

**MURDER IN HENRY JAMES' THE OTHER HOUSE
(1896)**

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Saggio.

Especially in literature, "the landscape of unprovoked but premeditated female violence remains strangely unexplored." Sam Tanenhaus makes this compelling statement in a *New York Times* article taking his cue from the case of Amy Bishop, the University of Alabama neuroscientist who shot six colleagues, killing three, in February 2010. While replete with figures of male criminals, the Western literary tradition appears to be reticent about women's violence, a subject navigating the social world – particularly nowadays – but to which works of the imagination have difficulty in attuning. Quoting a criminologist, Tanenhaus points out that female killers are confined to an "exceptional case" status ("the battered wife who kills her abusive husband; the postpartum psychotic mother who kills her newborn infant") which has proven inspiring to film and television productions, besides being a haunting presence in the more or less rigidly coded genre fiction. Serious literature, instead, has so far been rather indifferent to the potentially complex stories lurking behind criminal acts like Dr. Bishop's (i.e., what was the role played by her privileged background, by her secure marriage, by her scientific mind and career ambition?)¹.

In fact, in the last ten years, the relationship between femininity and violence has received a boost of attention from the domain of literary studies, with a peak of interest for the Victorian "sensation" fiction of the 1860s and 1870s. What only thirty years ago was considered as a minor and negligible collection of writings is now increasingly scanned, through interdisciplinary approaches that connect literature with law, medicine, psychology, etc., in search of alternative images of womanhood, from dangerous sexuality to folly and crime. More often than not, current fascination with sensational novels is pinned on the "woman who kills," the most conspicuous departure from canonical bourgeois femininity surfacing both in the press news – a potent source for the nineteenth-century imagination – and in the plots of a variety of writers like Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Mary E. Braddon, Mrs. Henry Wood, Charlotte Yong. Focus on feminine deviancy allows an assessment of the interplay between notions about bodily nature, psychology, class status, and moral and legal responsibility in the evolving definitions of womanhood, to which novels, among other cultural agents, contribute². Aligning Henry James with sensationalist, or quasi-sensationalist, novelists and their preoccupations would be surprising, had not his resilient ties with popular fiction been uncovered for three decades now. Yet it is still notable, and evidence of the attractive power of this subject both in cultural and literary terms, that the closest James ever came to representing an act of literal violence featured women as the perpetrators. This is true for "The Author of Beltraffio" (1884), a short story dealing with a mother's sacrifice of her son in the ambiance of Decadent literati, but especially for *The Other House* (1896), one of the most marginal novels of the Jamesian canon, whose singular features I believe deserve a larger investigation than they have so far received³.

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Set in the British countryside within the circle of the business partners Beever and Bream, the story gravitates around the promise extorted by dying Julia Bream that her husband Tony will not marry as long as their daughter Effie is alive. Rose Armiger, Julia's best friend, who shared with her the same horrible stepmother, is clearly in love with charming and wealthy Tony, although officially engaged to Dennis Vidal. As four years pass and it becomes clear that Tony and his neighbors' friend, Jean Martle, tacitly love each other, Rose cannot put up with the situation and during a birthday party drowns little Effie in the river, initially raising suspicion against Jean. Although shattered by the tragic event, family and friends decide to camouflage it as an accident, with the complicity of Dr. Ramage. Rose will be able to leave England in the company of her fiancé, with the prospect of forever pondering what she coolly defines as her "mistake," while Tony and Jean, who are now potentially free to marry, will have to cope with both their loss and the awareness of their complicity in the fatal turn of events.

When he first conceived the (then slightly different) lines of this plot, sitting in the flickering firelight on the day after Christmas in 1893, James was halfway through the "treacherous years" of his unfortunate experimentation with the theater. Shortly afterwards, he wrote the idea into a scenario that did not see the light, and only three years later did he decide to convert the scenario into a novel, which still bore a strong theatrical imprint, for the "Illustrated London News"⁴. In 1892, in the same popular weekly that during the decade would host such diverse authors as Thomas Hardy, Walter Besant, Robert Louis Stevenson, Ouida, and Stephen Crane, he had published "Greville Fane," a short story that humorously contrasted a pathetic best-selling woman novelist who "could invent stories by the yard, but couldn't write a page of English," with an I-narrator convinced that "a work of art required a tremendous licking into shape"⁵. This time, however, James had "endeavour[ed] to be thrilling," as he assured the magazine's editor Clement Shorter, who in turn was persuaded by James's friend and novelist Lucy Clifford to ask him for a serial⁶. It is ironic that in his second contribution to the "Illustrated London News" James rummaged in the very archives of the popular women's fiction, both domestic and sensational, he had so bitingy scoffed at in "Greville Fane" and other literary tales of the 1890s. Incidentally, these interpolations expose the inner contradictions and multiple allegiances characterizing the widely shared tendency, among male "serious" writers and aesthetes of the time, to construct a masculine sphere of aesthetics against a feminine sphere of mass production and consumption⁷.

Otherness in the Victorian House

James's intricate maneuvering to both draw from the tradition of domestic realism and distance himself from it can be appreciated starting from a key paratextual element: the title. The one originally proposed by James was *The Promise*, but as Shorter didn't seem happy with it, they settled on *The Other House*, which according to Leon Edel had come to James's mind after hearing a conversation by a friend⁸. In fact, by browsing the indexes of contemporary popular fiction, one finds a considerable number of titles centering on domestic spaces rather than individual lives, confirming a trend inaugurated in the early part of the century by authors like Jane Austen and Thomas Love Peacock. The copious production of some of the most successful women novelists of the period – Margaret Oliphant, Mrs. Henry Wood, Charlotte Yonge – hosted plenty of novels named after houses, very often following the vicissitudes of a single-parent daughter as she manages her childhood home while waiting to embrace married life: *The House on the Moor* (1861), *A House Divided Against Itself* (1886), *A House in Bloomsbury* (1894), *Danesbury House* (1860), *The House of Halliwell* (1890), *Chantry House* (1886)⁹. There even exists a novel literally titled *The Other House* (1878), which James might

have heard of, if not actually read. Written by the now forgotten U.S. novelist Mary R. Higham, it hinges on the love affairs of three sisters while they go back and forth, as occurs in James's novel, from their own to their neighbors' dwelling¹⁰.

