

SZEGED SERIES IN AMERICAN STUDIES 2

CRITICAL EXPLORATIONS OF U.S. CULTURE, LITERATURE AND HISTORY



EDITED BY
RÉKA M. CRISTIAN AND ZOLTÁN DRAGON



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A LITERARY AFTERLIFE: THE FIGURE OF HENRY JAMES IN COLM TÓIBÍN'S *THE MASTER*

Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

There has been a Henry James revival of biofictions about the author's life and appropriations of his novels in the past two decades. Colm Tóibín's *The Master* is one of the most popular biofictions about James to date, which examines the popular gender aspect of James's life and work by reenacting Leon Edel's famous biography of James. The expectation would be that Tóibín's novel will expose James's implied homoerotic inclinations as central to our understanding of his output. Instead, this essay finds that Edel had been fully aware of and communicative about this aspect of James' life, it did not need to be introduced by Tóibín. Instead, the main difference between the two accounts is the way James's psychology is represented in Tóibín's novel. In *The Master*, Edel's psychobiography has been turned into a psychological novel by Tóibín that focuses on the ambiguities in James's performances of gender identity.²⁰

Keywords: Henry James, Colm Tóibín's *The Master*, Leon Edel, biography, biofiction, gender

Proema

What can be the reason for the popularity of Henry James in contemporary fiction? Colm Tóibín's widely admired *The Master* and David Lodge's *Author! Author!*, both published in 2004, represent the tip of the iceberg only. Bethany Layne's *Henry James in Contemporary Fiction* explores the phenomenon by asking what conditions enabled the emergence of this form of engagement with James the author and his work. Layne argues that the contemporary popular interest in James was generated by theoretical concerns with the nature of textuality and the subject, interests that intersect with issues of gender and

sexuality in James studies. On the one hand, the questioning of biography as empirically founded coincides with reCanonizations of James the formalist Master. On the other hand, the notion of the authorial subject as a discursive entity resonates to James's practice of narration through one character's consciousness.

In biofictions about Henry James a postmodern interest in textuality comes along with the sacrifice of the notion of the author as a biologically rooted, stable, reconstructible entity. Biofictions relate to each other self-consciously, and the author's name becomes a figure in them (Layne 2020, 5). In the case of James, the gaps in his life and an outpouring of biographies paved the way for biofictions that create the plural figure of "James" the author and that suggest origins for his fictions.

Not surprisingly, the confluence of James criticism and biofiction has highlighted the theme of biography in James reception. In McWhirter's *Henry James in Context* Sheila Teahan criticizes early biographers who relied heavily on the autobiographies and "assumed them to be history" (Teahan 2010, 63) and also those who took the continuity between life and fiction for granted (ibid.). She summarizes the story of James's implied sexuality in the biographies to showcase the ever changeable forms biography can take. – As if providing an explicit further case study of Teahan's line of thought, Michael Anesko's *Monopolising the Master: Henry James and the Politics of Modern Literary Scholarship* tells the story of how Leon Edel's monopoly of writing about James's life resulted in the censoring of its homoerotic subtext (Anesko 2012 and Buchholtz 2014, 33-4). Based on thorough archival research, Anesko shows how the politics of scholarship forcefully formulated a mythical narrative about James's life. At the same time, it makes one wonder what further narratives may possibly lie buried in the archives.

For the James centennial in 2016, the Library of America published James's *Autobiographies* in Horne's edition which provided many readers an occasion for remembering Henry James. The edition contained not only the three (two and a half) volumes of James's autobiographies but also eight other related reminiscences (Horne (ed.) 2016). Adam Gopnik reflected on the new edition by focusing on James' image of James the boy and through this on James's evocation of the imaginative mind in his novels (Gopnik 2016). Conversely, Colm Tóibín's reaction to the edition is an overview of the adventures of James' biography through references to Anesko's account of the scandal in the

James archive. Tóibín credits Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick whose work on gender performativity in the 1990s provided a framework of reading that transformed James from the distant master into a contemporary spirit (Tóibín 2016).

