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Daudet, James, and the Revision of the Nineteenth-Century Wifely Adultery Plot

Abstract

Although it is widely known that Henry James took inspiration from Alphonse Daudet's L'Evangéliste *(1883) for* The Bostonians, *and from* Numa Roumestan *(1881) for "The Liar," the influence of the French novelist on James's late fiction is still far from being fully grasped or acknowledged. In this essay I will read Daudet's* La petite paroisse. Moeurs conjugales *(1895) together with James's* The Golden Bowl *(1904) and discuss the similar ways in which these two works revised the nineteenth-century form of the "wifely adultery novel" (Overton 2002) within their respective literary and cultural contexts. My argument is that they challenged both the social stigmatization attached to the adulteress and what were taken to be 'natural' relations between husband and wife, and within the family circle.*

Keywords: *Henry James, Alphonse Daudet, adultery novel,* La petite paroisse*,* The Golden Bowl

Today mostly remembered for his early short-story collection *Lettres de mon moulin* (1869), in the late nineteenth century Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897) was recognized as one of the master novelists of his generation. According to Henry James, Daudet's 1897 death marked "the close of a tradition" of "positive classicism," in which the French author stood out as "more personal, more individual and more inimitable" than any of the "descendants" of Balzac. His distinctive traits were a "marvellous style" and an "impressionism carried to the last point […] whimsically and consentingly human, and yet […] historical and responsible" (1984, 254-256). By his own admission, James took inspiration from *L'Evangéliste* (1883) for *The Bostonians* (1886), and from *Numa Roumestan* (1881) for the short story "The Liar" (1888); but Daudet's influence on James probably persisted onto the major phase.[1] James was still reading the

[1] James may have reworked a subplot of Daudet's *Numa Roumestan*—his favorite among the works of the French writer—for *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), namely the story of a couple of penniless lovers deceiving and exploiting a consumptive young woman. See Francescato 2013.

prolific writer with great interest in the late 1880s and early 1890s, and was even enthusiastic about some of his later works. Daudet was an extraordinary observer of contemporary French society, and his fiction often represented its transition to modernity with originality. His short novel *Rose et Ninette. Moeurs du jour* (1892), for instance, was one of the first to study the effects of divorce in parent-child relationships, a theme later tackled by James in *What Maisie Knew* (1897).[2]

In the present essay, I read Daudet's late novel *La petite paroisse. Moeurs conjugales* (published in late 1894 in the magazine *L'Illustration* and in book form in January 1895)[3] together with James's major-phase masterpiece *The Golden Bowl* (1904), with the aim of suggesting additional possible connections in the works of these two writers. James apparently knew *La petite paroisse* very well, as shown by the following letter to Daudet written from London on 12 February 1895:

> Je suis très touché et tout réchauffé (au temps où nous sommes), de ce signe de votre bon souvenir. J'ai lu *Petite Paroisse* comme je vous lis toujours—dans un doux recueillement traversé de frissons pénétrants. Il n'y a pas de manière de faire qui me contente aussi pleinement que la vôtre; je l'avais constaté de nouveau, justement ces jours-là, en relisant– chacun pour la troisième fois—*Sapho* et *L'Immortel*. Ça m'est une véritable joie de vous voir trouver au sortir (il y paraît bien), de vos sombres années, ce beau et riche roman, où la vie se joue si largement et librement, où l'observation et la poésie s'étreignent et se confondent. J'avais soif du timbre si spécial de votre voix de couleur—de votre monde et vous, tel que vous nous le donnez—et m'en voilà tout rafraîchi. Je tiens à croire que c'est une reprise entière de vos moyens, de vos grandes aises—à croire, c'est-à-dire, que vous allez bien de mieux en mieux. (1980, 519-20)[4]

After reaffirming his deepest admiration for Daudet's mastery ("there's no way of doing that satisfies me as fully as yours"), James pronounced himself very impressed by this new novel,

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Much of the scholarly criticism about Daudet's influence on James is dated and/or limited to James's reception of the French writer up to the 1880s. For a classic study see Powers 1972.

[2] See White 2002.

[3] This novel features along many others by Daudet in James's library at Rye (Edel and Tintner 1987, 28). It is also mentioned by Tintner in her study of James's use of popular fairytales (1996, 58).