By giving centrality to both feminine characters and the physical site of the home, these novels notably prove how gender – and class – status is produced through domestic space. One of their typical features is a "narrative tour" of the house that leads the reader through its internal spatial divisions, their attributes, and the activities performed in them, thereby founding the perception of proper Victorian bourgeois domesticity and simultaneously of woman's place within it¹¹.

The appearance and function of interiors, the paying and receiving of visits in parlors, presiding over meals, renovating the household furniture, nursing sick people in bedrooms, are crucial pivots around which the description and action of domestic novels revolve, highlighting the female protagonists' (sometimes fairly rebellious) negotiations with the restricted freedom of their lives¹². The almost invariable happy endings, epitomized by marriage to an eligible mate, sanction women's appointment as legitimate rulers of a new household, but only after their qualities of propriety, patience, and sympathy have been duly strengthened.

While appealing to this tradition, James radically manipulates it. The title does referentially point to the text's spatial organization, but the typology of the few places of action – partly ascribable to the theatrical matrix – has been transformed. Book I takes place in a very atypical setting, a hall. Not a parlor, not a dining nor a living room, the hall is by definition a neutral space, both an entrance room and a passageway ("bright, large and high, richly decorated and freely used, full of 'corners' and communications, it evidently played equally the part of a place of reunion and of a place of transit")¹³. A guest lounge where the owner's "violently" (4) new wealth can be displayed, at once formal and impersonal, the hall is a place completely deprived of intimacy, as evidenced by the many interruptions of the characters' conversations, or private meditations, due to the arrivals or departures of visitors. The setting of Book II, Mrs. Beever's garden, is likewise a liminal space that participates simultaneously of the outside and the inside, being in the open and yet furnished like a room¹⁴. Both potentially a motherly space, in the tradition of nineteenth-century American feminine culture, and a class-connoted space where the traditional ceremony of tea is administered, Mrs. Beever's garden in fact proves to be a highly dysfunctional and centrifugal context¹⁵. Within its borders one engagement is broken (Jean Martle and Paul Beever's), another is deceitfully reaffirmed (Rose Armiger and Dennis Vidal's), and a major showdown between the rival heroines, involving the seizure of little Effie, takes place. In Book III, the apparently proper domestic setting of Mrs. Beever's living room, full of period furniture meant to emanate solidity and respect for tradition, is equally unable to bring order or cohesiveness to the community. Again a space of comings and goings, immersed in darkness, the living room hosts the melodramatic peak of the story, when the disturbing details of the child's death are revealed and the breakdowns of the main characters are consummated.

The vital points of the home remain unreachable, or are disfigured. Whereas the essential purpose of any (Victorian) home is to dispense nourishment, care and protection, here meals go deserted (lunch in book I, tea in book III) and children are in utmost danger. Whereas any true Victorian home relies on a lady who presides over it, here the place vacated by Mrs. Bream's death is not filled, and her two aspiring successors keep gravitating around a void which soon turns into an "abyss" (one of the recurring words in the narrative). As in many other Jamesian portrayals of households, in short, the domestic sphere by no means offers a shelter from the iniquities of the outer world but is itself a breeding-ground for rapacity, in which the celebrated

values of piety and lovingness are radically shaken by self-interested pursuits¹⁶. If in this perspective the "other house" stands for the repressed underside of the cult of domesticity, the symbolic associations evoked by the title do not end here. In an arch-famous passage of the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), James envisaged fiction as a house, where the choice of metaphor is symptomatic of the capital role played by this setting – which with Gaston Bachelard we could rather call an "instrument of topo-analysis" – in Victorian literature¹⁷. If narrative art is represented by a house (although a fantastically reshaped one, provided with an infinite number of "windows" which in turn stand for the relativity of the observation posts from which reality is perceived), the "otherness" that settles in it might metafictionally point, considering the origin of James's novel, to the dramatic form. Before touching on the text's appropriation of theatrical models, however, I will examine its relationship with the slightly outdated, but still influential "literary possible" represented by the subgenre of sensation fiction, which appears implicated in the disruption of the domestic ideal staged throughout the narrative¹⁸.

The Thrill of Murder: Sensation between Reality and Fiction

Flourishing in the 1860s and 1870s, the sensation novel is sometimes described as a sort of revenge taken by literary authors – especially female – on the limitations imposed by conventional bourgeois morality. By offering "a mixture of melodrama, the gothic, sensational reportage, penny dreadfuls, the Newgate novel and domestic realism," it was successful because "it sanitized those aspects of working-class culture which were offensive to middle-class taste"¹⁹. Full of thrilling incidents and suspense, characterized by plots involving double identities, insanity, disasters, mysteries, and crimes, this kind of fiction, often centered on female transgression, was as officially censored as avidly consumed. James himself had been an eager if patronizing reader of pioneers of the genre such as Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. In an early review of *Aurora Floyd* (1863), he had criticized Braddon's exploitation of the public's ever-growing appetite for novelty and extreme situations, as well as her moralizing attitude; he was nonetheless admiring of the remarkable expansion of both the author's and her women's readers' competence about the life of the "disorderly half of society"²⁰. James's fascination was not limited to his role as reader and reviewer. If, as Peter Brooks has argued, all of his fiction can be said to flirt with melodramatic situations, explicit experimentation with sensationalism dates at least from 1884, with the publication of "Georgina's Reasons." A bigamist who is unconventionally allowed to keep up her imposture until the end (a symptom of the author's subtle subversion of the sensation codes), the protagonist of this story embodies to an utmost degree the qualities of assertive and ruthless femininity that are a trademark of the genre²¹.

