's increased sophistication in observing and depicting character, the melodrama is now internalized, subtilized. The action, though often as lurid as in the works before 1881, is distinctly subordinated to examination of the motives that prompt it and of its impact on those concerned, figures who are more extensively delineated and often far more sentient than their counterparts before 1881. Further, the depiction of marital difficulties is now directed intensely at answering the crucial question that, implicitly at least, was central to the marriage fiction before 1881 but never adequately perceived or developed by James—and that is whether a marriage is indeed a relationship that, as its defenders assert, can promote legitimate self-expression and personal development and repress mere selfishness or is simply a relationship, more often than not, in which an ugly clash of wills culminates not in wisdom but in wrecked lives. James's increased subtlety and new clarity of focus make his many tales of failed marriages after 1881 more poignant and troubling than any of those before, but they make possible, as well, his portrayal of such
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quiet victories as those attained in their marriages by Isabel Archer and Maggie Verver, victories that, reflecting the development of James's exceedingly rarefied romantic sensibility in a context of ostensibly "realistic" social observation, would earlier in his career have been out of his ken.

Before turning to The Portrait of a Lady, which, of course, marks these major changes in James's marriage fiction, and to the other novels significantly involving marriage, I shall examine some of James's depictions of marriage in the short fiction after 1881. Because there is no chronological pattern of development either in thought or style to James's marriage fiction in this period (other than the movement in the marriage works as in all of his fiction to the prose style of the later phase) I can do this for the sake of convenience and, for the same reason, treat the short works themselves in terms of their different marital subjects rather than in terms of chronological sequence. Further, by looking at the short works first, we can come to perceive more fully, perhaps, the highly personal framework of values in which the palpable marital horrors of What Maisie Knew (1897) and The Awkward Age (1898) and the complex affirmations of matrimony in The Portrait of a Lady and The Golden Bowl (1904) are operative. Though certainly the conflicting demands of marriage and art, the complications to which the disparate national backgrounds of husband and wife give rise in marriage, and the self-deception that James believes marriage often breeds are neither mutually exclusive topics nor ones that exhaust James's concerns in his post-1881 short fiction of marriage, they are nonetheless the major themes of these works. Moreover, they afford a representative range of stories, showing clearly their dominant grimness as they delineate movingly and powerfully the painful and usually futile struggles of married characters to attain valid means of self-expression, struggles, of course, central to the novels at which we shall look later.

Conflicts about the legitimate limits of self-expression are, needless to say, most explicit in the stories dealing with the relations between art and marriage. Though in a number of stories not concerned with marriage James presents the com-
mitment to artistic achievement primarily as bespeaking an unquestionably admirable devotion to beauty and integrity in an often shabby world, in the marriage stories the situation is somewhat different. Aware, apparently, as was Hawthorne, that a commitment to art might of necessity be at odds with commitments to people, James in these works treats art primarily as simply a particularly demanding form of the desire for self-expression, one by its very nature likely to engender conflicts between the artist and others, conflicts, obviously, that have devastating impact in as intimate and intense a relationship as marriage. The point of all this for James is not merely to show that artists do not do well in marriage but that the penchant for self-expression generally is, given the shortcomings of human nature, almost inevitably a source of difficulty in marriage. Thus, when artists in "The Author of 'Beltraffio'" (1885) and "The Lesson of the Master" (1892) and an incipient artist in "The Birthplace" (1903) have trouble in their marriages and when a marriage is assailed by the egos of two artists in "The Liar" (1888), James's efforts are directed less at making a case for or against art in relation to marriage than at showing how rarely the drives of one mate or the other for self-expression fail to lead to wrenching problems between them, as inevitably they bring about the jarring combat of fully aroused and bitterly opposed wills.

Consequently, "The Author of 'Beltraffio,'" though it has all the earmarks of an account of the conflict between art and philistinism in the context of marriage, is in reality a story having far less to do with the problems of the artist or, for that matter, those of the philistine than it does with the hideous effects of egotism in that same context. The egotism here resides specifically in the efforts of two artists (Ambient and the narrator), a frustrated would-be artist (Ambient's sister), and a woman bitterly suspicious of all art that is lacking in conventional morality (Ambient's wife) to impose their own private sense of what is fitting onto reality and to deny the others and the pathetic, ill-fated Dolcino an opportunity to be anything but dehumanized figures compliantly imprisoned in this personal vision. Such egotism, of course, is found
in all areas of experience, but it has particularly virulent ef­fects when it makes itself felt in a situation involving mar­riage.

Just how virulent these effects and sad the losses they wreak can be is evident from the very opening of the story, as a scene of deceptive attractiveness quickly becomes the first in a series of examples of the disturbing propensity of the adult characters to force reality to their own specifica­tions. To a quick, uninitiated glance, the prospect that pre­sents itself to the narrator as he arrives with his celebrated host at Ambient's home seems redolent with unalloyed mar­ital good fortune. The lovely wife awaiting her famous hus­band, with their child of surpassingly delicate beauty in her “maternal embrace” (5:308), the well-appointed garden tea table, the spacious English lawn, the picturesque cottage, the marvelously time-worn steps on the grounds, the “magni­ficent beeches,” the “garden walls of incalculable height” (5:307), all seem to bespeak a matrimonial ideal often envi­sioned but rarely attained, a vision of all that marriage should be in terms of sentient, loving mates who are also loving par­ents of charming children and who live graceful lives amid circumstances of quietly restrained beauty. Almost immedi­ately, however, it is apparent that this marriage approaches this brilliant ideal only in external appearance. It takes only Ambient's oddly intoned “She has got the boy” (5:308), his wife's refusal to let go of the child when his father bids him to come, and Dolcino's ineffectual efforts to break from his mother's arms to make one see that this marriage is one flawed by deep conflict.

Nonetheless, that conflict is largely dormant until the ar­rival of the narrator, which precipitates an active struggle in which, finally, not only Mark and Beatrice but Gwendolen and the narrator himself are caught up, a struggle involving the effort of each of the adults to turn the Ambient marriage into a private fiction of his or her own creation with Dolcino as the virtually foredoomed victim. Ambient's assertion that he and his wife “shall probably kill [Dolcino] between us, be­fore we have done with him!” (5:317) sparks in him no effort at accommodation with Beatrice that might save the boy but
merely the detached stance of the observant author who becomes, paradoxically enough, a willing, passive participant in the story that he has set in motion and then stepped back to watch quietly as it develops to the awful end he has foreseen. Similarly, Beatrice, who, as her name implies, is committed totally to the view that life must be spiritually and morally untainted, chooses, ultimately, to create a drama of personal salvation for herself and her son, with Dolcino as unwitting martyr to her ideal of unsullied purity. Though husband and wife bear the major culpability for the death of the boy in that each is violating solemn commitments as mate and parent to avoid the egregious self-indulgence into which they lapse, neither Ambient’s sister nor the narrator is without blame for what occurs. Posing as eccentric genius and uncanny prophetess of dire happenstance who plays the vital role of chorus in an exotic tragedy of misalliance, Ambient’s sister merely aggravates Beatrice’s distrust of her husband’s art by establishing an atmosphere in which the artistic and the perverse seem one. No less responsible for reinforcing Beatrice’s misgivings about Ambient’s work is the narrator, who, regarding all about him as “reproductions of something that existed primarily in art or literature” and believing, further, that the Ambient home “had . . . a general aspect of being painted in water-colors and inhabited by people whose lives would go on in chapters and volumes” (5:307), decides unconsciously to ensure that this story into which he envisions himself as thrust will have the formal integrity so fitting for any work associated with the author of the beautifully shaped Beltraffio, even if that integrity demands the death of a child and the destruction of a marriage.

