

East Angels: Woolson's Revision of James's The Portrait of a Lady

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Though she positioned herself playfully as an "admiring aunt" in late nineteenth-century literary society, Constance Fenimore Woolson was a deeply involved member of that society, interacting with and openly critiquing the writing of her male and female peers. Of her relationship to her male literary compatriots, Joan Weimer observes that "[h]er response to Cooper, James and other male literary giants was as critical and analytical as it was admiring; by appropriating and transforming some of their key images and themes, she critiqued and revised their work" (x). Of course, the writer's relationship to James draws the most interest and has been most difficult to accurately characterize. While Cheryl Torsney recognizes the unfortunate fact that, "Woolson's works have been read, even by her champions, as the ash from which the Jamesian phoenix rises" (20), she corrects this appraisal of James's female peer, suggesting that Woolson and James should be regarded rather as "part of the same textual fabric" (35).

Regarding one's ability to inspire the other, a more reciprocal relationship seems to have existed between Woolson and James than was once supposed.

In terms of the former's writing, perhaps the most important aspect of the relationship they maintained at the end of the century was Woolson's incorporation of her critiques and revisions of James's fiction into her own. Joanne Vickers, for instance, has located in Woolson's *The Street of the Hyacinth* a vindication of the American heroine whom she finds indicted in James's *Daisy Miller*. Similarly, Torsney reads Woolson's *Anne* for its relation to James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, discovering that "they focus on similar themes yet produce gender-inflected results" (35). Since *Anne* and *Portrait* were published concurrently, they may readily be examined for evidence of concerns that were common to two writers composing at about the same time.

Five years after *Portrait* appeared, however, Woolson published *East Angels*, a novel which also bears similarities to James's masterpiece. My purpose is to examine these similarities in order to invoke the retrospective critique of James's *Portrait* that underlies Woolson's text. I would suggest that *East Angels* embodies Woolson's determination to revise James's portrayal of a woman's struggle against male domination, thereby calling the *Portrait* writer's portrayal of the American heroine into question.

Admittedly, *Portrait* and *East Angels* arise from very different milieus: James's novel is set in the comparatively stable social fabric of the Old World; Woolson's in a declining, postbellum society in Florida. Woolson's development of several ethnically 'other' characters contrasts markedly with James's concentration on Anglo-Saxon nobles and the near-noble bourgeoisie. Still, similarities abound. Both novels portray an encounter between two ideologically different cultures. James sends his representative American heroine to the Old World on an Emersonian quest for a direct experience (*Portrait* 45); Woolson deposits her post-Puritan New Englanders Evert Winthrop and Margaret Harold into a Spanish-inflected remnant of the Old South. Both novels reveal a preoccupation with marriage bonds that is typical of the genre at late-century. Both portray a woman vexed by an unhappy marriage, and both concentrate on her responses to her unlucky situation. In *Portrait*, Isabel Archer realizes her misfortune gradually in the course of the novel, then maneuvers quickly at the end to cope with her circumstances. In *East Angels*, Margaret Harold suffers silently with her ill fortune, leading others to believe that she, rather than her husband, is guilty of a shakable matrimonial devotion. Both writers provide insight into what a late-century woman caught in a bad marriage is expected to do, and what she in fact does.

James and Woolson wrote their novels from within the transitional no-woman's-land of the waning True Woman and the dawning New Woman. Consequently, we find their female heroines ambiguously upholding and breaking early-century social molds designed to shape female behavior. Kurt Hochenauer locates Isabel Archer at the center of this transition, finding that she "remains caught between a stale ideology insisting women de-emphasize their sexuality to gain equal footing with men and a growing, nineteenth-century movement among feminists working to legitimize a woman's sex drive" (19). Annette Niemetz suggests that even within this changing social climate, Isabel succumbs doubly to convention, that "[w]hile the novel begins as a study of a single woman, searching for options other than marriage, who must control her sexuality because it could shatter her and society's notion of what is 'decent,' it ends as a study of the same woman, now married who continues to control her sexuality because it threatens her respectability, morality, and marriage" (383).

Beyond issues of her sexuality, *Portrait* treats the heroine's quest for personal liberty and her desire to construct her own destiny within a society that both binds and determines her.