Likewise, Rose Armiger, the central character of *The Other House*, shares many traits with the female protagonists of sensation novels. She is physically attractive, although in a non-reassuring way (before deciding that she is "strikingly handsome," Jean Martle judges her as "awfully plain," and her eyes as "strange," p. 7), and not in the prime of her youth—the sensational protagonist is generally a grown woman, whose youthful looks rather serve to conceal her experience of life and sexuality, like former marriages, motherhood, etc²². She is resolute, active and independent (she moves in and out of Tony Bream's house with great self-confidence, and after Julia's death goes to live on her own in London). She is manipulative, showing a penchant for playing multiple roles: while taking care of Julia as her best friend, she simultaneously acts as a sort of governess, insinuating into Tony's life as a confidante and probably lover (there is a reference to his visits to her in London, and in the end he admits to having being "too kind" to her). All the while, for safety reasons, she keeps

Dennis Vidal on hold as her betrothed. Cunning, plotting, seductive, clearly eager to improve her financially mediocre situation, Rose is thoroughly depicted as a self-directed subject of will, a common type among sensation heroines ("She only needs to get what she wants," Mrs. Beever says of her, p. 87). A memorable passage captures the narrator's particular insistence on her as both a demanding subject of vision and a desiring woman; her position determines an unusual inversion of gender roles, with Tony Bream playing the object of vision-desire and the sexual nuances being conveyed by the image of fire ("quench") and the phallic - lighthouse (the "light steadily revolving"):

She looked across at him from under [her parasol]. Their eyes met, and he again felt himself in the presence of what, in them, had been so deep, so exquisite. It represented something that no lapse could long quench - something that gave out the measureless white ray of a light steadily revolving. She could sometimes turn it away, but it was always somewhere (p. 107).

The most thrilling material in James's hands, however, is not feminine audacity or lack of scruples but murder proper. In Book II, Rose realizes that her hopes of winning Tony and of prompting an official engagement between Jean and Paul Beever (who instead has fallen for her) are doomed, for Tony and Jean are in love with each other. After strategically resuming her engagement to Dennis Vidal, she literally snatches at little Effie, provokes Jean into an argument, and leaves with the child. Her murderous act, which both Dennis and Tony agree should be imputed to her "passion" (p. 213), takes place off stage and the culprit's identity is confirmed only after suspicion against Jean and Tony - who accuses himself to disculpate Jean - has been cleared. A sinister reconstruction of the homicide is given by Dr. Ramage upon his discovery of Effie's body:

She was immersed—she was held under water—she was made sure of. Oh, I grant you it took quite a hand—and it took a spirit!...Then she was left. A pull of the chain brought back the boat; and the author of the crime walked away (p. 207).

The topic of female violence is not a unique feature of sensation novels but runs through the whole body of nineteenth-century English literature. Infanticide, especially if committed by a young, poor and helpless woman, was tackled sympathetically by major authors like William Wordsworth, Walter Scott and George Eliot, continuing to pop up even later (James's friend Lucy Clifford resumed it in her 1885 novel *Mrs. Keith's Crime*, which became the year's sensation)²³. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have shown, in her stories from *Scenes from a Clerical Life* and in *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot deliberately evokes women's fantasy of getting rid of male oppression through murder (but only to convert it into a redemptive Christian vision)²⁴. Charles Dickens, on the other hand, inaugurates the first realistically deviant women characters, generally servants or foreigners, in novels like *Bleak House* (1853) and *Great Expectations* (1861).

Recent scholarly work has stressed that starting in the 1840s, the press began to play a paramount role in exciting public attention to real murders committed by women. Compared to the "murdering mothers," the rise of the "criminal star" staged new interpretive problems that involved the interplay of feminine agency, public exposure, and class and legal status. Writers proved to be quite sensitive to the clamor aroused by public trials. The case of Maria Manning, a Swiss-born servant who in 1849 was hanged along with her husband for a murder with theft, generated a sort of repulsive fascination that inspired characters in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and Collins'

Armada (1866). Indirect allusions to the story of Constance Kent, a 16-year-old from Somerset who in 1860 killed her little brother, can be detected in novels by Charlotte Yonge, Mrs. Henry Wood, and even Margaret Oliphant²⁵.

Another case that caused quite a stir was the 1857 trial of Madeleine Smith. A Scottish genteel young woman accused of poisoning her secret lover after being pressured into a more desirable marriage, Smith was eventually acquitted as her responsibility in the murder – against all evidence – was famously declared “Not Proven”²⁶. In a 1914 letter to William Roughhead, author of *Twelve Scots Trials* (1913), James himself goes back to the intense coverage given by *The Times* to the Smith trial when he was fourteen, living in Boulogne with his parents who “followed and discussed it in suspense.” Interestingly and somewhat disturbingly, James dwells on the aesthetic allure of the “perfect” case as reconstructed by Roughhead, the beauty of which consisted in that “[Madeleine Smith] precisely *didn't* squalidly suffer, but lived on to admire (...) the rare work of art with which she had been the means of enriching humanity.” Like his contemporaries almost sixty years before, James had been certainly struck by the extreme self-possession exhibited by Madeleine in the courtroom despite not just the terrible charge, but also the disclosure of her ardent relationship with her victim (through her letters to him). The ideal of “true” womanhood being grounded in the deletion of the needs and even the conspicuous presence of the female body, the public display of Madeleine and her sexual urges proved hardly reconcilable with the dominant Victorian paradigm of young bourgeois femininity. Both traits – the effort to preserve coolness and the passion – also characterize the fictional character of Rose Armiger in *The Other House*; in the original sketch, moreover, Rose was to kill her victim with poison, and only later, possibly influenced by the contemporary case of a serial baby-killer, did James opt for death by drowning²⁷. The letter's conclusion insists on Madeleine's extraordinary poise:

She was truly a portentous young person, with the conditions of the whole thing throwing it into such extraordinary relief, and yet I wonder all the same at the verdict in the face of the so vividly attested, and so fully and so horribly, suffering of her victim. It's astonishing that the evidence of what he went through that last night didn't do for her. And what a pity that she was almost of the pre-photographic age—I would give so much for a veracious portrait of her then face²⁸.