Unlike his would-be acolyte the narrator, Mark Ambient himself may well be, as he declares, beyond the stage at which he “always arranged things too much,” did “everything to them that life doesn’t do” (5:331-32); but he is not beyond the “gospel” of the “aesthetic war-cry” of “art for art” (5:303) that he sounded in Beltraffio. Consequently, although he no longer holds that formal control implies the rigid symmetry that would ensure the death of a child if his father asserts that he sees it looming ahead, he does still hold
to the doctrine that saving the child in the name of some moral vision imposed on the work is a violation of all that artistic integrity demands. More, what such integrity demands, as he now sees it, is the presentation of "an impression of life itself" (5:331), a vision of things as they are, unshaped and unconstrained either by the shibboleths of morality or the formalistic imperatives of structure itself. Unfortunately, so given over to this doctrine is Ambient by the time at which the events of the story take place that he is living his life in the state of detached observation warned against so often by Hawthorne, a condition in which, as the narrator notes, "he looked at all things from the standpoint of the artist, felt all life as literary material" (5:333)—a condition, in other words, that one might call "life for art's sake." Therefore, as the conflict with his wife develops, he is less concerned with ameliorating the situation than with observing what its denouement will be. As potential literary material, it must not, given his theory, be shaped in the direction of any resolution, aesthetic or moral, but must be merely recorded in the honing, clarifying sensibility of the artist. If it is this point of view in its earlier "art for art's sake" form that initially prompted the conflict with his wife, this, presumably, for Ambient merely adds a dash of paradox to the material, making it potentially more interesting. If the wife herself sees things differently and wishes to regard herself and her husband and child as something other than figures in a book in progress, well, then, for Ambient the response can only be, as he puts it succinctly to the narrator, "Damn her point of view!" (5:324).

Thus does Ambient, "impregnated—even to morbidness—with . . . the love of beauty and art," as James puts it in his notebook sketch for the story, disastrously conflate art and life and assume for himself the dual role of observer and character in a story that, whether he is fully aware of it or not, can only have an unhappy ending, an ending that, in spite of all his professed desire for detachment, he cannot escape helping to shape. As character, Ambient lives to the hilt the role he perceives to be assigned to him by the terms in which his conflict with his wife is couched. If these define
him as the faintly decadent bohemian apostle of Art, standing lithely and gracefully yet with a seemly, nondemonstrative strength against the forces of philistinism embodied in her, he accepts them unquestioningly and with the observing artist's detachment watches himself play out this role. Though, as Donald Reiman suggests, Ambient is not without some taste for respectability and convention, he breaks the tenuous truce that he and Beatrice have imposed on their struggle, precipitating the events that bring on the conclusion to the story in which as observer he is so interested. By having as a guest a young man whose avowedly artistic predilections and adoration of him and his work cannot help but strike Beatrice as flattering his worst traits and cannot fail to call to mind for her all that she does not want her son to become under Ambient's influence, Mark arouses in her the antagonism that his disciple's actions will channel in the direction of the destruction of Dolcino. Further, by treating this adoring and impressionable young man as little less than an intimate confrere, he inevitably puts the narrator in mind of doing something to resolve the conflict into which he has so recently been initiated. Hence, Ambient, by turning the fellow, in effect, into at once another character in his life-story and, oddly enough, another creator-observer as well, makes the death of his son a foregone conclusion.

Though Ambient neither wishes his son to die nor knows that the narrator will, virtually under his aegis, lead Beatrice to bring about the boy's death, he does little to prevent the catastrophe from occurring. Such behavior as he manifests in yielding to the narrator's blandishments to "trust a mother—a devoted mother, my dear friend!" (5:352), though grotesquely inconsistent with one's notion of the way a devoted father should act when his overwrought wife will not allow a doctor to see their seriously ill child, is, on the other hand, all too consistent, as is his behavior throughout the story, with his whole theory of the literary calling. Unwilling to be more than an observer watching himself play the part of sensitive artist in a body of "literary material" that most men know as life, Ambient lets things happen. Having, that is, conceived of his situation less as a part of life than as a
literary event, he is bound by his sense of what literary craftsmanship involves to keep his shaping hand off the action and let the characters play out their roles as their make-ups demand. If, in his character as the much put-upon author of *Beltraffio*, he cannot avoid exerting a certain effect upon an impressionable younger character with whom he comes into contact, that character, in turn, must be allowed the freedom to give that effect natural consequences in the action. Again, if those consequences themselves generate further, perverse ones, in this case in the wife of the celebrated author who figures so centrally in the "literary material" Ambient observes, this is simply a natural outgrowth of character interaction, which, of course, must be allowed to follow a logic of its own, as Ambient has come to believe. Thus, Ambient does not simply "abdicate familial responsibility and authority," as Viola Hopkins Winner suggests, but actually abdicates his role in the human community. Though his sudden outbursts, "Is he dying—has she killed him?" and "I'll save him, please God!" (5:352) in response to his sister's urgent statement that both she and Beatrice want the doctor to come may well reveal a more typically paternal response than one has seen heretofore in Ambient, any genuinely fatherly feeling here is mingled inextricably with his odd double consciousness as literary character-authorial observer. The theatrical gesture as he utters these lines of "flinging away his cigarette" (5:353), that standard prop of his nocturnal bohemian talks with the narrator, presents a touch of pathos and humanity so perfectly apt to the role of cultivated artist shocked into predictably futile action by the brutal excesses of his philistine wife as, presumably, to elicit the approval of Ambient the observant seeker after material for art. The story he observes, obviously, is the account, so neatly played out, of the martyrdom of the high priest of art-craft, Mark Ambient. That Dolcino is the unfortunate who dies matters not; the martyr remains Ambient and, apparently, "making the most out of life" (5:334), to which he tells the narrator that he but not his wife is dedicated, involves sacrificing life itself, in terms of his son and his own humanity, to the necessity of gaining material for his self-expression through art.
Irretrievably ensconced in his own story as Ambient may conceive his wife to be, she, for her part, tells the narrator when he remarks ingenuously that the Ambient home and grounds have the "tone" of the author of Beltraffio’s work, that "I don’t in the least consider that I am living in one of his books; I shouldn’t care for that at all" (5:314). So averse is she, in fact, to regarding herself as in one of his works, expressing as they do that gospel of "art for art" which is so repugnant to her, that she is prompted finally to try to impose her own vision on reality in opposition to her husband’s. In this vision, obviously, she bravely saves her son from such decadence as she sees embodied in her misguided husband and his work, in his disciple the narrator, whom she finds so noxious that she ensures that he never even touches Dolcino, and in her sister-in-law, whose desperate desire to establish the fiction that she is “original” (5:319) despite her lack of real talent or insight leads her to the pathetic expedient of always posturing as “pictorial and melancholy” (5:318). The story into which Beatrice forces her marriage is clearly a didactic one, teaching that heroic sacrifice is demanded if purity is to be defended. Her realization with the imminent demise of her child that this tale is not without its terrors causes her to relent in her efforts to impose her vision on her marriage and makes her beg for the doctor to hurry to the child’s side. Her loss of will here and the fact that “she failed rapidly after losing her son” (5:355) show her to be less the devoted artist than is her husband, a fact, obviously, that would be no surprise to Beatrice Ambient. Nevertheless, though, in her effort to impose her own perception of things on the reality about her, she expresses herself in a manner analogous to that of the artist and, ironically enough, inadvertently plays the role all but assigned to her in the private fictions of the others.