Like James, Woolson portrayed the late-century feminine dilemma of the transitional woman—her not-quite-willingness to be pure, pious and submissive; her still-firm reluctance to demand her own sexual liberation. While James may convey his somewhat distanced empathy for such a woman, Woolson—a nineteenth-century woman herself, living through the transition—may move closer to the issues. Torsney differentiates between male and female writers' presentations of female characters, reminding us that, in the tradition of women's writing, "the female character is active, not passive; the protagonist is the writer's alter ego rather than a female character for whom the male author has a large degree of sympathy" (40). Thus, we may look to Woolson for "works [that] empower women in many ways rather than lament their powerlessness in the outer world while compensating them with an imaginative inner life" (41).

In *East Angels*, Woolson's Margaret Harold represents such a model of feminine strength. Unlike Isabel Archer, Margaret appears to be stability itself. A product of post-Puritan New England, she is imbued with the self-regulating moral firmness of her ancestors. Of her hard-shelled demeanor, her companion Mrs. Rutherford comments, "I don't believe she feels little things as some of us do, some of us who are perhaps more sensitive; she is never nervous, never disturbed, her temper is so even that it is almost exasperating" (*East Angels* 76). Like Isabel, however, she brings to her new setting a past that remains a secret, at the beginning of the novel, to all but herself. And like the Isabel of *Portrait*'s conclusion, she is eventually forced to make a decision concerning her unhappy marriage.

If Isabel departs for Europe to escape her suffocating relationship with Goodwood, Margaret arrives at East Angels not to escape, but to perpetuate her own misfortune. There, she is reacquainted with Evert Winthrop, with whom she shares "a long-established, though quiet and well-governed, coldness" (72). Winthrop envisions Margaret as what might be considered a hyperbolically threatening version of the imminent New Woman, one who willfully leaves her husband to live independently. Through his eyes, we see the spectre of a new breed of woman emerging to replace patriarchy's long-held position that "duty as a wife . . . clearly was, and would to the end of time continue, to remain with her husband—not to leave him . . ." (137). Winthrop's discovery of the truth that her husband Lanse, in fact, is responsible for the couple's separation, causes the chill to wear off of his attitude toward Margaret. Once the secret of her philandering husband is revealed, Margaret is faced with a choice remarkably like that of Isabel.

If Isabel conducts a failed rebellion against male power, Margaret maintains pure, seemingly self-defeating submission throughout *East Angels*. While critical appraisals of Woolson's character as stubbornly self-sacrificial varied little over a century, contemporary readings have been somewhat different. Weimer suggests that the author "has been misread, in both periods [the time in which she wrote and today], as a conservative advocate of womanly repression in the name of self-control, and of masochistic self-sacrifice in the name of goodness" (xxiv). To the contrary, Weimer perceives Margaret Harold's self-sacrificial front as a "veneer" behind which lies a rebellion against male authority and a struggle for feminine freedom (xxiv).

We may bring the irony of Woolson's heroine to the fore, however, if we consider *East Angels* as Woolson's critical response to James's *Portrait*. As we have observed, the two novels bear a few conspicuous similarities that facilitate such a reading. In both, the heroine is offered a way out of her misery; in both, she elects to remain in her unsatisfying marriage. I suggest that Woolson constructed *East Angels* to align with *Portrait* in its presentation first of a seduction scene allusory to the Edenic temptation scene in *Genesis*, and secondly of an ending that comments on its heroine's decision to resist such temptation. By focusing on the notable differences in these similar elements in the two novels, we find both Woolson's critique of *Portrait*, and the irony that underlies the character of Margaret.

Both James and Woolson locate the seductions of their heroines in a natural setting. When Isabel encounters Goodwood near the end of *Portrait*, they are on the lawn at Gardencourt. The "great oaks," "acres of turf" and the "rustic bench" (428) on which Isabel is seated suggest the Biblical scene in which Eve is tempted by Satan. When she becomes aware of Goodwood's presence, Isabel recalls that she had not heard his approaching footfall (429); he has come upon her as silently, perhaps, as a serpent. His initial plea to her is virtually the same as that of the serpent to Eve: "trust me" (431). Goodwood proceeds to offer her sure escape from her misfortunes, bending God's—and patriarchy's—laws by insisting that "a woman deliberately made to suffer is justified in anything in life" (434). Isabel, like Eve, is offered a forbidden fruit, and "the very taste of it, as of something potent, acrid and strange, forced open her set teeth" (434). Unlike Eve,

however, she soon resists temptation and flees the garden scene, discovering for herself “a very straight path” (436).