In such stories as fueled by the press, what proved most intriguing to public opinion – at once shocking, attractive, and mysterious – was the patent challenge to widely-held beliefs about women's “nature.” Especially to an age that had so much invested in women's moral superiority, creating the immensely influential icon of the “Angel in the House,” evidence of acts ruthlessly harming the integrity of life couldn't but appear unsettling: unlike male violence, women's violent behavior was – and still is – perceived as a radical breaking of the symbolic order. Writing censoriously of *Aurora Floyd*, Margaret Oliphant voiced the opinion of many when claiming that “the wickedness of man is less ruinous, less disastrous to the world in general, than the wickedness of woman”.²⁹

Very likely, news about female murder brought to the surface never-dispelled fears about the irrepressibly destructive passions harbored by women, to which mid-nineteenth-century psycho-medical theories gave fresh authority and which – as Nina Auerbach has shown – haunted the Victorian imagination through a plethora of demonic figures³⁰. Yet the Demon countered the Angel not just as a gender but also as a class ideal, posing legal problems: how to administer justice with regard to subjects who,

being deprived of most civil rights, were not considered as fully responsible? As statistics demonstrate, women offenders were treated more mildly by the nineteenth-century law (as wives and servants, they tended not to be prosecuted for minor crimes), while middle-class women generally escaped execution³¹.

The sheltering action exerted by the law was somehow reproduced in sensational or quasi-sensational fiction. Although clearly attracted to the thrilling potential of featuring women in the role of killers, authors devised a variety of strategies in order to mitigate both feminine agency and feminine responsibility in homicides. Such protective screens included replacing female with male killers in cases inspired by crime news, accounting for murderous acts in terms of madness, downgrading the social standing of murderesses, and substituting real acts with mere intentions³². Almost unfailingly, the culprit was punished with death (possibly preceded by repentance), a necessary retribution for a supremely unfeminine behavior – dictated by gender-borderline motives like ambition, jealousy, and revenge – with which female readers should not run the risk of identifying. A few examples: after killing the lawyer Tulkington in Dickens' *Bleak House*, Hortense, a French-born maid, wanders through London and dies in a cemetery; in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, the protagonist Lucy – a former governess – fails to kill two different men and dies abroad after entering a mental asylum; in Louisa May Alcott's "A Double Tragedy" (1865), a Spanish actress kills her persecutor and later commits suicide on the stage; Lydia Gwilt, the anti-heroine of Collins' *Armada* (1866), succeeds in one murder, fails another and eventually commits suicide; in Mrs. Henry Wood's *St. Martin's Eve* (1866) – from which James might have taken the idea of the "promise" exacted by a dying wife to her husband – the protagonist lets her stepson die in a fire, is seized by hallucinatory visions, and ends up in a madhouse. D. A. Miller's thesis in *The Novel and the Police* remains utterly persuasive particularly as far as murder gendered in the feminine is concerned: "The 'morality' of sensation fiction [lies] in its ultimately fulfilled wish to abolish itself: to abandon the grotesque aberrations of character and situation that have typified its representation, which now coincides with the norm of the Victorian household." Within the sensational framework, female deviance is denied both rational explanation and public recognition, which means recognition in a male order of things³³.

As already suggested, the whole business of Rose's murder is dealt with within the family circle, without neither the intermission of public authorities or any real acts of investigation. The novel's compliance with the rule of privacy, however, should not minimize other extraordinary breaches both in genre conventions and in the representation of the female character. In defiance of the sensational script and the laws of Victorian morality, Rose, a perfectly well-bred bourgeois woman, is left free to roam the world *after* being recognized in full possession of her mental faculties while committing her crime. To Dennis, she confesses having being "possessed" by the last hope to have Tony hate Jean, adding explicative details to her rational self-analysis: "You'll say my calculation was grotesque—my stupidity as ignoble as my crime. All I can answer is that I might none the less have succeeded. ... But I don't defend myself - I am face to face with my mistake" (p. 225, emphasis mine). Devoid of shame, remorse, and above all of discomposure, Rose appears like a second, self-confessed Madeleine Smith ready to begin a new life in another continent (while Madeleine went to Australia, she is off to China). Although inhabited by unrestrained desire, she is also, to the end, a ratiocinating and self-controlled creature, realizing a coincidence of opposite modes of being to which James had been alerted since the Smith trial, and which in his eyes makes Rose charmingly "monstrous" (an often-used term): perfectly civilized and yet both outside the restraining power of society and outside novelistic conventions, as a sort of fantastic embodiment of uncharted representative possibilities.

Never had James gone to such extremes, not even in "The Author of Beltraffio," nor would he ever do³⁴. In his 1891 novel also sympathetic with a woman murderer, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy had been far from attempting a similar epilogue. Not only is Tess publicly executed after her crime and flight, but she is depicted as a pathetic victim of circumstances, "unable to realize the gravity of her conduct," and possibly led to her "aberration" by her tainted aristocratic ancestry³⁵. What else, then, lies behind James's anomalous turn of the tables, capable of disconcerting even today's readers³⁶? *The Other House* stands out as a unique experimental literary ground, which realizes the convergence of different interests, strategies, and models. On the one hand, as we have seen, it enables James's effort to cater for readers accustomed to domestic realism but especially to thrillers, that is to say a genre that at the time had very little cultural legitimacy ("If *that's* what the idiots want, I can give them their bellyful," he wrote to his brother William in 1896)³⁷. On the other hand, it is an attempt to integrate the dramatic form – dialogue, a circumscribed setting and "stage" directions – with James's usual material, the narrative of the fine consciousness: allusions to Decadent topoi and the theatrical model of Henrik Ibsen contribute to bring additional, complicating dimensions to James's portrayal of female violence.