No less concerned with bringing his fictional imposition on reality to a suitable conclusion is, as we have seen, the narrator. Convinced that he has “seized Mark Ambient’s point of view” (5:323), which he characterizes as that “of the artist to whom every manifestation of human energy was a thrilling spectacle, and who felt forever the desire to resolve his experience of life into a literary form” (5:323), he seeks...
throughout to turn the disastrous marriage of the Ambients into the stuff of fiction. Because he is still tied, unlike Ambient, to the notion, as Donald Reiman points out, that art must "unfold in artistically satisfying symmetry," this "young American apostle of aestheticism sees in his mind's eye the logical, artistic resolution of the struggle" and takes measures to bring it to fruition. He precipitates the climax of his work by giving Ambient's manuscript to Beatrice and then ensures that events will flow smoothly to their clearly foreshadowed conclusion by quieting Mark long enough for Beatrice to do her worst. By persuading Gwendolen to suppress her suspicions about Beatrice's behavior, the narrator establishes a perfect intimacy with his readers, as he makes certain that he alone can bring them into close communion with the facts behind events long shrouded in romantic secrecy. Thus, although Ambient himself never writes the story that he both observed and participated in so intimately, the narrator has done so, working in his master's tradition. That he consciously intended the boy to die is doubtful. He is not a blatant villain out of crude melodrama. But that he sacrificed his concern for the boy's well-being and for that of his parents, as well, to force a logical resolution because he had more interest in them as figures in a story of his own crafting than as people in their own right is clear.

Though much of any discussion of "The Author of 'Beltraffio'" must be directed at analyzing the makeup of the narrator, all that one brings to light about him bears, finally, on the marriage that is central to the work. His behavior throws further light on the failings of Ambient and his wife, making clear the main reasons for the failure of their marriage. Significantly, as Ora Segal notes, this marriage is never seen directly—never seen, that is, in terms of extended dialogue between husband and wife. The pair never being seen alone, one learns of their strained marriage mainly through Gwendolen's comments about them and through their comments about each other, making their marriage one seen only from the outside. This not only heightens one's sense of their estrangement from each other but imparts to their marriage a pervasive sense of loss, for, pathetically enough,
Ambient knows his wife is a woman of singular beauty and virtue and Beatrice knows that her husband's works have their own beauty and are the result of rigorous labor. Yet each, like the narrator, and like poor Gwendolen as well, cannot yield up the absolute commitment to a private vision of how reality ought to be ordered; and, as a result, disaster ensues. Whether either mate learns from the loss of Dolcino is impossible to say. One hopes that Beatrice's dipping into Beltraffio and Ambient's long delay in publishing the manuscript that led to his son's death are signs of development, but the manuscript is published and Beatrice is merely dipping into Beltraffio. Because of the intensity of the commitment each makes to self-expression, then, a commitment so intense as, in effect, to demand that all around one express oneself, the marriage of this pair becomes a battleground. Because most people, James believes, manifest a like commitment, particularly in situations of close confrontation with others, most marriages, he suspects, go in one form or another the route of the Ambients'. If one or both of the mates is an artist, this grim story points up, so much the worse.

Although the marriage of the Capadoses in "The Liar" is not destroyed, as was the Ambients', by art, which is again presented as a particularly acute outcropping of the desire for self-expression, it is, James makes clear, debased by it. More specifically, Colonel Capadose's wife, so ingenuous and authentic as a young woman that Oliver Lyon, the portrait painter who regrets that she did not marry him, once considered her a perfect model for a painting of Werther's Charlotte, is shown to have become a willing accomplice in her husband's prevarications. Though Capadose is a likable fellow whose lies seem, for the most part, harmless ones—even something of an art form—the situation seems more than a little unsavory, as the last lie in the story, which they tell together, particularly reveals. Capadose's desire to recast reality in order to satisfy his obscure need for self-expression, then, rather than restricted or suppressed within the confines of marital demands, overwhelms his marriage, carrying all, including his wife, before it. Ultimately, his marriage, as he refashions it, becomes an insidious bastion out of which
he forays to do battle with facts and into which he retreats
for comfort and support when facts and their consequences
rise up against him.

James’s strategy throughout the tale is to link Capadose,
whose name, fittingly, may be derived from the Italian for
“masterpiece” (capodopera), to the painter Lyon in order to
show that both are artists singularly devoted to their crafts.
One possible purpose for this linkup is to show that Lyon is,
not unlike Ambient, an artist of the heartless sort, incapable
of the warmth or the genuine affection that his Doppelgänger,
Capadose, is fully capable of manifesting. Seen in this
light, the story is primarily a character study of Lyon as a liar,
in this case a liar who deludes himself by overestimating his
capacity for human feeling. More likely a purpose for the
linkup, however, is James’s effort to establish that Capadose
himself is indeed an artist, though assuredly of a unique sort,
and, like Lyon, is not at all averse to using and shaping peo-
ple, even his wife, to his own ends. Thus, a grim story devel-
ops in which, once again, marriage is not proof against the
chaotic egotism endemic to human nature.

Lyon’s propensity for subordinating people to the uses he
might make of them at first makes itself felt in relatively in-
ocuous ways. A fellow guest at dinner he mentally dis-
misses as “just not a subject,” and that luckless fellow’s wife
he regards airily as having an unfortunate “sort of appear-
ance of fresh varnish . . . so that one felt she ought to sit in
a gilt frame, suggesting reference to a catalogue or a price-
list,” a “bad though expensive portrait” (6:385–86). Such
quiet cataloguing of types, though somewhat cold and smug,
seems understandable in a portrait painter who takes his
craft seriously. What is not legitimate, however, is the desire
to manipulate that Lyon manifests as he becomes increas-
ingly involved with the Capadoses. In his dealings with the
prevaricating colonel and his wife, Lyon’s motives, though
mixed, all bespeak this desire to use others that James, like
Hawthorne, sees as often intimately bound up in the artist’s
motivation.11 Lyon’s portrait of Capadoce is a means of fur-
thering his career and of humiliating the feckless colonel for
his wife’s audacity in not marrying Lyon. Further, it is an ef-
fort to humiliate Mrs. Capadose herself in Lyon’s presence by forcing her either to tell an obvious falsehood on her husband’s behalf or acknowledge before the painter that she has married a pathological liar. And underlying these aims is, even worse, an utterly malignant curiosity, itself bound up inextricably with a desire to manipulate another for the sheer joy of asserting one’s power to do so.

Capadose himself, though clearly a far less subtle man than Lyon, is, as noted, likened to the painter throughout. Not only was the colonel, of course, drawn to the same woman whom Lyon so admired—though from start to finish the colonel’s commitment to her has been stronger—but the colonel is pointedly described as an artist in his own right. Like any artist he has not really chosen his calling but has, in a sense, been chosen by it. As one acquaintance remarks of Capadose’s tale-telling, “It’s a natural peculiarity—as you might limp or stutter or be left-handed” (6:407). Indeed, Lyon tends typically to regard Capadose as an artist, perhaps sensing vaguely the similarities between them. Characterizing Capadose for himself, he muses, “He is the liar platonic . . . ; he is disinterested, he doesn’t operate with a hope of gain or with a desire to injure. It is art for art and he is prompted by the love of beauty. . . . He paints, as it were, and so do I!” (6:411-12). Elsewhere, in the same vein, he speaks of the freedom with which Capadose “handled the brush” when indulging himself as “raconteur” (6:405). Even closer ties between the two are developed by James when, during the painting of Capadose’s portrait, Lyon derives the impression that “no one drew the Colonel out more than he” (6:415) and soon comes to feel, in fact, that he and the colonel are virtually partners in the creation of the work. When the colonel in his storytelling “had his intermissions, his hours of sterility, . . . then Lyon felt that the picture also languished. The higher his companion soared, the more gyrations he executed, in the blue, the better he painted . . . .” (6:420). Together, then, the two do the portrait, and together too they are drawn into lies; for if Capadose’s willingness to sacrifice fact to his farfetched stories makes him more than a little bit an artist, Lyon’s willingness to sacrifice others to the
overweening demands of what he conceives to be legitimate artistic interest marks him increasingly as a liar. Masking his purpose in painting the portrait, declaring that it will remain in his hands when he secretly intends to send it to the Academy, Lyon reveals himself to be a liar of a particularly nasty, self-serving sort, just the sort Capadose finally becomes once the portrait has carried out its appointed office.