[4] "I am very touched and all warmed up (at this time) by this token of your fond memory. I read *Petite Paroisse* as I always read you—in a gentle recollection crossed by penetrating shivers. There is no other way of doing things that satisfies me as fully as yours; I noticed it again, precisely on those days when I read again, each one for the third time, *Sapho* and *L'Immortel*. It is a real joy for me to see you find at the end of your dark years (it seems indeed) this beautiful and rich novel, where life is played out so freely, where observation and poetry are embraced and merged. I was thirsty for the special timbre of your colorful voice—of your world and of you, as you give it to us—and here I am refreshed. I would like to believe that it is a complete recovery of your means, of your great comforts—to believe, that is, that you are getting better and better" (my translation).

seeing it as evidence that the French writer was regaining his greatest talent—the ability to merge observation and poetry—and maybe even growing better and better.[5] Although he would write, later on, that Daudet ultimately lacked the "greater imagination, the imagination of the moralist," except "in flashes" (1984, 256), James probably found a joyous expansion of this type of imagination in *La petite paroisse*, a work that combined stylistic accuracy with psychological insight and understanding in its depiction of the dynamics of marriage, adultery, and jealousy.[6] This novel appeared in a period of intense social interaction between the two writers—just a few months after its publication, Daudet made a three-week visit to England (May 1895) kindly assisted by James, who introduced him to a number of English writers and critics like George Meredith and Edmund Gosse. It was at that time that James occasionally revised his project for what was to become one of his major-phase international masterpieces, *The Golden Bowl*. As is known, the plot outline of James' novel surfaces quite complete in a notebook entry dated 28 November 1892, but a later important entry dated 14 February 1895 (James 1987, 114-116), written just two days after the letter on *La petite paroisse*, makes us wonder whether the reading of Daudet's work might have inspired James and helped him define some stylistic details in the final version. James in fact opted to divide his new novel into two halves ("The Prince"/"The Princess"), the first of which reminds one of the "Journal du Prince"/"The Prince's Journal" chapters interspersed in Daudet's novel.[7]

But my argument here goes beyond simple influence. Rather, reading these novels together gives us new insight into the literary and historical context of the *wifely adultery novel*, "a form stemming from social tensions concerning the role of women in marriage, motherhood, the family and the transmission of property" (Overton 1996, 14).[8] Whereas James's novel has long

[5] Earlier on, however, James had expressed some reservations towards Daudet's mid-1880s writings. See, for instance, a letter to Frederic William Henry Myers (20 October 1888) in which he wrote: "[Daudet's] later 'evolution' has been of the ugliest" (James 1999, 210).

[6] Jealousy—and the relation between erotic and artistic imagination—is also at the center of Daudet's masterful 1897 novel *Le Tresor d'Arlatan*, which James praised in an unpublished letter to its author dated 5 February 1897 in which he wrote: "j'ai trouvé à votre nouvelle un charme & un prestige irresistible, aussi bien qu'une fraîcheur que vous avez un secret pour garde. Je porte toujours à votre manière de faire un interet [sic] qui, tout en étant des plus tendres, me permet une envie féroce" (Ms. Harvard 6ms Am 1094.1 (10) file 2). ("I found your new nouvelle to have irresistible charm & prestige, as well as a freshness you have a secret to keep. I always take an interest in your way of doing, an interest which, while being the most tender, allows me a ferocious envy." My translation). I wish to thank Greg Zacharias and Doug K. Dolan, Jr. at the Center for Henry James Studies at Creighton University for providing me with unpublished material.

[7] James initially planned the character of Amerigo as a Frenchman (James 1987, 129).

[8] See Overton 2002, 3-20.

been considered a classic novel of adultery in English, whose influence has been traced to other earlier or contemporary authors (from Milton to Goethe, from Bourget to Loti),[9] little scholarly attention has been paid to Daudet's both in France and elsewhere. I will show that these two works stood out among others, as they manipulated an established plot in unusual and unexpected ways. Not only did they de-stigmatize the adulteress by insisting on the conditions that determined wifely adultery rather than on the moral implications of the act itself,[10] but they also challenged what were taken to be 'natural' relations: between husband and wife, as well as conventional loyalty within the family circle.

In both these works, adultery stems from an unbalanced, symbiotic family relationship that stifles other attachments, which emerges as a symbol of the petty mentality of the French province in Daudet, or the dehumanizing consumerism of the American upper class in James. The adulteress, spared in both cases from a melodramatic ending, turns from someone who initially mirrors the projections of those who surround and exploit her, to someone whose true 'value' is finally recognized—with different effects in the two texts—only at the end. In this process, deterministic discourses of heredity, race and degeneration come into play, only to be repeatedly questioned as interpretative constructs with distorting effects on social interaction.

1. Lydie Mendelsohn

Set in the late 1880s, *La petite paroisse* begins with a romantic elopement: 27-year-old Lydie Fénigan deserts her husband Richard—the subjugated son of a wealthy widow of a provincial town south of Paris—to follow her younger lover, 19-year-old Prince Charlexis d'Olmütz. After a series of events, including the suicide attempt of the adulteress and the murder of the young aristocrat carried out by another of his 'cuckolded' and jealous victims, Lydie and Richard reunite. In France, the novel was received as a successful psychological study of jealousy, which also managed—according to a critic—to "revive the old theme of adultery."[11] Adultery was an "old theme," no longer piquant, as evidenced by the nonchalant way it was treated in, say, the works of Guy de Maupassant.[12] The declining preoccupation with the frank depiction of adultery

[9] See for instance Tintner, 1991. Tintner, perhaps the only one to have noticed the relevance of *La petite paroisse* for James, has noticed that this novel, like Daudet's last, *Soutien de famille*, "reflect[ed] the 'blackness' of society, on which the American novelist was beginning to concentrate" (Tintner 1991, 86).