Medusa and the Angel: Variations on Women's Violence

In the construction of Rose Armiger, James did not just resume some key features typical of the sensational tradition. He endowed his character with a series of attributes that can be ascribed to the Decadent culture thriving around him. Tall, big-eyed, of imposing presence and changeable beauty, Rose in many respects also incarnates the "dark lady" types that had begun circulating first in the Continent and then in England since the 1880s, in literature as well as in painting. Throughout the text, various terms revolve around the semantic field of sacrifice, with the obvious function of metaphorically anticipating the murder of Effie ("a poor little lamb of sacrifice," p. 103). The character most frequently associated with the trope is clearly Rose, who in one instance is described as "[standing] there in her vivid meaning like the priestess of a threatened altar" (p. 102). Envisaging his killer as the officiant of a sacred ritual, James is joining a long line of fin-de-siècle artists engaged in reviving disquieting, death-bearing images of women from classical myth or the Scriptures—the Sphynx, Circe, Medea, Daliah, Judith, Salomé, and so on³⁸. One of the period's major icons of threatening femininity was Medusa, to which Rose is often assimilated, either directly ("The gaze of the Gorgon was petrifying Rose Armiger," p. 67, "Rose's mask was the mask of Medusa", p. 182), or indirectly ("You look at me like a stone" p. 48). James goes as far as describing Rose's "wide, full-lipped mouth" uncovering a set of "small square white teeth" (p. 7). This very unusual characterization detail for him might, on the one hand, further elaborate on the Medusa image, which painters often depicted with her mouth half-parted. On the other hand, it brings to mind the positivist theories about the murderesses' distinctive physical traits, recently popularized by Lombroso and Ferrero in *The Female Offender*, which had appeared in English in 1895. Like Lombroso's natural-born criminals, Rose is devoid of all maternal sentiment, as she almost boasts during a caustic verbal exchange with Jean: "It would be very sweet and attractive of me to say I adore [dear little children]; but I never pretend to feelings that I don't keep up, don't you know?" (p. 10). Constantly shunning physical contact with little Effie, the only time she takes the child in her arms she kisses her flesh with such a ravenous ardor as to resemble one of the female vampires that in the early 1870s had begun peopling horror narratives³⁹.

All such attributions, either emanating from the author's conscious encyclopedia or simply attuned to the climate of his time, would seem in line with the misogynistic implications that have been

imputed to fin-de-siècle representations of "feminine evil". By portraying women as perverse, blood-hungry, lascivious, and unmotherly, as Bram Dijkstra claims, Decadent masculine culture would exorcise fears about women's increasing emancipation, perceived as a threat to the patriarchal order⁴⁰. Setting aside the problems raised by a catch-all theory such as Dijkstra's, James's depiction of the evil woman is far from univocal. Although clearly labeled as "perverse" (there are five occurrences of the term in relation to her), Rose's character is also enriched with an array of enhancing, heroic attributes like "tragic," "noble," "intense," and "sincere." Starting with Leon Edel in his 1947 introduction to the novel, several critics have argued for the influence of Ibsen's plays on the composition of *The Other House*, especially *Rohmersholm* (1886) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890)⁴¹. The latter's protagonist, in particular, has in common with Rose a multilayered personality whose assets are pride, ambition, sharpness, but also intensity, sensitiveness, and unpredictability. Although only a "virtual" murderess, Hedda Gabler brings tragedy to her community by inducing her husband's scholarly rival to suicide, by burning his manuscript and, after learning that his death was not a beautiful and free but only an accidental gesture, by killing herself to avoid blackmailing. Both claiming power over the men around them, both struggling against "mild" counter-heroines, Hedda and Rose commit their evil actions with passionate determination, but do not evade responsibility for them in the aftermath. When first performed on the British stage, in fact, Ibsen's play had aroused much controversy, as a great number of critics and spectators felt outraged by what they perceived as Ibsen's unhealthy focus on Hedda's "moral repulsiveness" and "female monstr[osity]." In his long defense of the play, James was among the few to praise without moral reservations not only its intellectual and technical power, but also the contradictory nature of Hedda's character: "And then one isn't sure she is wicked, and by no means sure... that she is disagreeable. She is various and sinuous and graceful, complicated and natural; she suffers, she struggles, she is human, and by that fact exposed to a dozen interpretations, to the importunity of our suspense"⁴².

Rose, then, is much more than a collection of sensational and decadent stereotypes. Profiting from the lesson of Ibsen, James makes the woman killer a complex and "interesting" character, whose motives readers are led less to judge than to interrogate. Especially in the early chapters, Rose makes an appeal to our sympathies by appearing courageous and agonistic, a woman who has been wounded by a sorrowful past but hasn't lost her capacity for deep feeling (she had "the look of being made by her passion so acquainted with pain that even in the midst of it she could flower into charity," p. 110). Central to James's sympathetic treatment is the connotation of Rose as a figure of care. As she tells Mrs. Beever, she and Julia were united as girls "by one of the strongest of all ties—the tie of a common aversion" (p. 12); as a result of this special relationship, she refers to her friend with the language of mutual possessive love ("I'm the only thing of her own that dear Julia has ever had" p. 12; "Julia's the only thing I have of my own" p. 14). Such statements may hint, as Priscilla Walton has argued, at a homosexual subtext to the novel, but they also undisputedly ground the psychological construction of James's villainess on qualities like lovingness, solicitude, and even motherliness⁴³. Rose tells Tony that "it's for your affection for her that I've really given you mine" (p. 25), and later makes clear to her fiancé that "people can do anything to me who are nice to Julia" (p. 38). All throughout, there are references to Rose's "protect[iveness]" of her fiancé Dennis Vidal (p. 29), to her keeping Julia under her "wing" (p. 29), to her talking of Julia as if she were her "mother" (p. 38). Despite the explanation Rose gives to Dennis (to cast blame on Jean), the reasons behind her murder of Effie remain open to interpretation: because Effie stands between Rose and Tony? To make happiness impossible for Tony and Jean? Yet there is a strong emphasis on Rose's determination