But there is another way, finally, in which these two are alike. Each uses Capadose’s wife and debases her in doing so. By putting her in a position in which the woman feels compelled to lie in order to protect her husband, Lyon satisfies his curiosity, his manipulative urge, and his desire to see brought low someone who apparently is satisfied after having rejected him as a prospective husband. Nor does Capadose seem much more appealing than Lyon at the close. By linking the pair as closely as he does, James prepares the reader at last to see how heinous is Capadose’s treatment of his wife. Without the Doppelgänger motif, Capadose’s lying would seem little more than a foible quietly tolerated by a loving wife. But once James has established through the association with Lyon that the lying, like any manifestation of the creative urge, may bespeak an urge to self-assertion that overpowers all concern for the autonomy of others, the full implications of the lying and of Mrs. Capadose’s response to it can be seen. In essence, this once unsullied, genuine woman has been forced to give up her moral autonomy and become little more than an appendage to her husband, useful in buttressing up any private vision he wishes to impose on reality.

That the unloving Lyon, himself taken aback by the coolness with which she is now capable of lying, is, as Leon Edel notes, “unable to grasp the simple truth that she loves her husband” is obvious; but no less obvious is the fact that the total aplomb with which the Capadoses give each other support as they create their ludicrous fantasy attempting to mask their destruction of the portrait marks them both as practiced liars, experienced not merely in spinning yarns for the sake of yarns but yarns for the sake of self-protection. The love that brought a girl who once seemed Werther’s
Charlotte to this seems too easily subverted by the coercive pressures of a demanding spouse to ever serve as an appealing example of marital affection. Unfortunately, of course, it is this very feature of marriage, this propensity of the relationship to be wracked by the demanding self-assertiveness of one or the other of the mates—self-assertiveness that is particularly acute when linked with artistic predilections—that makes marriage such a frequently grim proposition as James sees it, so likely a context for such sad little melodramas as the one he subtly shows working itself out here to its tawdry conclusion.

As anyone who has read "The Death of the Lion," The Tragic Muse, or "The Next Time," among other tales of the artistic life by James, knows, James does not always associate art with the dangers of undue self-assertion. He values art too highly and defends the freedom of the artist too often for anyone to believe that the suspicions about the artistic sensibility that he reveals in "The Author of 'Beltraffio'" and "The Liar" are ones he holds consistently. Given James's dedication to art, it is not surprising that his fears for the integrity of any marriage when it is faced with the too fervent desire for self-expression on the part of those in it would be matched by his fears for the legitimate aims of the artist when they conflict with the demands made by marriage. These fears are central to his treatment of the Gedges in "The Birthplace," another of James's post-1881 stories showing the difficulties that he envisions as inevitably arising from the close confrontation of art and marriage.

That timid, dun-colored, middle-aged Morris Gedge, erstwhile librarian at Blackport-on-Dwindle and now resident guide at the "birthplace" of England's greatest writer, becomes an artist at all is a surprise. Seemingly trapped forever in a dreary domestic realm that is characterized mercilessly by James as one of flies in the butter dish and of tins of biscuits "that refused to squeeze in the cupboard" piled shabbily on the sofa or on top of the "cottage-piano" (11:407-8), Gedge, like his chronically worried, thoroughly pedestrian wife, strikes one as unlikely to gain more from his work at the shrine than perhaps a few more shillings a week. How-
ever, from the first, James does make clear that although the Gedges seem to meet the qualifications set by the controllers of the "Birthplace" that they be a "united couple" (11:403), there lurks within Morris a sensitivity that sets him apart from his wife. In the dismal days at Blackport, "the tears came into his eyes sooner still than into his wife's while he looked about with her at their actual narrow prison, so grim with enlightenment, so ugly with industry, so turned away from any dream, so intolerable to any taste" (11:405). The tenacity with which he clings in the face of opposition to his "dream" of "enlightenment" and "taste" once he forges it at the "birthplace" under the influence of late genius of the place shows once and for all that under his unpromising milquetoast demeanor he has the stuff of the artist in him.

Throughout, Gedge's development is resisted by his wife. Satisfied with the extra money and with what she conceives pretentiously and foolishly to be an elevation in social status, undisturbed by the mendacious spiel demanded of her and her husband by the managers of the shrine and the tourists, Mrs. Gedge fears lest her husband's increasing disenchantment with the lies they must tell will lead him into a rebellious course that will cost them their position. Assuring herself that she is in good relation to the writer they ostensibly venerate at the "Birthplace," she declares with self-serving sentimentality, "We see Him because we love Him—that's what we do. How can we not, the old darling—what He's doing for us? There's no light . . . like true affection" (11:411). And when her husband, troubled by his part in what he calls "the Show" (11:421), in which they turn "Him" into that "old darling" in whose name they pander to the most sophomoric impulses of willingly deceived visitors, embarks on a series of "nightly prowls" (11:418) in which he seeks genuine "Communion" with the "enshrined Presence," she can only see in this the "danger" that he may become "affected" (11:422). In fact, of course, he is "affected," though not in the purely nonremunerative sense of being addled that his wife fears. "The point was," James notes, "that he was on his way to become two quite different persons, the public and the private—as to which it would somehow have to be man-
aged that these persons should live together” (11:425). That his way of managing this ultimately is to bring both selves together in a new, higher identity as artist is at this point still as inconceivable to him as it would be to his wife; and were the forging of this new identity to hinge on the encouragement of his spiritually and aesthetically lifeless mate, it clearly would remain unimaginable to him and unachieved.

The vital inspiration that Gedge does receive comes, significantly, from outside his marriage, through his contact with the Hayeses, a deeply sensitive, aesthetically alert, young married couple who achieve a perfect union rare among married folk in James’s work. Unlike the Gedges, they are admirably attuned not only to the promptings of beauty but to each other, as is strikingly apparent when they discuss their perception that the spirit of the great writer whose memory they revere is too all-encompassing to be snugly in residence at the “Birthplace.” The wife declares to her husband, “It’s rather a pity, you know, that He isn’t here. I mean as Goethe’s at Weimar. For Goethe is at Weimar.” To which her husband replies, “Yes, my dear; that’s Goethe’s bad luck. There he sticks. This man isn’t anywhere. I defy you to catch Him,” prompting her laughing response, “Why not say, beautifully, that, like the wind, He’s everywhere?” (11:436). It is such happiness and intelligence as seen in what Gedge feels to be this “tone of pleasantry, though of better pleasantry, . . . and more within his own appreciation than he had ever listened to” (11:436), which causes him to unburden himself to this pair about his difficulties.