[10] As Judith Armstrong has brilliantly noticed, James's attitude towards adultery in *The Golden Bowl* "sets him apart from the other novelists in that he is indifferent to the kinds of moral imperatives they are unable to dissociate from the act" (1976, 145).

[11] Anonymous review quoted in Roche 1976, 114.

[12] See Overton 2002, 199-218.

in fiction, and women's adultery in particular, was in tune with a society (i.e. the upper classes) that was growing used to the possibility of divorce, which had been re-introduced in France in 1884 through the *loi Naquet*. As Overton has pointed out, by that time "socially as well as culturally, wifely adultery was losing its status as the cardinal sexual transgression" (2002, 188).

Daudet's novel considerably differed from earlier, 'classic' wifely adultery novels such as *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*—in which the adulteress died tragically after violating the moral code—as it granted a better fate to the female protagonist. And yet, the final reconciliation of wife and husband seemed to give voice to the author's desire to protect the endangered institution of marriage; Daudet was in fact skeptical about divorce as a solution for family crises.[13] What is striking, however, is the unprecedented way in which the author put the act of wifely adultery in perspective, shifting the focus of his work from the question of morality to a wider reflection on the nature of human passions, jealousy in particular. In this novel, both the adulteress and the betrayed husband learn the real value of their marriage only *after* adultery has taken place. Thus, although a conservative, Daudet seemed to have found a way to celebrate marriage *through* the reassessment of the experience of adultery and the reasons of the adulteress, a position that set him apart from other, more or less overtly misogynist contemporary writers affiliated to the naturalist school.

Daudet was often considered a naturalist, but the representation of wifely adultery in *La petite paroisse* differed sharply from those of fellow naturalists, best epitomized, perhaps, by Zola's 1867 novel *Thérèse Raquin.*[14] As Maupassant had done before him,[15] Daudet went in a different direction from Zola, playing with both the traditional stereotypes about women's intrinsic moral weakness, and with pseudo-scientific discourses that postulated a biological or instinctual predetermination behind the adulteress' fall. Daudet's concern with the effects of the cultural discourses of heredity and social Darwinism is evident in his successful play *La lutte pour la vie* (1890),[16] in which a politician justifies his reprehensible behavior in public and private life (and towards his wife in particular) as conforming to the principle of 'the survival of the fittest.' Whereas in that play, as in Daudet's earlier novel, *L'immortel* (1888), the male adulterer makes use of an overtly distorted and unscrupulous interpretation of reality to indulge irresponsibly

[13] See Melison-Hirschwald 2014, 52. See also Cerullo 2016, 125-133.
[14] See Overton 2002,160-1.
[15] Maupassant had also wryly played with heredity discourses, in particular in his wifely adultery novel *Pierre et Jean*, see Campagnoli 2006, 342.
[16] The critically acclaimed 1890 English adaptation of this play ("The Struggle for Life") featured one of James's favorite actresses, Geneviève Ward, as protagonist. See James 1999, 232, n. 3.

in sentimental infidelity and criminal acts,[17] in *La petite paroisse*, the female adulteress—seen as destined to fail and fall—stands out as the exploited victim of such distortion.

In Daudet's novel, stereotypes about female depravity attach not to female characters, but to ruling-class social worlds. The suspicion of dubious morality stemming from a hereditary flaw follows the protagonist of Daudet's novel from the moment she encounters the local bourgeoisie, first, and then, the local landed gentry. Growing up as a foundling in an orphanage, Lydie—the future adulteress in the story—attracts the attention of Mme Fénigan, who initially picks her as a suitable wife for her son. The latter's choice is self-interested: "a child who owed them everything would never think of introducing a new authority into the household, of setting up a will in opposition to [herself], who had reigned alone so long" (1899, 23). In spite of her humble and mysterious origins, Lydie has grown up an elegant young woman who astonishes her benefactors with her surprising taste and talent, her knowledge of foreign languages, and her skill at the piano. These accomplishments convince everyone—including, at least initially, their possessor—that she must be the daughter of some mysterious noblemen. But when Lydie elopes with young Charlexis, Mme Fénigan resorts to the hypothesis of the hereditary flaw to explain her adulterous behavior to herself and her deserted son:

> The wife comes to you without antecedents or sponsors, enveloped in mystery, in obscurity, subject to all possible hereditary drawbacks. This girl claimed to be of noble blood. They put that into her head at the convent. At all events her nobility was well mixed with depravity in her veins. Kiss me, and let us think no more about her. (1899, 62)

Meanwhile, the aristocratic villain of the novel, Prince Charlexis, cynically exploits what he believes to be Lydie's inherited traits to accomplish his seduction plan. ("He unrolled before the orphan's nomadic, gypsy instincts the panorama of the adventures of a long sea-voyage, opened to her unfamiliar skies and horizons; and to flatter her vanity as a child of hazard, the romance which she invented for herself on the foundation of her mysterious origin, he wrote to her: 'Does not your aristocratic blood rebel in that environment of addle-pated bourgeoisie and vulgar greed?'" [1899, 52]).[18] The Prince's cynicism stands out powerfully in the section of his diary in which he reflects on the impossibility for Lydie to fall back on divorce: "What does she hope for?