The examination of Tóibín's *The Master* in 2022 needs to acknowledge the role of Tóibín's novel within the critical work of academic Jamesians: not only did it provide a delicious way to engage with James's style through pastiche but, perhaps just as importantly, it directed critical attention to the politics of memory studies in the James archive. Tóibín relied on Kosofsky Sedgwick in writing his biofiction, while James criticism in turn refocused on discursive intersections of gender, biography, memory, and identity politics. The essay below maps out representational strategies in *The Master* and Edel's biography in order to situate them in the discourse of biographical criticism on James.

Introduction

The James industry seems to be in full swing at the moment. It is not so much that innumerable dissertations are being written and books published on James – this has been normal critical practice since the 1940s. Rather, and perhaps more importantly, his figure and work are adapted to film versions and to new novels, so he is practically becoming part of the contemporary cultural output through the allusions. Speaking about the films, one must mention Jane Campion's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996) that was followed by Iain Softley's *The Wings of the Dove* (1997), Agnieszka Holland's *Washington Square* (1997) and James Ivory's *The Golden Bowl* (2000). More recently, James can often be sighted as a theme or character in British fiction, too. Emma Tennant's *Felony* (2003) is a rewriting of James's *The Aspern Papers* that allows for the perspectives of the female characters and the author beside the narrator. Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004) rewrites Leon Edel's famous biography of James focusing on James's consciousness and was shortlisted among the final six for the Booker Prize, 2004. David Lodge published his latest novel titled *Author, Author* (2004) as a tribute to the Jamesian achievement. Last but not least, Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) presents a satire of 80s Tory government in Britain, while it features “the tone of a laconic latter day Henry James” (Hickling 2004) coming from his narrator-aesthete. Also, it won the Booker Prize in 2004.

What might be the reasons for the frequent references to James and his work? As for the film adaptations, David Lodge claims the constant need for screenplays in the film industry is well satisfied by Jamesian narratives. James

tends to write stories that are confined to a limited space and to a minimal number of characters. Also, his usual reliance on a strict dramatic structure in his texts lends itself well to scenes in the films (Logde 2002, 201). Yet, one has to admit a possible problem, too: James's lifetime ambition, the representation of human consciousness, is difficult to actualize on film and becomes a pitfall of adaptations. As for the novels, James's experiments with perspective and his focus on the process of personal experience that paved the way for Modernist prose present a challenge for rewriting his texts in the manner he foreshadowed.

Apart from the reasons based on formal features, one can also find a contextual explanation for the James renaissance. Referring to Sacvan Bercovitch, Heinz Ickstadt describes the direction of New American Studies since the 1980s as a shift of focus on issues of race, class and gender in the direction of research (Ickstadt 2002, 549). In practical terms this means the outpouring of articles and books on hybrid identities, power struggles, queer and lesbian performances of gender in the case of specific texts or authors. For James, the focus on issues of gender has provided a new source of critical activity. In a similar vein perhaps, in contemporary adaptations of Jamesian texts or figures, one can spot the interest in questions of gender identity. Campion's film presents *The Portrait* with a feminist bias, Tennant complements the male perspective of *The Aspern Papers* with the female one. Tóibín and Hollinghurst focus on gender performances of gay men in their adaptations of Jamesian themes and tones.²¹

As a case in point, I propose to investigate Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004) in the context of current critical focus on gender in James's reception. For me, Colm Tóibín's novel reenacts Leon Edel's biography of Henry James. Tóibín's title is borrowed from the fifth volume of Edel's biography which describes James's life between 1901-16, "the evolution of the legendary master." Yet Tóibín's new volume relates the events of 1895-1901 instead, using the same title and it also offers glimpses from James's life before and after 1895. Shifting the reference of the title from James's major phase to his experimental phase indicates a shift of focus: instead of the master of the late novels, the new hero of the new book is the Master in the making. In the experimental years the Master is born because of personal and professional anxieties that trigger his new way of writing. For Tóibín, James's unresolved sexual identity constitutes the core of these anxieties. While Edel's psychologizing narration

only hints at James's ambiguous performance of gender, Tóibín explicates this performance. I wish to find out to what extent the gendered focus alters Edel's biographical account in Tóibín's novel.²²

In my paper I am going to explore, firstly, the current situation in James studies in terms of representations of gender, thereby explicating expectations towards a new biographical volume. Secondly, I am going to display some comparable scenes from the two books with a focus on performances of gender (using Edel one volume version of his biography as handy reference), and thirdly, consider the extent to which issues of gender actually inform the novelty of Tóibín's work.