Having done so, Gedge is left with much to ponder about his career and his marriage. The sympathy that he receives from this young pair obviously intensifies his internal conflict about his position at the shrine. Further, the image of marital fulfillment they present contrasts so obviously with the lack of identity of purpose flaying his own marriage that he finds himself looking at Mrs. Hayes and thinking, “If poor Isabel could only have been like that!—not as to youth, beauty, arrangement of hair or picturesque grace of hat—these things he didn’t mind; but as to sympathy, facility . . . !” (11:437). Finally, what, in effect, his unburdening
himself to the Hayeses and his admiration for them lead him to is a tendency for the first time to view his marriage from outside its dreary context, from the vantage point of that "private" half of himself who now knows not only that the "Birthplace" is fraudulent but that there is at least one marriage that makes his own seem as fraudulent as the shrine. And this new perspective, in turn, enables Gedge to see his way through to the opportunity of forging his new identity. This incarnation as artist, interestingly, gives the "Birthplace" an odd legitimacy by ensuring that at any rate one brilliant creator has been born on its premises.

The second visit of the Hayeses, after Gedge has assumed his new identity, is a means by which James enables the reader to see that no irony is being directed at Gedge and at his triumph. If this pair, sensitive and alert as they are, see him not as a humbug but as having achieved something grand, then clearly he has. This pivotal role played by the Hayeses both as inspirers of Gedge's growth and certifiers that the growth has, in fact, taken place might well make one wonder whether marriage is, for James, as inimical to art as Mrs. Gedge's demeanor initially makes it seem. Indeed, it is the very conflict within him between his desire not to take "the bread from [his wife's] mouth" (11:443) and his hatred of the lies that she wants him to feel no compunction in telling that leads him to develop his special art form of delivering the lies with an accomplished raconteur's grand flourishes. Too, the Gedges end up thoroughly reconciled to each other—"just as we were," as his wife puts it—but better off too because of the addition of a raise voted for their "sweet little stipend" (11:465) as acknowledgement by the managing committee of Gedge's ability to please the hordes of guileless tourists. Marriage, consequently, seems, at least for Gedge, to have become a relationship that can serve variously as catalyst for artistic achievement and a realm of easy domestic comfort in which he can savor his triumph. And if it can be this for Gedge, one might wonder whether it perhaps could be a means by which others would be enabled to come into full possession of their talents for self-expression and similarly flourish.
Unfortunately, despite the happy turn of events for Morris Gedge, there is really little in "The Birthplace" to convince one that James has come to see marriage as a relationship consistently conducive to the nurturing of the artistic impulse. The marvelously successful Hayes marriage is thoroughly atypical, of course, of most marriages poor Gedge has seen and, indeed, of most marriages found in James's work:

They were children of fortune, of the greatest, as it might seem to Morris Gedge, and they were of course lately married. . . . Somehow the world was theirs. . . . The thing was that the world was theirs not simply because they had money—he had seen rich people enough—but because they could in a supreme degree think and feel and say what they liked. They had a nature and a culture, a tradition, a facility of some sort—and all producing in them an effect of positive beauty—that gave a light to their liberty and an ease to their tone. (11:433)

Clearly, the Hayes union is exceptional, presented by James more as an ideal of what marriage ought to be, and hence as an educative contrast for both Gedge and the reader to the Gedge marriage, than as a representation of what most, or even many, marriages are. Rather than inspiring Gedge by showing him what he can hope his marriage will become, it instills in him a dissatisfaction with his matrimonial lot that prompts him to his subtle rebellion against his wife and all the shabby, conventional mendacity to which she seeks to tie him. Nor is even the ideal Hayes marriage presented without some reservation, for Gedge does observe that "they were of course lately married," a cautionary note thrown in by one who has seen, apparently, too much marriage to believe that in the long run more marriages turn out to be like the early stages of the Hayeses' wedded life than the middle stages of the Gedge union. Finally, there is little reason to believe that the latter segment of the Gedge union will be much better than the part James presents. What reconciliation James observes at the close is prompted more by Mrs. Gedge's fervent gratitude for the raise in their stipend than by any epiphany through which she comes to understand what her husband is doing and his motivations for doing it. The frenzied, fright-
ened tone she manifests when she fears that Gedge has gotten himself cashiered gives ample evidence of what sort of response Gedge might have expected from his wife over the years ahead had he in fact lost his job. Doubtless, even as she thankfully and bewilderedly stays beside him through the years to come, Gedge’s lot will indeed be a lonely one.

Thus, the major impression with which one is left at the close of “The Birthplace” is that Gedge’s curious triumph is achieved more through the influence of a long-dead genius, the encouragement of a virtually unique couple, and, perhaps most importantly, Gedge’s long-dormant talent for artistic expression than through the influence of his marriage, a relationship in which he had long stagnated. Gedge’s ability to use the peculiar circumstances in which he finds himself, then, is a singular happenstance, bespeaking no affirmation of marriage as an encourager to legitimate self-assertion through art. Though central to the particular art form that Gedge creates for himself are, James notes, a totally spurious “clerical unction” and the affectation of a “priestly character” (11:452), there is nonetheless running through James’s stories of art and marriage the underlying notion that the celibacy that one identifies with the priest’s calling may well be necessary for those who hope to create art.

Certainly, this view is central to “The Lesson of the Master.” In fact, the very lesson that the celebrated author Henry St. George conveys to his admirer, the promising young writer Paul Overt, is that for the artist “one’s children interfere with perfection. One’s wife interferes. Marriage interferes” (7:264). If the artist marries, St. George declares, “he does so at his peril—he does so at his cost” (7:264). And what that cost is precisely is the artist’s opportunity to attain the “great thing,” as he calls it, “the sense of having done the best—the sense, which is the real life of the artist and the absence of which is his death, of having drawn from his intellectual instrument the finest music that nature had hidden in it, of having played it as it should be played” (7:263). St. George attained this “great thing” once, early in his career. His failure to achieve it since, a failure sensed not by the literary world at large but only by a few who count, such as St.
George himself and Overt, to whom he confesses his sense of defeat, is attributed by St. George to his marriage. His wife, whose frail health and delicate good looks belie her iron will in matters fiscal, has been, St. George confides to Overt, the bane of his career, a veritable dragoness laying waste his work. Pressuring him to provide her and their strapping sons with all the advantages of fashionable English life, she sets St. George to work, as if turning out “a few” (7:220) novels, as she puts it, were simply a matter of diligently applied sound business practices. Put to his task in a windowless chamber before a tall desk at which he can only write standing, “like a clerk in a counting-house” (7:258), St. George cranks away at his suitably remunerative works with machinelike regularity from eleven till two each day. Thus does St. George do his obeisance to what he characterizes as the “the idols of the market—money and luxury and ‘the world,’ placing one’s children and dressing one’s wife—everything that drives one to the short and easy way” (7:239). If his devotion to these idols necessitates that he let his wife force him to burn a “bad book” (7:219) on which he is at work—one, presumably, that is too fine to sell well or that, perhaps, touches too closely on the Master’s sense of artistic loss—it is something he does without demur. Such, then, is the price, teaches the Master, that marriage exacts from his art; and, as “The Last of the Valerii,” “The Author of ‘Beltraffio,’” and “The Birthplace” all show, this innate antipathy of a wife for art is virtually a given in James’s marital fiction.