Woolson sets Margaret’s temptation in the moist and seductive Floridian Monnlungs. The scene itself is alluring; Margaret admits that “a strong exertion of will was necessary to prevent the mind from becoming fascinated by [it]” (467). She and Winthrop, traveling through the swamp by canoe, search for her missing husband, when Winthrop, echoing Satan’s advances on Eve, invites her to “let yourself go” (470). The swamp is, in Biblically allusive fashion, inundated with serpents that threaten Margaret’s safety. Like Goodwood in Portrait’s seduction scene, Winthrop charges Margaret to “trust yourself to me,” promising that “I will bring you out safely” (474), presumably both from the Monnlungs and from her unhappy circumstance. Unaware of the import of his comment, Winthrop points out that they now occupy “an antediluvian forest” (470)—inferring that they are in fact in Eden, before the Fall that eventually results in the Flood. Margaret, like Isabel, rallies, imploring Winthrop to find “the narrow place” (473)—perhaps the Biblical straight and narrow path that will allow her to avoid her fall from conventional notions of virtue.

While these two scenes—Isabel’s temptation at Gardencourt and Margaret’s in the Monnlungs—are strikingly similar in their recasting of the Edenic drama and in the fact that both heroines resist their respective temptations, the scenes also exhibit telling differences. In James’s rendition of the temptation, Goodwood exerts oppressive control over Isabel as the two argue over Isabel’s future. Typical of the suitor from whom Isabel may have fled to Europe to gain control of her life, Goodwood demonstrates his aggression, grasping her with “a motion that looked like violence” (428). When he confronts her with the truth: “You’re the most unhappy of women, and your husband’s a fiend,” she reacts to this aggression “as if he had struck her” (432). Then, James reveals to us, Goodwood commits his ultimate act of physical domination.

He glared at her a moment through the dusk, and the next instant she felt his arms about her and his lips on her lips. His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession. (436)

In this scene, the power of masculinity over femininity—depicted as not only physical domination but as an uncontrollably seductive force—is fully demonstrated. Goodwood’s force is both physically and emotionally compelling; Isabel must, and does, give in. By narrating this act, which constitutes more a rape than a seduction, James also demonstrates the preeminence of patriarchal power over any sign of uprise. Isabel’s offered escape from the oppression of her unhappy marriage would only constitute her further oppression by the physically and psychologically aggressive Goodwood. Either choice, Goodwood or her husband Osmond, would mark her ultimate submission to patriarchal imperatives.

In Woolson’s temptation scene, on the other hand, it is the heroine who exerts control. Woolson reveals that as Margaret and Winthrop navigate the Monnlungs and its impelling allurements, Margaret, in fact, acted as pilot, half kneeling, half sitting at the bow, one hand on the canoe’s edge, her face turned forward, she gave her directions slowly, all her powers concentrated upon recalling correctly and keeping unmixed from present impression her memory of the channel. (467)

Woolson depicts Margaret firmly and capably commandeering the action in this scene. The setting itself reflects the feminine; the swamp’s “silver moss” in “long, filmy veils,” its “vines” in “strange convolutions,” its “air-plants . . . flaring, and gaping” (468-9) are all suggestive of a fertile womb. Margaret’s “narrow place,” which appears to Winthrop as “a broad circular space of vivid scarlet, in the centre of which a smaller and revolving disk of colors like those of peacocks’ feathers, continually dilating and contracting” (479), represents the vaginal canal, that narrow space over which Margaret maintains control throughout the scene. As James places his tempted heroine within the man’s world of an English estate’s sculpted lawn, Woolson locates hers in a setting which is symbolically feminine—thus affording her full domain over the circumstances. Though the episode proves suffocatingly oppressive for Margaret, though she even faints during the journey, she holds consciously to her resolve. Winthrop plies her: “There’s no use trying to deceive me Margaret, I know what your life is; remember, Lanse told me everything” (471). He even threatens: “I don’t know what would happen if I should put this oar down and—let you pity me” (478). Throughout the scene, however, Winthrop himself is feminized. At one point, fearing that he will faint, Margaret takes off her black lace scarf and “[binds] the lace tightly round his forehead . . . fastening it with her little gold pin” (478). Winthrop