[17] See Ripoll's notes in Daudet 1994, 1293.

[18] Perhaps the most accomplished character in the novel, masterfully sketched in the first-person diary sections which convey a singular mixture of youthful *ennui* and cynicism, Prince Charlexis, as Murray Sachs observed (1965, 162-165), emerges as the product of a materialistic society devoid of values and no longer preoccupied with inter-generational respect or discipline (in this regard we also need to remember that Charlexis manages to seduce the very woman who had earlier been coveted by his own father).

Assuming that she obtains a divorce, I have a thousand excuses in the way of age and social position for not marrying her. However, there is no likelihood of divorce for her" (1899, 97-99). Whereas the character of the Prince, despite some originality, adheres to the literary type of the libertine, Richard Fénigan considerably departs from the literary type of the gullible cuckold.[19] Like another character in the novel, Napoleon Mérivet, who acts as a sort of mentor to him, the jealous young man progressively grows a poise that inspires profound respect in the reader.[20] Although we find other 'respectable cuckolds' in the nineteenth-century adultery novel—Count Karenin in Tolstoy's novel, for instance—Daudet's stands out among these latter for the reason that he is also granted a reconciliation based on his understanding, non-judgmental response to his wife's adultery. Remarkably subversive is the way in which Daudet treats the adulteress's illegitimate pregnancy and the reaction of the dishonored husband.[21] Rather than threatening his honor, Lydie's pregnancy provokes in Richard only concern for his wife's sufferings, as evident in a significant passage in which he recalls overhearing the farmer's wife in labor: "Suddenly he thought of his poor Lydie, who, perhaps, at that very moment, was going through that same agony, and he was seized with frantic despair" (1899, 209-10).

[19] The symbolic center of the novel is the little parish church of the town of Uzelles ("called […] more picturesquely the 'Church of the Good Cuckold'" 1899, 94) built by Mérivet and dedicated to the memory of his inveterately adulterous wife, Irène, a sort of latter-day Madame Bovary. Mérivet helps Richard come to terms with his pain and wounded honor by sharing the sad story of his marriage with him. What is unusual is the wisdom and depth of character that Daudet bestows on this betrayed husband. Although concluding that his wife's behavior was mainly due to her solitude and the absence of children (1899, 85-86), Mérivet also engages in a singular self-examination which exposes the terrible inequality of gender roles in society ("'But how many other reasons would absolve her from blame! For example, what right has a man to demand that his wife shall be content with a single man, when no man is ever content with a single woman?" 1899, 85).

[20] A contemporary reviewer observed: "Mr. Daudet's great boldness is to have broken with the tradition of the jealous man who strikes and kills, in order to paint us the resigned jealous man, a resigned jealous man who is not ridiculous" (my translation, Monceaux 1895, 248). Another described Richard Fénigan as "a jealous man who inspires neither ridicule nor aversion [...] The great beauty, on the contrary, of Mr. Daudet's hero is that in his sufferings, not for a moment is he presented to us under a laughable aspect, not for a moment does he give in to the brutal temptations of the spirit of vengeance./Besides him, other jealous people have ridiculous attitudes, ridiculous ways; still others kill, shed blood, avenge their honor, satisfy their hatreds. [...] He is a jealous man, but he is not a beast. He is a jealous man, but he is not a murderer. He's a good man with vision and suffering. He's a man who suggests pity and respect" (my translation, Vandérem 1895, 157).

[21] Maria Cerullo has pointed out that the existence of children for Daudet is the very cement of familial bonding (2016, 153). Lydie can also be forgiven, in the end, as the child born out of wedlock does not survive.

Daudet's novel offers a series of unexpected reactions of sympathy and kindness towards the adulteress, which come from those supposed to be her worst enemies. After her attempted suicide, in fact, Lydie is taken care of by a team of women that includes not only her formerly unsympathetic mother-in-law,[22] but also Elise, the latter's niece, the young woman with whom Madame Fénigan had thought of replacing Lydie as her son's wife. This choice, anti-melodramatic and anti-sentimental, is in line with another, concerning the 'reconciliation' between Richard and Lydie. Far from representing the return to a patriarchal moral order, such reconciliation builds instead on a shared (exciting) suspicion that one of them might have been the murderer of Charlexis. The cover-up unites husband and wife in a self-sacrificing desire to protect the other:

> Never had each of them seemed so beautiful to the other, never had they longed for each other so passionately. But it was not that glorifying light that transfigured them, that caused them to appear to each other in new and superb guise. It was the *thing*, the sinister *thing* of which each of them suspected the other, and which, more potent than pity and forgiveness, alone had the power to restore life to their caresses, and to make them forget everything. (1899, 309-310)

The community is entirely blind to this complex entanglement of passions and is instead led to interpret the couple's reunion in a traditional fashion, just as when the magistrate of Corbeil says to himself: "Marriage certainly is a solid institution. To think that those people can still live happily together after such a strain!" (1899, 269). It is at this point, however, that an important narratorial intrusion seems to voice skepticism against any uncomplicated view of marriage: "Thus the world judges, seeing of men and things only the deceitful appearances, and never imagining what lies underneath" (1899, 269).