There is, to be sure, some ambiguity in “The Lesson of the Master” that does, perhaps, cast Mrs. St. George’s role as dragoness into doubt. St. George’s marriage after his wife’s death to the very girl he warned Overt not to imperil his career by marrying does raise some interesting questions. For example, is St. George’s impassioned attack on matrimony for the artist merely a smokescreen thrown up by a man who knows that his frail wife will not last long and is himself looking longingly at the girl Overt wishes to wed? Further, will St. George now, after scaring Overt away from the girl and winning her for himself, give the lie to his own thesis and write a new masterpiece, as Overt fears he will? Or, finally,
is St. George's warning, whether he seeks to win the girl for himself or not, merely the sleazy self-extenuation of an author who either chose willfully to prostitute his talent or found after his fine early work that he had tapped dry the vein of his talent? An affirmative answer to any of these questions, of course, reduces greatly the responsibility of Mrs. St. George and of marriage generally as destroyers of art.

However, there is, finally, little reason to believe that either any such affirmative answer or reduction of responsibility is intended by James. The apparent ambiguity serves the purpose of making Overt, who did, in fact, write a brilliant work while in self-imposed exile from the girl, question whether such renunciation as he endured and will, apparently, have to continue enduring at least as far as this girl is concerned, is indeed necessary for the true artist. As such, James makes vivid for his readers the agonizing self-doubts about his lonely course that the artist must inevitably confront and that impart to his calling its quality of awful heroism. To share Overt's doubts is to know, however briefly, the absence of comfortable signposts that the artist must know all his life. Further, there is little reason to believe that St. George will ever turn out any work again, much less any work of note. His demeanor at the close, "almost banal" and "almost smug" (7:280) as he confronts Overt at the celebration of his engagement, and his bride-to-be's appearance of being "happy with a kind of aggressiveness of splendor" (7:279) do not seem to suggest that literature is in the offing. Thus, although one cannot be sure, the likelihood is that St. George's lesson on behalf of the artist's celibacy is a sound one as James sees it; and, one might note, even if it were in this case meant to be taken ironically, the very fact that James here as in the stories we have looked at previously would think to associate terrible hindrances to art with marriage is another significant indication of his recurring fears that marriage may be inimical to self-expression through art.

Two other stories that make this same association and thus reflect the same fears are "The Real Thing" (1892) and "The Next Time" (1895). Though the lack of malleability for artis-
tic purposes revealed by Major and Mrs. Monarch in the former is the result more of their social training and absence of innate talent than of any other factors, the fact remains that they are married and that in their touching mutual support each reinforces the other's shortcomings as model. Nor is it merely coincidence, one suspects, that the painter and his models Oronte and Miss Churm, all skilled in their own ways in the artistic calling, are all, apparently, single. In the latter story, although Ray Limbert's wife does not keep him from producing his brilliant fiction, his misery as impecunious genius is increased by his knowing that he is failing to support adequately his wife and children. Moreover, his works are successful only in spite of his abortive efforts to prostitute his genius so that he can be a better provider.

Repression and overly aggressive self-expression are, as we have noted, evident as problems not merely in stories in which one of the mates is an artist. As "The Last of the Valerii" and "Madame de Mauves" manifest, international marriages are particularly prone to difficulty in James's fiction, so much so, in fact, that Leon Edel notes, "Implicit in these tales" is James's "sense that there could be no happy marriages between American and European." And the chief difficulty that these marriages have in the short fiction involves this very question, so prevalent in the stories of the relation of art and marriage, of whether matrimony, typically, is compatible with legitimate self-expression or simply a relationship too often marked by repression and immoderate efforts at self-assertion. Certainly, the suppression by his wife of Count Valerio's pagan heritage and the mutual misunderstanding of the Baron de Mauves and his unyieldingly American wife as they manifest traits instilled in them by their different national backgrounds reflect this question implicitly. Nowhere, however, in James's short fiction are the problems of manifesting one's own identity while married to someone of foreign birth and training explored more extensively and explicitly than in the sardonic "Lady Barberina," a tale that delineates all the difficulties perceived in the two earlier short tales of international marriage but, avoiding the
somewhat heavy-handed melodrama of both through subtle
wit, conveys more tellingly the loss that James sees as ensu-
ing all too frequently in such marriages.

Unmarried, free to live in manners that their national
backgrounds have trained them to, Lady Barberina and Doc-
tor Jackson Lemon are happy and no threat to each other’s
happiness and way of life. Married, they are caught up in con-
flict that is irremediable save for the sacrifice of one or the
other’s sense of identity and purpose. When first seen, before
the marriage, Lady Barberina seems one of the fortunate
ones. Glimpsed riding proudly and happily with her family,
among friends and social peers amid “the deep, dark English
verdure” (5:200) of Hyde Park, Lady Barb seems little less
than the finest example in England of the beauty and self-
assured grace that centuries of upper-class breeding in a sta-
ble, hierarchical social order can produce. Lemon, the young
American galloping in the park the same day on a horse too
large for him, seems no less fortunate and no less an admi-
rable product of his national culture. Wealthy, as Lady Barb
is not, Lemon has nonetheless, in the best American manner,
pursued a career anyway, becoming a physician. Though his
money has to some extent dulled his appetite for achieve-
ment in his field, a friend asserts, “He takes a great interest
in medical science, and . . . he will always be doing some-
ting in the way of research” (5:211). The very picture of him
sitting a horse too large for him denotes his American ag-
gressiveness and irrepressible desire to overcome odds and
assert himself, if not in medicine then certainly elsewhere.
That such a pair might make a brilliant marriage is the fond
wish of Lady Beauchemin, who thinks “English and Ameri-
can society ought to be but one— . . . the best of each—a
great whole” (5:219). Unfortunately, though, it is a wish that
James sees as having virtually no chance of becoming reality.

Ironically, James shows, it is those very traits that make
Lady Barb and Lemon the “best” of English and American so-
ciety that doom their marriage from the start. Lemon’s de-
termination “to marry Lady Barb and carry everything out”
(5:262) against the advice of his American friends and after
confronting disquieting difficulties with her parents over the
marriage "settlement"—a British arrangement that he finds offensive—grows as much out of Yankee determination, stubbornness, and the will to assert himself socially as out of affection for the girl or understanding of her makeup. His blithe statement "If she likes me, she'll like my country" (5:237) reveals not only his culpable ignorance of his prospective bride's nature but an optimism and a faith in the power of love and the charm of his native land that James sees as peculiarly, quaintly, and rather dangerously American. Obviously, determination, optimism, and even the will to achieve social grandeur can be admirable traits, but, symptomatic as they are of the still raw, still new, democratic way of life in America, they are incomprehensible and vaguely irritating to the quintessential English Lady Barb, particularly when, living in the United States with her husband, she finds herself cut off from the world she has known and in which she has flourished. Similarly, when her father characterizes Lady Barb succinctly as "a clever, well-grown girl, [who] takes her fences like a grasshopper" (5:234), he is marking those traits that make her the fine product of the upper-class English way of life who attracted Lemon in the first place but also revealing inadvertently the narrow range of her accomplishments and interests, a narrowness that will lead to her unhappiness in America and to the exasperation of her husband.