I. James's Recanonization Today

Problems of gender identity and performance in James have been discussed widely only recently; as, I suppose, they have been in all areas of the humanities influenced by the cultural turn. So today we have a new, powerful image of Henry James influenced by gendered readings of his texts. So in James' letters we glimpse the image of the young man with tropes of homoerotic panic lurking among the lines. In the biographies, we find the image of the consciously feminized bachelor artist who has taken a conscious decision not to be a productive member of society in any material sense of the word. In his Notebooks, we get acquainted with the image of the ageing homoerotic man.

The issues discussed in recent important studies on James often relate to the problem of gender. As a case in point, James's relation to women in general was studied by Alfred Habegger in his *James and the Woman Business* to show the falsity of the account of James' relation to his cousin, Minny Temple, which is revealed to be mostly James' own creation (Habegger 1989, 231). Also, in her *The Epistemology of the Closet* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has discussed post-Romantic male homosexual panic in James' texts, letters (Sedgwick 1990, 208) and Prefaces (Sedgwick 1995, 233). Even the acclaimed Americanist, John Carlos Rowe published his latest book on James titled *The Other Henry James* about homosexual implications in noncanonized short stories (Rowe 1998, 3). Perhaps as a companion piece to Rowe's book, Donatella Izzo analyzed technologies of gender in stories about women in 2001 (Izzo 2001, 2 and Annus 2005, 16-17). The most recent example is Eric Haralson's *Henry James*

and Queer Modernity which traces the emergence of modern male homosexuality including James's sexual politics.

To make sense of the gender upsurge, Richard Henke goes as far as to say that gender has a lot to do with the rehabilitation of James' reputation in the 1980s and 90s. I have to quote him extensively on this:

As the well-known story goes, a group of devoted critics in the late 1930s and early 40s transformed an eccentric and increasingly unread author into one of the most important writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. James may have earned his place in the revised canons of British and especially American literature because of shifting literary priorities that resulted in a new understanding and respect for modernism that his experimental late narratives seemed to prefigure. What has not been so often noted about the rise of James's literary fortunes is how pivotally issues of gender played in his redemption. (Henke 1995, 227)

In other words, Henke claims that a discussion of issues of gender was central to the critical rehabilitation of our James today, after his formal reception whereby New Critics assigned him his canonized position as a pre-Modernist author, a canonic figure of American national literature. To put it bluntly, his homoerotic interest is no longer a shame but an attraction for us.

Tóibín's book reflects an awareness of the pivotal gender orientation in James's reception. So it seems a matter of course that he centers his biographical work around the question of James's gender identity. Also, Tóibín as a literary biographer has a reputation for writing about gay Irish authors, so James seems to be a natural choice for him. One's expectation is definitely that the fuller exploration of the gender aspect is the most likely reason why Tóibín chose to reenact Edel's story about James the Master.

II. The Performance of Gender in Edel and Tóibín

When we indeed look into the two books, however, the expectation turns out to be a gross oversimplification. Although it is true that Tóibín modifies the way scenes from James's life are presented and organized, and the narratorial commentary is also different, it is mainly the representation of James's *consciousness* that is modified. Let me explain my position further first in general terms (on genre) and then through examples (of scenes).

Genres

Generally speaking, Edel and Tóibín relate two versions of James's psychic development. Edel's classic is also a well-known example of psychobiography.