The novel ends with the death of two men, the one responsible for almost killing Lydie, Prince Charlexis, and the other for saving her life, Papa Georges, the poor old tramp who was so dear to the young woman and eventually turned out to be her grandfather. Her last encounter with Georges, one of the most touching moments in the text, forces Lydie to accept the truth about her lowly origins. After the discovery of the actual murderer of the Prince and Richard's release from prison, the novel lingers on this latter's doubts about the true feelings of his wife, leaving him uncertain as to whether she is now sad for the loss of Papa Georges or for the death of the man who had once stolen her heart. While suspicion, scrutiny, and jealousy still linger and merge with the happiness of a regained love, the novel closes with a view of the couple from the

[22] The least convincing scene in the novel, also for contemporary readers (see Monceaux 1895, 247), was the conversion of Mme. Fénigan in Mérivet's church.

outside: Fénigan's mentor, Mérivet, on the steps of the Uzelles Church on a Sunday morning is "surprised and overjoyed to see Richard Fénigan arrive with his wife on his arm,—his dear little Mendelsohn, all in blue, like the saint in the stained-glass window" (1899, 360). The important detail here, besides Lydie's redemptive saint-like gait, is that she is referred to by Papa Georges' last name ("Mendelsohn").[23] At the end of the story, the reintegration of the adulteress is significantly paired with her husband's (and her own) serene acknowledgment of her true, lately recovered, identity.

This reintegration seemed utterly unacceptable to contemporary French reviewers. According to some, Daudet had gone too far and bypassed the reality of human psychology.[24] Others found it unbearably sentimental and even potentially dangerous for dishonored husbands.[25] The English editor of the novel, William P. Trent, who otherwise found it a tale of "psychological power" (1899, vi) and "thoroughly moral" (1899, ix), was very skeptical about the implications of its ending story and wrote: "Society is nowhere prepared to accept Daudet's solution […] the restoration of a fallen wife through kind treatment" (1899, x).

2. Charlotte Stant

Unforgettable adulterous female characters feature in two of Henry James's major-phase novels: Madame de Vionnet in *The Ambassadors*, and Charlotte Stant in *The Golden Bowl*. The latter in particular prefigures the appearance of a new literary type in the Anglo-American transatlantic literary context: much more than the half-French, half-British Marie de Vionnet, the downright American (though rendered degenerate by her Old World upbringing) Charlotte Stant emerges as a reintegrated (and unpunished, at least publicly) adulteress, whose fate partially anticipates that of Undine Spragg, the 'triumphant' adulteress (and divorcée) in Edith Wharton's ground-breaking novel *The Custom of the Country* (1913). In order to understand the originality of Charlotte Stant, it is important to remember that the theme of adultery, and wifely

[23] The name Mendelsohn seems to raise the issue of Jewishness in the text. On the thorny problem of Daudet's alleged antisemitism see Dufief 2019, 41-42.

[24] "Nice conclusion from a moral point of view. But scientifically, psychologically, is it true? Is it proven?" (my translation, Vandérem 1895, 157).

[25] "This theory of forgiveness at all times may appeal to our vague sentimentality today, but it would quickly ruin any notion of family. It almost legitimizes sensual madness and vicious instincts. Silly though she was, Lydie Fénigan would not have left with her schoolboy if she had been sure that on her return she would find the door closed" (my translation, Monceaux 1895, 250). Surely the novel's *dénouement* was in striking contrast with what Daudet stated in an interview: "If the wife cheats, she is unworthy, and the husband can choose between so many means that our laws, morals and conveniences allow him to take" (my translation; in Melison-Hirschwald 2014, 53).

adultery even more, had been practically absent from the landscape of British and American fiction until the late nineteenth century. In the 1880s and 1890s, writers such as George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, and James himself made adultery an acceptable, even popular literary theme, defying the strict moral standards which limited the freedom of representation in the Victorian age.[26]

In her study of the relation between trial reports in magazines and fiction writing, Barbara Leckie has underlined James's non-prudish attitude towards the theme of adultery in *The Golden Bowl*, pointing out that, in this work, "more than any other English novelist, James develop[ed] an epistemology of adultery through which to make adultery palatable, even morally compelling, to his imagined audience" (1999, 166). But while Leckie is more interested in the implications of this thematic opening for Maggie Verver,[27] I aim to show that the destiny of the silenced adulteress is also very much a point of concern in the text. We need to remember that *The Golden Bowl* was to be titled *Charlotte*,[28] and although this character's point of view rarely surfaces and shrinks progressively to the point of being completely abandoned in the second volume, her centrality in the economy of the novel is repeatedly and emphatically underlined in the narration.[29]