More knowing than her son, Lemon's mother, "who had never thought of matrimony without a community of feeling in regard to religion and country" (5:285), treats her daughter-in-law from the first on her arrival in America "with the greatest gentleness—all the gentleness that was due to a young woman who was in the unfortunate position of having been married one couldn't tell why" (5:274). Though certainly anything but brutal and overbearing with his unhappy wife, Lemon has little understanding of her situation. Unable to regard Central Park as a suitable substitute for Hyde Park, finding American conversation too intense and continuous, loath to visit among democrats, whose manners she detests, whose recreation she abhors, and whose propensity to measure themselves against her she finds at once ludicrous and
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vaguely baffling, Lady Barb is as out of place in New York as Lemon unknowingly was in London. Consequently, she spends her time wishing only to return to England or, as a miserably inadequate substitute for it, to talk of her homeland with her husband. This, the only real source of satisfying intimacy she has with him, apparently, is not enough finally to make a marriage. More often than not, in fact, Lady Barb feels that with Jackson absent only when he is doing research or reading a paper to a medical society, she has "more of her husband's company than she counted upon at the time she married" (5:276). Moreover, such few warm moments as they have are never seen, and the conversation between them that is directly presented is almost akin to stichomythia in its prevalence of short, clipped utterances, conveying an intense coldness and repressed hostility under its calm that show little sympathy on Lemon's part and augur badly for the future of their union. Indeed, when last seen, Lemon, having taken permanent residence with his wife in England, seems as miserable as did his wife in America. No longer doing research, unwilling to see either Mrs. Freer, an old American friend who warned him against the marriage, or her husband, who encouraged him to marry the girl, Lemon has become a repressed, ineffectual man. Too, he has a little daughter "with features that [he] already scans for the look of race—whether in hope or fear" (5:301) is not known, though one has dark suspicions, of course, of his feelings should the girl show marked signs of her mother's background. This is particularly ironic in view of the fact that it was the English racial traits of the child's mother "which were after all what he had married her for, thinking that they would be a fine temperamental heritage for his brood" (5:297). Thus concludes the effort by the "best" of each culture to achieve a union. Instead of mutual accommodation to each other's identities, there is merely suppression of one or the other, as husband or wife must become an unassertive married stranger in a confusing foreign land.

There are two other marriages in this story, one an international union that does achieve happiness of a sort, the other a marriage of Americans that is conventionally happy.
in a way that one rarely sees in James’s works. The former is
the union between Lady Barb’s younger sister, Lady Agatha,
a flighty, flirty, too pliant girl, and Herman Longstraw, a
loud, genial, essentially spurious fellow of dubious origins.
Neither is a particularly admirable example of his or her na­
tional type, and James’s point in bringing the pair into the
story seems to be to show that only such overly adaptable
types, devoid of developed identities, settled tastes, prin­
ciples, or substance can have a happy international marriage.
Significantly, James points out “it is as good as known that
Jackson Lemon supports them” (5:301), a further indicant,
one suspects, that this pair lack substance and that such hap­
piness as they know neither ought to be sought after nor
thought to bespeak any faith on James’s part that interna­
tional marriages might be a success. The latter marriage is
that of the aptly named Freers, a distinctly American couple
highly reminiscent of Howells’s Marches in their openness,
friendly badinage with each other, and essentially pragmatic
orientation. Such happiness as they know is hard-won, for
they lost a child in the distant past and still feel that loss
keenly. Though Freer’s desire to see Lemon marry Lady Barb
so that he and his wife can observe how the young pair will
do is troubling, the Freers do seem, by and large, likable and
even admirable. What James includes them for, apparently, is
not to present through them a paean to the typically
Howellsian sort of marriage but a contrast to the interna­
tional marriage. Whereas such marriages as that of the
Freers rarely interested James, probably striking him, as we
have noted, as rather pedestrian, the very terms of their suc­
cess, with mutual accommodation implicit in every relaxed
bit of conversation reported, points up the reasons for the
difficulties undergone by Lemon and Lady Barb, two whose
rigid commitments to the countries of their birth will not al­
low for a marriage in which both mates can assert their ident­
ities.

Hence, in international marriages, as in marriages involv­
ing artists, James’s short fiction presents more difficulties in­
volving self-assertion than it does solutions. In a number of
other short tales written after 1881, he shows that another
difficulty stifling mature assertion of self in all too many marriages is self-deception. As we have noted with regard to other problems that James depicts, self-deception is not peculiar to marriage in his fiction. But, again as with the others, self-deception, James shows, is, if not more prevalent in marriage than elsewhere, more intense, more prolonged, and more prone to blight lives irremediably. Bearing on this aspect of James’s misgivings about marriage, though not, strictly speaking, a marriage story, is the strange “Maud-Evelyn” (1900). When Marmaduke gives up his plans to marry and instead spends his young manhood irretrievably caught up in venerating the memory of a dead young girl he never knew, convincing himself with the aid of her bereft parents that she grew up and that he loved her and married her, only to have their happy union ended by her untimely death, his indulgence in this life-denying self-delusion is merely a disquieting literalization of what a number of James’s characters do when, tying themselves to a relationship highly productive of self-delusion, they marry and incur personal disaster. No less damaged by a life-denying self-delusion is the widowed Mrs. Warren Hope in “The Abasement of the Northmores” (1900). Her unwillingness to acknowledge that her late husband was a man of far less ability in his career of government service than was his friend Northmore, the man she rejected for him (and subconsciously wishes she had not), has led her into a joyless existence compounded of envy and a sense of undeserved obscurity while both men lived and to virtual paranoia now that both are gone. Her futile, frenzied efforts to build up her husband’s posthumous reputation (if possible, at the expense of Northmore’s and to the chagrin of his widow) are obviously the pathetic expedients of a woman who sought vicarious achievement through her marriage and could not find even that paltry fulfillment. But, even more, they are again symptomatic of the destructive self-deception to which James finds so many of his married characters prone.

More humorous in tone is “The Path of Duty” (1884), but the humor does not belie the fact that the marriage depicted in it is one ruined by the self-serving self-deception of the
husband. Devoted to a woman other than his fiancée, Ambrose Tester renounces, out of ostensible fidelity to his engagement vows, all possibility of either an affair or marriage with her. Though such a decision might seem strikingly high-minded, it is soon apparent that Ambrose has gained more than he has given up. Before long he is spending innumerable intimate hours after his marriage with his renounced love, basking in the glow of her approval of his moral strength and rewarding her with similar admiration. That his poor wife, consequently, finds herself with little to do other than puzzle in loneliness over her husband's behavior seemingly has no effect on him, caught up as he is in this exercise of mutual congratulation. Again, then, marriage, a breeder of self-deception, results in either unhappiness or groundless self-satisfaction. For one such as James who so values consciousness and self-awareness, this aspect of marriage is, needless to say, particularly unfortunate.

Perhaps the short work after 1881 epitomizing this specific failing in marriage is the late, unduly neglected novella "Mora Montravers" (1909), a sardonic account of the multiple self-deceptions engendered by an especially luckless union. As middle-aged, ineffectual "poor Traffle" (12:267) contemplates his orphaned niece Mora's decision to live with the little "painter-man" (12:268) Walter Puddick instead of in the dreary house in which he and his stolid wife, Jane, have raised her, the quiet desperation that unbeknownst to him and his wife has characterized their marriage makes itself felt for him. "Living on their sufficient means in their discreet way, liked, respected, and even perhaps a bit envied, in the Wimbledon world . . ." (12:268) has not been enough, he comes suddenly to see, to make a marriage, to compensate for "their thin ideals, their bloodless immunity, their generally compromised and missed and forfeited frankness . . ." (12:273). However, this revelation that he has been mired in self-deception comes too late in the game for Traffle. Unaware, though, that he is too long accustomed by now to the yoke of convention and too timid by nature and ingrained habit to make good an escape from the stultifying marriage he has come so suddenly to despise, Traffle does not perceive
that it is too late and seeks to use his niece’s flight as a means to his own, thus embarking on a self-deception every bit as pathetic as the one from which he has only just been awakened and far more ludicrous.