A psychobiography designates “an account of the life of an author that focuses on the subject’s psychological development, relying for evidence both on external sources and on the author’s own writing.” (Abrams 1993, 266) It stresses the role of the unconscious and disguised motives in forming the author’s personality, and is usually written in accordance with a version of the Freudian theory of the stages of psychosexual development. In this vein, Edel’s hero is James the devoted artist who has sacrificed his personal relations and his emotions on the altar of art. For Edel, James’s textual production is primarily the expression of James’s personal anxieties, a safety valve, as it were. In this respect, Edel’s biography is essentially a monograph of James’s work because the life is related to show how it inspired the texts. Edel’s work also has an impressive scholarly polish to it. The text is studded with quotations from James’s correspondence, from his articles and novels, from newspapers of the time. The tone Edel uses, whilst the language is slightly embroidered and Jamesian, its mainly informal tone reporting events in James’s life and work. In the focus we find the ‘Work’ by James, paraphrases of the plots and the connection of these to James’s repressed emotions. As is due from a biography, the events are related in a chronological order. The only aspect that may make us wonder about the obvious objectivity of Edel’s narration is the recurrence of his personal voice. Repeatedly, Edel finds it necessary to explain James’s behavior. He poses as a modest, understanding friend of James who is telling us the insider’s view. James is usually addressed familiarly as ‘Henry,’ and any time there is an instance in James’s personal relations that would make the implied reader wonder as to the novelist’s egoism in his personal affairs, we get the comment that all this happens because James has sacrificed life for art.

Colm Tóibín’s version of James’s life is definitely not a psychobiography but rather a fictionalized biography.²³ Although Tóibín relates James’s position in his family, the relations of the siblings, his emotional responses and memories, none of this serves the purpose of a background to the work. As an important difference from Edel’s book, in Tóibín Jamesian art is not elevated as a result of a sacrifice. Rather, the book focuses on James’s relations to others with only brief references to the artistic aspect. The hero in this version is not the author but James the experiencing person. Tóibín’s version has little of the scholarly polish characteristic of Edel. The titles of the chapters do not come from texts or events but are modest dates. We have no quotations from letters because the wordings from the correspondence are woven into the text

as descriptions or dialogues. However, the most striking difference from Edel's account lies in the absence of narratorial evaluations. Nowhere in *Tóibín* can you find a definite commentary from the narrator as you have accustomed to it in Edel. Although he calls the novelist Henry, this third person singular narrator is not a friend of James. Instead, he provides detailed accounts of James's consciousness. In other words, in *Tóibín's* novel the Jamesian center of consciousness is the character called Henry James. In this sense, *Tóibín's* text is more of a psychological novel featuring James the person than a psychobiography starring the artist.

Gender in scenes

Let us concentrate on some of the scenes of consciousness featuring Henry James. I have selected three scenes some version of which exists in Edel and are relevant from the perspective of gender identity, too. The first one is about how the young James shares a room and a bed with Olivier Wendell Holmes, Jr. in 1865. The second concerns James's reaction to and possible role in the suicide of Constance Fenimore Woolson, a fellow novelist, in 1894. Last but not least, his intimate friendship with a young sculptor, Hendrik Andersen, in 1910s is elaborated on. Brief references to Edel's version will indicate the contrasts *Tóibín's* prose creates.

The case of Olivier Wendell Holmes, Jr. takes place in 1865 right after the end of the Civil War. Holmes had been a soldier while James maintained his civilian life in Boston. The two young men visit James's cousins, Minny Temple and her sisters, at their summer residence, and Minny can only arrange for a room with one bed for the two men. Edel quotes James's letter in which he makes fun of the situation, and then goes on to relate the conversations with Minny. The letter is mentioned to illustrate the wit and tone James uses with Minny, while the significance of the holiday proves to be intellectual and social.

Tóibín, in contrast, magnifies the story of the night. We get to know little about the actual events of the summer with Minny although it is indeed mentioned that James feels he has been writing about this summer ever since. In *Tóibín's* presentation, the focal event happens in the room with one bed. There is a proper dramatic structure to present the story: the issue of Holmes, Jr. is introduced with the anecdote. The young James's interest is roused by a male nude being drawn at William James's art school. The same allure appears

in the description of the night with Holmes, Jr. as Holmes undresses for the night. The main part of the scene is constituted of a sex scene without sex. Holmes invariably directs the situation: he moves close to Henry who is the yielding but passive partner to Holmes. All the movements are presented from Henry's perspective, how he silently agrees to being nude, how he turns away not to initiate anything but to be able to respond.