to guard the promise exacted by Julia at all costs: "There's a right I must see done -there's a wrong I must make impossible. There's a loyalty I must cherish - There's a memory I must protect," she tells Paul (p. 102). The suggestion is that Rose's murderous gesture springs from the logic – no matter how distorted and paradoxical – of her unconditional devotion to Effie's dead mother, which in turn feeds on the supreme motherly role of the protectress (but also on more masculine, chivalrous values like a sense of righteousness and loyalty).

Rather than merely meant to evoke another Decadent topos – the killing mother – I believe that James's ambiguous treatment of the murderess is a symptom of his fascination with female agency caught in a struggle against constraining cultural definitions, particularly as far as the problem of desire is concerned. At a superficial level, the novel is built upon the melodramatic opposition between two antithetical female characters, Rose and Jean. Virtually all commentators maintain that Jean plays the role of the "textual ingénue," "nymph-like" and "adoring," cherishing only her "innocent love" for Tony⁴⁴.

Possibly reproducing at face-value the (ironic) distinction between a "bad" and a "good" heroine made by James in the Notebooks, this univocal and unanimous interpretation does rest on considerable textual evidence. Whereas Rose is surrounded by dark tones, Jean bathes in the radiance of her fair beauty. Young, submissive, and caring, since her first appearance on the scene Jean is the perfect candidate for the "Angel in the House" role. James carefully hinges her characterization on one of the most persistent Victorian myths, the ideal continuity of women and children. Tony, who has grown fonder and fonder of her, still addresses her "as a child" (p. 107), relishing at "the capricious rotation by which the woman peeped out of the child and the child peeped out of the woman" (pp. 117-118). Furthermore, Jean's symbolic association with Effie, to whom she is passionately devoted, is strengthened both by explicit reference to their common birthday and by metaphorical allusions to drowning (under Rose's verbal attack, "unguardedly stepping into water that she had believed shallow, [Jean] found herself caught up in a current of fast-moving depths" p. 161).

At the same time as he casts Jean as an angelic and naive creature, however, James undermines, by showing their ideological essence, the main ideals that she is meant to incarnate: innocence and maternal love as inbred in women's nature. Chapter XII in Book I, staging an extended encounter between Tony and Jean, is most revealing in this respect. Strewed with modal verbs of conduct like *must* and *should*, the dialogue revolves around Jean's almost comic struggle to conceal under a screen of propriety her active interest in Tony—a married man with a gravely ill wife in the other room ("for the first time in her life she was regularly calling on a gentleman. Since this was the singular case she must at least call properly" p. 63). In her studious effort to make an impression and appear sympathetic without getting too familiar, she resorts to the effective weapon of her "absorbing" love for babies, to the point of swearing eternal devotion to Tony's daughter—a child she has never seen; the result is a sort of self-advertisement on the marriage market: "She looked more assured. 'I'm just the person always to be [kind to her]' " (p. 64). In short, the text suggests that Jean's intense bond to Effie originates less in a born-mother's instinct than in a capitalization on shared expectations about women's attitudes to children, a gender prescription that Rose, as we have seen, had already called into question.

Exactly like her antagonist, Jean is motivated by desire, although her conformity to the script of Victorian femininity imposes that she disguise her feelings as a silent and patient wait; or, at most, that she transfer her libidinal energy from the father to his child. Again, it is Rose who exerts a disruptive action on the mandate of silence enforced on feminine desire. After shamelessly – or rather "nobly" – declaring her unrequited love to Tony ("I love you quite

as much as she does" p. 142), Rose exacts a similar toll from Jean. In their dramatic dispute over who is to take Effie, during which she sadistically keeps the latter out of her rival's physical reach, Rose demands a full confession about the hidden motives of Jean's affection for the child. Struggling against her "incapability" of voicing any such answer, Jean finally breaks the rule of reticence:⁴⁵.

"It's because of that that I want her!"

"Because you adore him—and she's his?"

Jean faltered, but she was launched. "Because I adore him—and she is his."

"I want her for another reason," Rose declared. "I adored her poor mother—and she's hers. That's my ground, that's my love, that's my faith." (p. 164).