Along with Kate Croy in *The Wings of the Dove*, Charlotte can be considered as the last of James's great naturalistic heroines.[30] Like Lydie Fénigan in Daudet's novel, her life is marked and marred by a questionable pedigree, although compensated by her capacity of adaptation and remarkable intellectual, artistic, and social skills. Determined by lack of money and deprived of relations, she stands out from the very beginning not only as socially disadvantaged, but also as *racially*[31] degraded by "her birth in Florence and Florentine childhood; her parents, from the great country, but themselves already of a corrupt generation, demoralised, falsified,

[26] See Overton 1996, 10, and 2002, 13-19. Overton sees the well-known exception of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, as being "not a novel of adultery, but of post-adultery, half historical, half allegorical, dealing with spiritual crime and punishment" (1996, 9).

[27] According to Leckie, Maggie's role is that of "the *intelligent* young woman who comprehends sexual misconduct [and] introduces an anomaly into the organization of English domestic relations and the English novel" (1999, 172). Leckie stresses an identification between Maggie and unmarried young women readers, primary consumers of novels, but Maggie *is actually* a married woman, a wife and a mother, even if her representation as an eternal daughter aptly skirts on these aspects.

[28] See Righter 2004, 188.

[29] Critical appraisals of Charlotte include F.O. Matthiessen, Elizabeth Owen, Jean Kimball, and Hugh Stevens. See Camden 2019, 213, n. 164.

[30] See Bell 1991, 301-303.

[31] See Camden 2019, 212-224. Camden is right in pointing out that: "Surprisingly, Charlotte's 'race-quality' goes without comment in most critical treatments of the novel" (2019, 216).

polyglot well before her" (2010, 492).[32] She is also endowed—like Daudet's Lydie—with a considerable broad social imagination ("Her own vision acted for every relation—this [Amerigo] had seen for himself: she remarked beggars, she remembered servants, she recognised cabmen; she had often distinguished beauty, when out with him, in dirty children; she had admired 'type' in faces at hucksters' stalls" [2010, 528]).[33] Her love for the Prince is more 'instinctual' and 'real' than Maggie's—the Prince himself has the impression that "her presence in the world" is a "sharp, sharp fact, sharper […] than that of his marriage" (2010, 486)—as the latter is mostly a creation of Fanny Assingham. And her adulterous behavior rests on a previous claim: Amerigo is in fact the man she had been in love with (and could not marry for lack of money) long before meeting Adam Verver.

Charlotte's admission into the Verver family, very much like Lydie into the Fénigans, is an act that displays the generosity of her widowed benefactor which, at the same time, shelters him from any threatening presence who might interfere in his life and business. In the novel, Charlotte seems to be endowed with an intrinsically double value, as she can be associated with both the irruption of reality in an alienated environment and its effacement. Becoming ever present during Adam's acquisitive transactions in the early days of their courtship in Brighton, and destined to become the guide in his exhibit halls, Charlotte functions as an *agent* who mediates for an outer reality ("the duties of a remunerated office" in the Prince's eyes, [2010, 669]), but only on the tacit condition that she renounces *her own* reality, thus becoming part of a system while perpetuating it at the same time. With this young woman at his side, who is said to have brought back "the pulse of life" (2010, 599) for him, Adam in fact feels "again furnished, socially speaking, with the thing classed and stamped as 'real.'" But, for Adam, "the note of reality" is equivalent to an "application of the same measure of value to such different pieces of property as old Persian carpets, say, and new human acquisitions" (2010, 588).[34]

[32] Though not utterly indigent, Charlotte carries on herself the mark of poverty. When asked by Amerigo about what she might give Maggie as a wedding present, she replies: "Mine is to be the offering of the poor—something, precisely, that—no rich person *could* ever give her, and that, being herself too rich ever to buy it, she would therefore never have" (2010, 518).

[33] Maggie herself advertises Charlotte as "great"—provided with a "great imagination," a "great attitude" and a "great conscience" (2010, 578)—specifically linking these qualities to poverty ("'She has only twopence in the world—but that has nothing to do with it. Or rather indeed'—she quickly corrected herself— 'it has everything. For she doesn't care. I never saw her do anything but laugh at her poverty. Her life has been harder than anyone knows'" [2010, 578-579]).

[34] The stability brought about by Charlotte to the Ververs is examined by Adam himself in a long dialogue with Maggie which features his highest level of awareness of the alienation of their apparently perfect life (2010, 794-795).