The particular form that his effort at reform takes is that of regarding himself as a sophisticated, sentient person long immured in Philistia with an insensitive mate but now gradually and gracefully asserting his identity and winning his way, through the example of the gloriously “Bohemian” (12:313) Mora and Puddick and such contacts with them as he has, into his rightful realm. Here, one assumes, he and the erring couple can regard each other as loving comrades in the task of keeping alight the flames of beauty and freedom. Several facts, however, undercut Traffic’s escapist vision. First, Puddick may not have nearly as much talent as Traffle is so quick to believe he does, may, in fact, be little more than a ne’er-do-well who finally marries his mistress Mora only to get the money offered him by Jane to do so. Second, Mora, rather than the exotic apostle of bohemianism Traffle takes her to be, may only be a rather selfish, shallow, little thing whose avowed desire to be “free” consists of little more than the wish to partake of a good time whenever she can find it. Certainly, it is with no compunction whatever that she deserts her new husband to take up with the “smart,” obviously nonbohemian Sir Bruce Bagley, Bart. And, finally, Traffle himself probably is motivated more by an illicit, unconscious passion for Mora (no blood relation to him) than by genuine avuncular affection. Thus, embarked on the pursuit of nothing less than a new identity that he cannot hope realistically to achieve, seeking to feel at one with people whom he more than likely misunderstands and overrates, and driven by an illicit longing that may well have precipitated his awareness of his marital dissatisfaction in the first place, Traffle pursues his course of self-deceit.

Though, as evidenced by Arthur Miller’s A View from the Bridge, a depiction of another uncle’s troublesome attachment to his niece, there is much in Traffle’s situation susceptible of tragic delineation, James sees no tragic potential in his protagonist here. More dreamer and bumbler than doomed
hero, Traffle maunders along comically. He tacitly admits to Mora "that her aunt was a goose of geese—compared to himself and her" (12:291); vaguely identifies with Puddick because he too once dabbled in painting and is, of course, drawn more powerfully to Mora than he knows; coyly alludes, to Puddick's horror, to certain unnamed "realities" of which "you must be having your full share" (12:277); and, finally, dreams that the pair of lovers will some day see their way clear to "invite him, their humble admirer, to tea" (12:293). All the while, he assures himself, he is "becoming under the precious initiation opened to him by Mora, whether directly, or indirectly, much more a man of the world" (12:290). His illusions about his new identity and about any special affection his niece may have for him are effectually dispelled when, virtually overcome with emotion at coming upon her by chance after not having seen her for a long while, he finds himself treated with no warmth from her but only informed airily that she is now Mrs. Puddick but is leaving her husband. Thus does Traffle learn to his chagrin that, all his efforts and dreams notwithstanding, for Mora he will inevitably "stand or fall with fatal Jane" and that "it was in fact with fatal Jane tied as a millstone round his neck that he at present knew himself sinking" (12:307-8). He has the clear sense too now, perhaps hardest of all for him to take, "of having seen the last of Mora as completely as if she had just seated herself in the car of a rising balloon that would never again descend to earth" (12:313). He soon finds, however, that he has not seen the last of poor, rejected Puddick. Coming home, he finds the fellow bohemian of his imaginings all too comfortably ensconced with "fatal Jane," who, having undertaken without her husband's knowledge a search for new identity and new freedom all her own, is providing the little "painter-man" with a solace prompted by underlying motivations the nature of which Traffle is exceedingly well-equipped by now to guess. Abashed, Traffle can only muse enviously, "Lord, the fun some people did have. Even Jane . . . unmistakably, was in for such a lot" (12:333).

As one follows Traffle through his misguided course of self-deception, one is inevitably reminded of Lambert
Strether, another man who belatedly tried to live all he could, and of Strether's vicarious and ultimately painful involvement with Chad and Madame de Vionnet. Indeed, like Strether, Traffle even has an embassy to carry out, as he acts as his wife's intermediary, offering Mora and Puddick money set aside by Jane if they are willing to marry. However, there is a major difference between the luckless Traffle and Mrs. Newsome's ambassador. Strether finally attains a redemptive renunciatory vision that, James believes, will enable him to face all that lies ahead with grace and courage. Traffle, on the other hand, the victim of his marriage, learns little. Left fruitlessly envying "fatal Jane," for "even" she will now have "fun," Traffle, clearly, has grown little. Leon Edel's characterization of this tale as one of "human waste, mistaken lives, wrong decisions, lost opportunities"¹⁵ seems applicable to no one in the work as much as Traffle, who, finding that he has deceived himself for years into believing that his empty marriage is fulfilling, rushes desperately into what are merely new, more humiliating self-deceptions. His failure to realize that he has been shaped too effectively by his marriage to be a type other than he is or to live more fully than he does will, one suspects, be repeated by his wife, who will doubtless learn as little from the experience with Puddick as Traffle did with Mora about the power of marriage to enmesh one inextricably in a web of self-deception. Apparently, then, James, here as elsewhere, sees the frustrations of marriage as often breeding self-deceit of such staying power as to make the clear, illusion-free thought of a grown Strether impossible to achieve.

Breeding repression, self-deception, lacerating conflicts, feverish attempts at self-assertion, marriage in James's shorter fiction after 1881 is a relationship pervaded invariably by loss and pain. Little in this is, of course, different from what occurs in the earlier short fiction of marriage; but all here is heightened, as we have noted, because of James's greater subtlety and intensity of focus. As before, much here is the material of melodrama, always, as Peter Brooks notes, a sign in James's work of deep concern over the implications of social disorder inherent in the flawed lives he depicts. The
bitter struggle of father and mother over their beautiful, frail son, the plight of a woman married to a pathological liar who himself is pathetically vulnerable to the devious attack of his wife's former suitor, a young man wedding himself to a dead girl he never knew, an uncle amorously pursuing his wayward niece, the conflict between a wealthy American and the English noblewoman he married over where they will make their home, the attempt of a virtually paranoid widow to humble the family of the dead man she did not marry but wishes unconsciously that she did—all this, needless to say, is the stuff less of "realism" than of melodrama; but James by emphasizing event less than the internal makeup of those involved, as he did not do in the marriage works before 1881, save, perhaps, in "Madame de Mauves," gears all in the post-1881 marriage works, melodramatic or not, to the overriding question of whether marriage is compatible with legitimate self-assertion and valid self-development. Inevitably, as we have seen throughout this chapter, he concludes that they are not.

1. An exception to this is the weak "Georgina's Reasons" (1884), a shallow, rather silly tale of a flighty, selfish girl's bigamy and her first husband's continuing commitment to the vow he made her. Because of the weakness of the tale, his renunciation of personal happiness in order to maintain his loyalty to his vow carries none of the moral authority of Isabel's similar renunciation and seems merely a somewhat foolish, quirky thing to do.


4. Speaking of the state between the Ambients that I have characterized as a "truce," the narrator notes (5:336), "[Ambient] had the art, by his manner, by his smile, by his natural kindliness, of reducing the importance of [the difference between himself and his wife] in the common concerns of life, and Mrs. Ambient, I must add, lent herself to this transaction with a very good grace."


6. Scoggins suggests that Ambient is Frankenstein-like in the effect he has on the narrator (p. 267).


9. This is borne out, as Ora Segal notes, in the “wry” and “amused” tone, as she describes it, that predominates in the closing passages of the tale (The Lucid Reflector [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1969], p. 124).

10. Segal, p. 120.


12. James, Complete Tales, 6:11.

13. James, Complete Tales, 5:9.


15. James, Complete Tales, 12:10.