They lay side by side without speaking. Henry could feel the bone of his pelvis hitting against Holmes. He wondered if he could suggest moving to the bottom of the bed but somehow, he understood, Holmes had taken control and silently withheld permission for him to make any suggestions. He could hear his own breathing and sense his own heart beating as he closed his eyes and turned his back on Holmes. (Tóibín 2004, 98)

The closing of the situation is a report on Henry's somewhat disappointed observation that Holmes does not refer to the events of the night the morning after. The turning point in the story is that it serves as a counterpoint for James's evening with the old Holmes in Britain some thirty years later. Holmes has come to visit James in order to tell his conviction that James did not help her cousin Minny recuperate from her illness when they were young. Holmes thinks James should have invited Minny to spend the winter with him in Rome, and this would have saved the girl's life. James denies the accusation point blank and bitterly resents Holmes for bringing it up. So in Tóibín's version, the joke from Edel is turned into an alluring and disturbing scene of desire that is eventually reversed as Holmes's antagonism towards James is proved in 1890s.

Constance Fenimore Woolson was the only possible woman who could have aspired to be a wife in James's life. She did not achieve this aim, and committed suicide. The dilemma for James and his friends was to determine how much this unrealized connection influenced Fenimore in committing her act. In Edel's version, this story one of the major examples of the Jamesian identity theme "life sacrificed for art." Although James is drawn to Fenimore as a person and is willing to spend a lot of time with her in private, he is afraid that a relationship would jeopardize his artistic independence. Also, he is abhorred by thinking that their friendship gets publicized. So after years of intimate friendship, James practically stops seeing Fenimore, although he is aware that she suffers from depression when they are separated for long. The last incident between them happens when James promises to visit Fenimore in

Venice, to stay there for a while to keep her company, but when he learns that Fenimore has told others about his promise, he reverses his plan. He does not write to Fenimore but to one of the acquaintances involved that he is not coming to Venice. A couple of months later Fenimore jumps out of her window and dies. Edel recounts the events as a dilemma that James resolved when he decided to withdraw from the attachment in the first place. It was a renunciation, a sacrifice only logical for James whose life was patterned according to the principle life for art. James feels remorse and given the chance destroys those parts of Fenimore's correspondence that would reveal their involvement. Apart from his emotional shock, he feels utterly frustrated by the six weeks the selection and destruction of Fenimore's papers has taken from his work.

In Tóibín's representation, James's remorse is much more intense. James is shown struggling with Fenimore's letters and papers. He is also shown burying her clothes in the Canal like a romantic lover. The letter expressing his annoyance at the loss of time caused by arranging Fenimore's papers is not mentioned at all. Instead, the actual reasons for James's remorse are stressed emphatically. James's experience of the time with Fenimore is triggered by Lily Norton's visit. She has come to see James in England to tell him she thinks he had a major role in Constance's depression (and suicide) that winter. (Tóibín 2004, 219) James can hardly back out of the conversation, and the remainder of the chapter relates his experience of Constance's death. In other words, in *The Master* there is no narratorial explanation of the events but a careful projection of events, accusations, and reactions that reveal the full ambiguity of James's behavior to Woolson. He dreads the possible role of a husband and although he enjoys Fenimore's company, it should in no way be linked to his solitary life and work. As a male performer, he is inactive. He is also indirectly responsible for Constance's suicide. He suffers from this knowledge, but is unwilling to face the accusation: in conversation he rejects it right away.

The most rewarding scene from the perspective of James's performance of gender in both volumes is the account of James's relation to Hendrik Andersen, the Norwegian-American sculptor in Rome in 1899. Edel reports their meeting step by step. James behaves like an older mentor figure to the young sculptor, as if they were characters from James's early novel *Roderick Hudson*. Then, Edel tells about their correspondence which is striking in that James uses several descriptions of bodily gestures he would perform if

Andersen were near – patting, drawing close, holding long, gestures a lover would write about. This impression is strengthened by the general tone of the letters that expresses a cry for the absent one. Characteristically, Edel is prompted to add a speculative paragraph to the account, where he poses the question if this relation was really “love.” By the term “love” here he means a realized homosexual relationship. He says we cannot tell if it was, as Victorian bedrooms had their doors shut. Nevertheless, Edel deems it important to point out that James “had hitherto tended to look at the world as through plate glass.” (Edel 1985, 498) That is, without us knowing if the relation was consummated or not, it would not fit into the Jamesian pattern of renunciations witnessed so far.