Charlotte is called to compensate, both privately and publicly, for the evident lack of personal involvement of the Ververs, too absorbed in their own special relationship to mind the world outside. This trait of the Ververs' (Adam's in particular) has been widely seen as continuous with a capitalistic, dehumanizing attitude, best expressed in the act of collecting not only art objects but also human beings as if they were *morceaux de musée*. It is in this void of humane recognition that wifely adultery is played out, more specifically—here as in *La petite paroisse*—in the guise of a victory of aristocratic libertinism over bourgeois dullness. Just as Lydie finds some kind of fulfilment in the vibrant, sophisticated world she is presented with by the Prince d'Olmütz, Charlotte, guarantees to the objectified Amerigo (and herself) a certain amount of agency otherwise denied by the Ververs.

In his attempt to rewrite, adapt, and translate the 'germs' of contemporary French literature for an Anglo-American readership, James enhanced the psychological complexity by multiplying predicaments and points of view, while at the same time silencing significant others. Whereas Daudet leaves the redemption of the adulteress in the hands of a forgiving, understanding 'cuckold,' James avoids the direct confrontation between adulteress and husband, bestowing this task—as I will argue—on the latter's daughter, herself a betrayed party. Even more significantly, in James's deflective prose, Adam Verver is neither allowed to give proper expression to his desire for the beautiful young woman ("Adam Verver had in other words learnt the lesson of the senses, to the end of his own little book, without having, for a day, raised the smallest scandal in his economy at large" [2010, 589]) nor granted the humanizing feeling of jealousy—something that, by allowing him to endure in his idiosyncratic view of reality, denies him any sort of redemption in the symbolic space of the narration. This lack of personal involvement of the betrayed husband should not be interpreted as a defense of or apology for his solipsism, but rather as a sign of the continuation of his alienated and alienating life into his most intimate sphere.

In literature, jealousy is often a chaotic force that disrupts the social order; the jealous lover is driven not only to "subject the actions of beloved and rival to a microscopic attention, but also to assess his or her own actions with a similarly aggressive and persistent intensity" (Lloyd 1995, 7). In *La petite paroisse* and *The Golden Bowl*, the experience of betrayal and the investigative energy that accompanies it has two (positive) thematic functions: it both disrupts the social order—in the latter case, the dehumanizing regime of the magnate collector—and allows for the spiritual evolution of the betrayed spouse. But this experience is exclusive prerogative of the millionaire's daughter, Maggie. The young woman has a major emotional wound inflicted on her, which involves her husband, her father, and her best friend at the same

time, and which exacts from her not just an extra caution and calculation, but also an expansion of her intellectual, emotional and moral range. Indeed, one of the most intriguing aspects of the novel is the way it thwarts the reader's attempts to 'frame' Maggie's reactions and affections within a normative view of domestic and intimate relations. Fanny Assingham, for instance, repeatedly inspects her to find the expected reactions of a betrayed wife or an apprehensive daughter, only to become disappointed and baffled, as when Maggie says to her:

> "No; I'm not terrible, and you don't think me so. I do strike you as surprising, no doubt—but surprisingly mild. Because—don't you see?—I *am* mild. I can bear anything."/ "Oh, 'bear'!" Mrs. Assingham fluted./ "For love," said the Princess./Fanny hesitated. "Of your father?"/ "For love," Maggie repeated. /It kept her friend watching. "Of your husband?"/ "For love," Maggie said again. (2010, 810-811)

Repetitions, so frequent in James of the major phase, are used here to baffle the interlocutor (and the reader through her), who cannot help but wonder what the Princess means by the word "love" and for whom she feels this kind of affection. In a conversation with her father, Maggie explains that jealousy, as it is commonly understood, does not apply to her state, coming up with a puzzling distinction:

> My idea is this, that when you only love a little you're naturally not jealous—or are only jealous also a little, so that it doesn't matter. But when you love in a deeper and intenser way, then you are, in the same proportion, jealous; your jealousy has intensity and, no doubt, ferocity. When, however, you love in the most abysmal and unutterable way of all—why then you're beyond everything, and nothing can pull you down. (2010, 909)

Given the fact that Maggie knows about the presence of adultery in their family, while Adam should not, we need to attach a very different meaning to Maggie's applying the idea of 'being beyond everything' first to herself and, later on in their conversation, to her father ("Oh, it's you, father, who are what I call beyond everything. Nothing can pull *you* down" [2010, 910]): in fact, whereas the intensity of her love (for Amerigo? For Adam? For Charlotte?) prevents her from taking sides ("'I do *feel*, however, beyond everything—and as a consequence of that, I dare say,' she added with a turn to gaiety, 'seem often not to know quite *where* I am'" [2010, 909]), Adam remains entirely confined to his golden cloud of unknowing—at least as far as the reader or his daughter are allowed to know.