Rose's literal murder of a real child is thus preceded by another symbolic murder, that of the child-like "purity" that women like Jean are socially required to perform. The "monster" performs one of its main cultural functions, to show the functioning of the "normal." Perhaps more effectively than in many a gothic horror story, the violent core of *The Other House* and its ramifications appear to expose what has been defined as "the traumatic destruction of female autonomy, the violent repression of multiple identifications and desires during the construction of 'true womanhood.'"⁴⁶ Drawing on feminist and queer readings of the gothic genre as a site for staging the repressive construction of normative gender roles, Noble argues for the presence of a gothic sadomasochistic core at the heart of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, which would especially reveal, with both repressive and subversive effects, the cruel Victorian model of female bodilessness. This is possibly the most sensational story told by the novel: that behind the apparently most disinterested sentiments may lie complicated forms of personal investments, libidinal drives connected with people's struggle for power, and that when engaged in such struggles, women can be as inexorable as anybody. In the only real power arena available to them at the time, the house, competition is fierce. Reversing the standard patriarchal situation, two – or rather three – women rival for the possession of a highly desirable male reduced to an "unmasculine" condition of passive wait, debarred from speaking out his choice of another partner by an authoritative injunction (and yet enjoying the advantages of his position all the while). In order to achieve their goal, they transform a child into an instrument—a cluster of themes, from the tough woman to exploitation of the vulnerable to the passive and desirable male, that James will continue to explore in his later works, from *What Maisie Knew* (1897) to *The Wings of the Dove* (1902). The novel thus offers a sort of phenomenology of feminine violence, whose various embodiments and degrees of intensity are signaled in the text by lexical and metaphorical recurrences. There is the initial evil perpetrated by Rose's and Julia's stepmother, which reverberates its damaging action on the lives of its victims (although never described, it is referred to as "that horror," the same term that also qualifies the homicide of Effie). Then there is the crushing psychological pressure exerted by Julia's oath request, which endangers the child's life in the first place and which the narrative voice aptly defines as "the little hour of violence" (p. 118). With respect to these premises, the infanticide enacted by Rose appears as the most destructive manifestation of female will-to-power, and yet an act carefully woven into a larger spiral of shattering forces. In the very end, set against all the men's mild reaction, the transformation of Jean-the-Angel into a vengeful fury (" 'I wish to hunt her to death! I wish to burn her alive!... I could tear her limb from limb!' " p. 218) leaves little doubt about James's disengagement from any residual belief in the reassuring, normalizing power of domesticity.

The Other House as a "Literary" Thriller

As I have suggested, in producing his own version of the sensational thriller James alters or discards some of the main conventions of the genre, resorting to his customary anti-sentimental narrative machine. Besides leaving the culprit unpunished, he keeps the characters' dark past vague, has the murder occur offstage, avoids direct focus on, and therefore identification with, the helpless victim (rather than by her name, Effie is mostly referred to impersonally as "the child"). The principal ingredient of mystery stories, suspense, is not built through action but through slow verbal exchanges and character analysis, unaccompanied by clarifying comments on the part of the narrator. In the special hybrid solution thus devised, the well-established Jamesian "analytic mode" borrows from critically unsanctioned or controversial popular genres (crime stories, sensation fiction) as much as from the avant-garde model of Ibsen's theater. The latter reference is particularly significant, for in the literary debates of the 1890s Ibsen had become a sort of catalyst for "purist" positions that, despite their different accentuations, claimed the emancipation of literature from the fetters of genteel morality through an empowerment of the aesthetic medium⁴⁷.

The 1890s saw an acceleration of momentous transformations both in the social and in the literary field. The advancement of the lower middle classes, women's progress in the professions, the spreading of elementary education and new developments in popular journalism and publicity were phenomena connected to a further widening of the reading public, which increased the perception, on the part of ambitious writers, of the readers' loss of standards of taste and capacity for appreciation⁴⁸. James himself dramatized in countless writings his conflicted relationship with the "mass" public—a conflict that, as we have seen in *The Other House*, is far from transparent and hides many compromises, appropriations, and duplicitous positionings. Parallel to and implicated with such social transformations was the completion of the process through which the modern British literary field came into being. The system of anonymous reviewing was gradually replaced by signed articles, national and international copyright laws were established, adequate royalties were paid to authors, the circulating libraries' influence, thriving on expensive three-decker novels, gave way to a liberalization of the market; furthermore, an unprecedented understanding of literary value was elaborated that neatly distinguished ethical and commercial preoccupations from artistic ones⁴⁹. As is well known, in the ongoing debate that reached its peak in the mid-1880s, James played a pivotal role both as a novelist and a reviewer-critic. With his 1884 essay "The Art of Fiction," he contributed as much as anybody else to the definition of literature as an activity grounded in freedom and personal integrity, to be evaluated solely on the intrinsic criteria of its "execution."

The contemporary reviews of *The Other House* bear a telling testimony to the changes that had taken place in the literary field as well as to James's position in it. American and British reviewers gave a rather warm welcome to James's new novel after six years since the publication of *The Tragic Muse*. There was a general praise of the work's compact and vivid quality, greeted by many as the proof of James's capacity to handle a story of elemental passions, complete with a strong dénouement (the positive qualifiers used are "vivid," "impressive," "force[ful]," "striking," "fascinating")⁵⁰. In short, given his avoidance of all "vulgar sensationalism," the author's foray into the lower zones of the literary field arises much appreciation, with one reviewer declaring that James's unexpected undertaking "the apotheosis of the police gazette (...) has made its footing firm upon Olympus" (p. 255); more than one comment labels the book a "masterpiece."

What is most remarkable about virtually all the reviews is their comparative lack of commentary on the plot lines and characters' features in favor of detailed observations about the novel's formal

composition. Unlike the typical nineteenth-century custom of interspersing lengthy summaries of the works with amateur remarks on their efficacy of style and presentation or "uplifting" effect, here priority is given to questions of craftsmanship at the outset. Reviewers seem most preoccupied with the particular compositional method devised by James, that is, with the balance between theatrical and narrative elements, with the author's departures from or fidelity to specifically defined stylistic idiosyncrasies ("the slow and patient accumulation of detail and circumstance," "the cultivated indirection of his style"), and in general with an assessment of his fresh contribution to the literary craft, of which James is a recognized master ("whatever Mr. Henry James does is of importance to literature, and any display of his craftsmanship employed under new conditions, or upon new materials, must be of great interest to other writers," p. 251).