Of course, Tóibín takes full advantage of this story. The implied reader’s knowledge about the depth of the involvement is not more specific, but the way James and Andersen behave carries the full understanding of the potential relationship. James and Andersen gaze at each other well before being introduced. James takes his brand new acquaintance to Constance’s grave and the two hug each other because of the emotional strain on the part of James. James watches Andersen bath very much like his father had watched a swimmer woman in Boulogne, with repressed desire (Tóibín 2004, 86). James can assess Andersen’s foolish artistic aspirations but remains supportive of him. Also, he writes the letters of longing we know of from Edel, too. So in this affair, James would perform the role of the elderly seducer, if there was a seduction. Both Edel and Tóibín are fully aware of the nature of the attraction between the two men, the difference comes from the way they represent it: Edel as part of the Jamesian sacrifice scheme, while Tóibín as another ambiguously desiring and withholding performance.

III. Tóibín and Recanonization

Having looked at specific scenes of the two texts, it is apparent that the two accounts cannot be sharply contrasted on the basis of their understanding of Jamesian gender identity, because both Edel and Tóibín are aware of the homoerotic tinge in James’s attractions. The difference lies in the way they represent this impulse. Edel explains the scenes by fitting them into the story of Jamesian sacrifice, his renunciation of life for art. This theme does not leave space for actual adventures, and the repressed is put to good use as it

surfaces in the form of artistic activity. The issue of the possible homosexual inclination is positively resolved as far as Edel is concerned.

Tóibín, in contrast, exposes the ambiguities of Jamesian human “sacrifices” to the full. In *Tóibín* there is no dichotomy of renunciation contra good use. As a result of his personal renunciations, James is shown to be possibly responsible for not helping his friends in need. His reluctance to invite Minny to Rome when his life opens up is similar to his unwillingness to take a flat in Venice when Fenimore intimates his plan to move there for others. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. and Lily Norton appear to articulate these accusations to him. In terms of roles acted out, James declines to act like a woman or a man; instead, he prefers the position of the patron, that of the (elderly) inactive gentleman. So the issue of the homosexual tendency is definitely not resolved in *Tóibín’s* account, as it represents a lack of human contact and responsibility. While Edel appraises James’s renunciations because of its artistic yield, *Tóibín* is critical of the very same because of the irresponsible behavior it results in. So *Tóibín* portrays James’s ambiguous performance of gender roles as a betrayal of human ties under the pretext of creating art. This interpretation renders James’s figure part of an intellectual tradition that, constructing human bonds as a result of affective interaction, deemed the white European’s others incapable of developing such ties. James, by implication and ironically, becomes the opposite of the dominant cultural ideal and thus on a par with Native American males and African Americans of the early nineteenth century as imagined by Thomas Jefferson, for instance, who thought “uncivilized” peoples existing outside the world of affective human relations (Vajda 2009; Vajda 2012).

From the perspective of the recent James revival, the expectation of *Tóibín’s* work was that it would focus on the popular gender aspect of James’s life and work. His reenactment of Edel’s biography would expose James’s implied homoerotic inclinations as central to our understanding of his output. Instead I found that Edel had been fully aware of and communicative about the gender aspect, it did not need to be introduced. The main difference between the two versions is the way James’s psychology is represented. Edel’s psychobiography has been turned into a psychological novel focusing on the ambiguities in James’s performances of gender identity.

My suspicion is that *Tóibín’s* novel may soon be integrated further into contemporary popular culture through additional textual remakes of James’s

life. Also, this may happen through intermedial exchange, if/when the book gets turned into a film, possibly into one similar to the film adaptation of Richard Ellman's biography of Oscar Wilde.

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