Maggie's realization of the complexity of her role within the quartet's dynamics seems to take on—as usual with James—a painterly association: in the scene on the terrace outside the smoking room, the young woman

> saw as in a picture […] why it was she had been able to give herself so little, from the first, to the vulgar heat of her wrong, [perceiving the] range of feelings which for many women would have meant so much, but which for *her* husband's wife, for *her* father's daughter, figured nothing nearer to experience than a wild eastern caravan, looming into view with crude colours in the sun […] but turning off short before it reached her and plunging into other defiles. (2010, 891-892)

This sudden appreciation of her family circle as the subject of a beguiling portrait leads Maggie not only to reject any ordinary reaction as exotic and remote from her ("a wild eastern caravan"), but also to realize that "to feel about them in any of the immediate, inevitable, assuaging ways, the ways usually open to innocence outraged and generosity betrayed, would have been to give them up, and that giving them up was, marvelously, not to be thought of" (2010, 892). For Maggie, "giving them up" would mean, primarily, giving up the person of Charlotte Stant.

Like Daudet, who substitutes for the expected antagonism between women an uncommon manifestation of sympathetic support from the adulteress's rivals, James entrusts his woman co-protagonist with a similar task, increasing, at the same time, the level of her personal involvement in the matter. Many critics have noted how Maggie learns the art of scheming, progressively isolating her rival in a sort of imaginary cage. But few have recognized Maggie's understanding of Charlotte's plight, or her attempt to help her. What would happen to Charlotte if her affair with the Prince were to be revealed? Could Charlotte possibly consider divorce as an option? For this adulteress—a woman of limited connections and means—it would be a catastrophe, a fact of which Maggie is surely aware.[35] It is true that Maggie lies to Charlotte about the fact that she knows about her illicit affair, but it is unclear whether she does so primarily to prevent Charlotte's countermoves, or out of respect for the latter's dignity. Manifestations of the Princess's compassion for Charlotte can be found in often-quoted passages, like the one in which she observes her friend in the gallery at Fawns ("Hold on tight, my poor dear—without *too much* terror—and it will all come out somehow" [2010, 924]) or those in which she seems to decline any unproblematic complicity with her husband to the detriment of her mother-in-law ("'It's terrible […] I see it's *always* terrible for women'" [2010, 968]) and forbids Amerigo to intervene ("'Isn't it my right to correct her—?'/ Maggie let his question ring—ring

[35] Whereas Maggie's involvement in the engagement of her father has been oftentimes stressed, lending itself to being interpreted as a sort of incestuous and defensive move, one should also notice that the decision to leave for American City is at least superficially Adam's and not Maggie's.

long enough for him to hear it himself; only then she took it up./ '*Correct* her?'—and it was her own now that really rang. 'Aren't you rather forgetting who she is?'" [2010, 973]).

Here the comparison with Daudet's novel highlights new aspects of James's. In *La petite paroisse,* the reconstitution of the original couple follows the acknowledgment of Lydie Mendelsohn's true identity—she is no longer the idealization of her bourgeois 'benefactors,' but rather a poor man's daughter, whose outstanding qualities cannot be made to correspond to her adherence to determined standards of propriety. The reconstitution of the original couples in James's quartet is based on the recognition that Charlotte Stant's 'value,' as a woman and a human being, lies far beyond what was originally expected and exacted from her. It is with this premise that I read in non-ironic terms Maggie's final appreciation of Charlotte as "great" (2010, 978), considering the fact that Charlotte is not merely *a means* through which the reorganization of couples (and the rupture of Adam and Maggie's symbiotic relationship) has the chance to occur, but that such a reorganization instead centers on her and somehow, idiosyncratically, celebrates her ("They were parting, in the light of it, absolutely on Charlotte's *value*" [2010, 979]). It could be thus argued that the very aim of the novel resides in a fuller appreciation of Charlotte, and in Maggie becoming her main appreciator, despite the narrator's ironic effort to stress the correspondence between Adam's and Maggie's views of her ("What else had she herself meant three minutes before by speaking of her as great? Great for the world that was before her—*that* [Adam] proposed she should be: she was not to be wasted in the application of his plan. Maggie held to this then—that she wasn't to be wasted" [2010, 980]).

To conclude, Daudet and James both challenged the conventions of the wifely adultery novel in the context of a changing social perception of the figure of the adulteress, responding to it, or—in James's case—even anticipating it. Their treatment of such figure was as unprecedented as it was un-redeeming and anti-melodramatic. Both novelists resisted the temptation to expel the lower-class protagonist from the bourgeois social circle as some kind of scapegoat. Instead, their acknowledgment of her transgression forced them to confront their own bourgeois prejudices and find a way to incorporate her in a newly constituted social world. At the same time, they depicted the institution of marriage—the perfect embodiment of nineteenth-century moral standards and values—as a precarious bond colliding with human passions and unable to reconcile them. Very much like Richard and Lydie, Amerigo and Maggie are far from regaining a perfect balance at the end of the novel. They, like Daudet's couple, find new closeness through complicity. But while their collaboration in the subtle power play effectively removes Charlotte and Adam, it leaves them at the mercy of a lingering suspicion and fear.

La petite paroisse, Daudet's pioneering and unjustly forgotten masterpiece, is echoed and honored in James's last completed novel, the ultimate portrait of the confrontation between Old World corruption and New World innocence, which holds an enigmatic and unforgettable adulteress at its center.

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