
*House of Wits: an Intimate Portrait of the James Family* will be welcomed by scholars of American literature, by readers with an interest in the Jameses, and by anyone interested in the history of the human family. It is therefore a book that will appeal to a wide readership.

It is Paul Fisher’s contention that it is impossible to understand any one member of the James family without taking the rest into account. For, in consequence of life on the move, they were bound together as ‘natives of their own family’ (141): natives of a family ‘“with no other country”’ (368). Yet, to be confined to the parental home was tantamount to being a prisoner of its stifling and sepulchral atmosphere as both parents plagued their sons with expectations and advice, thereby manipulating their lives. A hatred of home and a fear of being drawn back into its tentacles therefore fed the inclination to travel, which became in time ‘“the standing remedy”’ for the Jameses ‘under stress’ (224). A habit of defining themselves against one another arose from closeness, conflict, and competitiveness, especially for the two elder brothers (308). Yet, emotional ties overruled differences between them and served to bind them all to a past they couldn’t escape, thereby preventing their embrace of the new future to which they naturally aspired. In summary the family ‘“breathed inconsistence and ate and drank contradictions”’, fully aware that ‘“the presence of paradox was … bright among us”’ (132).

Fisher aims to show that the psychological traits and physical ailments from which they suffered in common (notably stomach and bowel problems, bad backs, anxiety, depression and neurasthenia) were a response to anxieties arising from family life, that physical and mental breakdown was the symptom of internal conflict. The growing family lived in the shadow of their father’s personality and aspirations. The young became victims of his social experiments; they were obliged to live in terms of the vagaries of his desires and emotions; and they suffered from the loss of freedom that came from prolonged dependence and outsized parental ambition. Thus, even in ‘a family struggling for enlightenment and labouring to improve on the mistakes of previous generations’ ‘old patterns die[d] hard’ (454).

The narrative traces the complex inheritance with which each member of the family struggled in facing the difficulties of existence, and brings out commonalities of experience. Much was expected of William, and assistance was given to William and Henry in developing their potential. By contrast the younger sons, Bob and Wilkie, were required to earn their own living in the world of commerce they had been taught to despise. Being female, nothing was expected of Alice, except that she should serve the family’s interests. For, though ‘an unexamined ideal’ (162), manliness was revered as the opposite of womanliness, women being deemed inferior to men in passion, intelligence and physical strength: fitted to be child bearers and homemakers only. Yet, the James
parents exemplified the impossibility of applying conventional traits to distinct genders as Henry was sensitive, nervous, melancholic, unbalanced and restless whereas, in spite of her ‘complete availability’ and ‘selfless devotion’ (240) to her husband’s needs, Mary was forceful, practical, gritty and thrifty, and knew how to manipulate her role as materfamilias. Likewise, having acquired a taste for Europe, their mother’s sister, Kate, provided ‘a penumbra of unconventionality, independence and escape’ (117) and Alice’s friend, Katharine Loring, represented in herself both masculine and feminine virtues. The confusion of gender attributes within the family is an index of the importance of gender identity in the work of each James writer.

Manliness was an issue for all the James men, father and sons. The elder Henry’s injury in youth left him with a prosthetic leg, and an accident to his back left son Henry with a disability he referred to as a ‘horrid even if an obscure hurt’ (177). William had doubts about his own sexual potency; was ‘uncomfortable with the intimate burdens of family life’ (436); and had romantic affairs with young women in his later years, which, he asserted, bolstered his marriage to his wife, Alice. Initially, Henry is thought to have identified himself with mother figures or women like himself (depressive, isolated inverted) but, when the barriers of conventionality and restraint gave way with age, he was able to express his love for young male friends (or lovers) in the cultural context in which ‘men “loved” men as a matter of course - in a “manly” and innocent way’ (328).

As would be true for most readers, Fisher is more familiar with Henry James’s fiction than with William’s works, and his biography casts a most interesting light on it. He is concerned to provide a view of “the master” as far as possible as he was, not as he wished to be remembered. Henry therefore appears as a human but flawed figure, more like the bewildered male characters that inhabit his fiction than their masterful creator. The novels are interpreted rather too closely in the light of the biography: represented as their author’s method of working through a problematic personal life. His latent homosexuality is represented as a barrier to self-understanding because it led him to live ‘in a prison of fear’ (526), ‘walled off from his family, his friends, and the possible objects of his affection’ (527). Consequently, he ‘didn’t know how to live out his impulses – or even probably what they were’ (261) and was increasingly led to ally himself with ‘grand authority figures’ (569). The question arises as to how he knew what he knew as a novelist.

Fisher also aims to make visible the plight of the women in the James family, especially Alice James, notably the victim of her family’s gender bias. This represents a challenge to the accepted view of Henry James as a novelist known for his sympathetic representation of the inner life, especially of women. For, it appears that he inherited his father’s view of women’s place in the world: ‘he did not encourage or promote women’s education, and did not favour women’s emancipation’ (336). He felt free to incorporate Alice’s responses to Europe in his own travel pieces without regard for their source (287). It was enough that she should be ‘a self sacrificing component in his own emotional support system, expected to listen to his vision, tirades, and obsessions’ (173). By
contrast, William was able to appreciate his sister’s intellectual potential, and his reaction to reading her Journal constitutes a summary her life: it gave him ‘the tragic impression of personal power venting itself on no opportunity’ (522). However, the fact that Henry knew what it was to be imprisoned within the home, and feared being reabsorbed into it, does suggest a ground for sympathetic identification with the plight of women.

The biography implicitly raises fundamental questions about who we are as individuals and where we come from – to what extent we are formed by family influences, genetic composition, and social expectations, and to what extent it is open to us to change physical and emotional habits established in childhood. It is fascinating to speculate on the relation between the life and the work of both Henrys, as well as William, but although Fisher credits novelist Henry with innovative work, he regards his fiction as disguised experience (588) and the representation of his own ambiguities as those of others (468).

Readers will inevitably be interested in the hidden story of a family whose ‘oversized collective achievements’ are ‘as great as any other family in American history’ (2). Their contribution to an understanding of the mind is of inestimable value. William laid the foundations for an understanding of consciousness; Henry equated life with consciousness; and Alice built her Diary from ‘microscopic additions’ drawn from her ‘inner consciousness’ (502). Yet, however their collective contribution is estimated, it is not hard to see why Henry should so passionately have espoused the view that a writer is to be found in his work and not in his life; why he ‘worked to ensure that a dignified respectable version of the family history would survive’ (588), and why he strove to represent the art of the novel as possessed of a high social value.

However, the composite life of the family does much to explain why Henry James valued the imaginative faculty so highly. Fisher’s view that he had ‘a tendency to live second hand’ (544) seems condemnatory, whereas James thought that life could be taken in two ways in almost equal measure: ‘One way was to go in for everything and everyone, which kept you abundantly occupied, and the other way was to be as occupied, quite as occupied, just with the sense and the image of it all, and on only a fifth of the actual immersion.’ The family history also helps the reader to understand why Henry James did not develop the ‘masculine directness of style’ (394) his brother William expected, and why he developed a different style, one that required readers to follow his imaginative reach that they might see for themselves all that lay beneath the surface of the ‘magnificent wordy web of his fiction’ (588).

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1 Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913) 290.