In proportion to such widespread formalist preoccupations, attention to the novel's content is much limited, especially as far as its dark core is concerned. Reviewers do remark on the "grim drama" and the "tragic" purport of the story, but the hideous crime committed by Rose Armiger and her baffling escape produce a reaction in no way comparable to the outraged critical response aroused by Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* five years earlier. Whereas Hedda had been reviled as both an ostentatious symbol of depravity and an offense to womanhood, Rose's actions are often ignored, or only cursorily defined as "repellent," "revolting," "dreary," and "less than human." An effect of the Master's poetic license? The difference may in part depend on the undeniable lack of dramatic force of James's work compared to Ibsen's, and in part on James's "intellectual," non-sentimental narrative strategy. However, it seems to me particularly compelling to read the downplaying of the murder theme in *The Other House* as a symptom of the state of the contemporary literary field—a state to which James's narrative strategy actively contributes. Essentially, the reviewers' primary focus on the formal dimension, which even generates a specialized vocabulary, subsumes their concern for the work's ethical impact:

Rose Armiger is at times less than human, but her character is reasonably consistent as the author has conceived it. The story of her love and of the crime to which it led is at times repellent, but faultless in unity and fascinating in interest. Henry James is a literary painter of miniatures, a critic, and a creator, but, above all, an artist (p. 252).

In such an interpretive approach, the relationship between the artwork and the facts of real life is loosened, and the former is not judged by its moral effects but by the consistency of its aesthetic economy ("The final departure of Rose into the night and exile is dramatically, if not morally, satisfying"). It goes without saying that the liberal attitude exhibited by the reviewers – who may already be called budding literary critics – is proportional to their perception of the work's limited popular appeal, and that certainly in the case of an easier-reading, conventional novel, moral censure would have been much tighter. While in the more popular medium of the theater Ibsen's transgressive women were perceived as a social threat, in the protected space of James's demanding fiction women characters could be condoned in spite of their being murderesses on the run. Not merely condoned, even admired. As another review puts it by means of an ennobling implicit comparison with the Greek and French classical tragedy, "[The reader] looks in retrospect over the footlights instead, and the murderess of 'The Other House' becomes a great *tragedienne*, the central figure in a dramatic situation of commanding intensity of force" (p. 251). A veritable symbolic revolution, enlarging the possibilities for representing women's agency in literature, is thus consumed within the pages of this neglected anti-sensational sensation novel.

1. S. TANENHAUS, *Violence That Art Didn't see Coming*, "The New York Times", February 24, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/28/arts/28bishop.html?_r=1.
[↵]
2. For an assessment of the increasing interest of academic studies for the Victorian sensation fiction, see M. KNIGHT, *Figuring out the Fascination: Recent Trends in Criticism on Victorian Sensation and Crime Fiction*, "Victorian Literature and Culture", 37 (1), 2009, pp. 323-333.[↵]
3. Not the best of James's novels, *The Other House* has received comparatively scant critical attention and has many detractors. E. WILSON found it "dreadful" ("The Ambiguity of Henry James," in *The Question of Henry James*, ed. F. W. DUPEE, New York, Octagon, 1973, p. 181), S. GORLEY PUTT "disappointing" (*Henry James: A Reader's Guide*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1966, p. 309), and J. WOOD, more recently, "unworthy" (*The Later Henry James was a Master of Technique. But How Good a Novelist Was He?*, "The Atlantic Monthly", April 2003 <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2003/04/wood.htm>). For a more positive view, see L. BEGLEY, Introduction to Henry JAMES, *The Other House*, New York, The New York Review Books, 1999, pp. v-xiii, L. S. SCHWARTZ, *The Other Henry James*, "The threepenny Review", 83, Fall 2000, www.threepennyreview.com/samples/schwartz_f00.html, and T. TANNER, who defines it a "beautifully crafted, highly civilized novel" in *The American Mystery: American Literature from Emerson to DeLillo*, Cambridge, UK., Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 130.[↵]
4. *The Notebooks of Henry James*, eds. F. O. MATTHIESSEN and K. B. MURDOCK, New York, Oxford University Press, 1961, pp. 138-143.[↵]
5. H. JAMES, "Greville Fane," *Complete Stories 1892-1898*, New York, The Library of America, 1996, pp. 217-233, p. 220, p. 221. The story appeared in the "Illustrated London News" on September 17 and 24, 1892. In his *Notebooks* (cit., p. 94), James implies that the character of Greville Fane was based upon the prolific British novelist Ouida (pseudonym of Maria Louise Ramé, 1839-1908), whose works were a mix of sensationalism, adventure, and historical romance.[↵]
6. L. EDEL, "Introduction," in H. JAMES, *The Other House*, New York, New Directions, 1947, p. xi. *The Other House* appeared in the "Illustrated London News" from 4 July to 26 September 1896. In October, Heinemann (London) published the novel in two volumes, while Macmillan (New York) in one volume.[↵]
7. On the gendered construction of both aestheticism and modernism, see R. FELSKI, *The Gender of Modernity*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1990; S. GILBERT and S. GUBAR, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven, Ct., Yale University Press, 1988-1994; K. A. PSOMIADES, *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997.[↵]
8. L. EDEL, "Introduction," cit., p. xiii.[↵]
9. The first three novels, by Margaret Oliphant, focus on a teenage girl who has lost her mother; the following two were written by Mrs. Henry Wood, while the last one by Charlotte Yonge. Typically, the first chapter of these novels opens with a rather detailed description of a domestic interior, a feature that obviously is also shared by many other nineteenth-century novels.[↵]
10. M. R. HIGHAM, *The Other House*, New York, A. D. F. Randolph, 1878.[↵]
11. For an interesting if rigidly-outlined study of the intersection between gender roles, the cultural meaning of the home and domestic space in the novels of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Margaret Oliphant and others, see the PhD dissertation by Elizabeth Palm Callaghan, *Domestic Topographies: Gender and the House in the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Topography* (2009), at <http://digitalibrary.usc.edu/assetserver/controller/item/etd-Callaghan-2705.pdf>. [↵]
12. See, for example, how complacently the father's point of view on the management of his house is conveyed early on in Higham's *The Other House*, which prescriptively implies that any happy and successful household should be so managed by the women living in it: " 'It was very little in life he wanted,' he would often say to his children. Only to have his house and garden in perfect order, flower blooming upon his table three times a day, that table not heavily loaded, not even extravagantly supplied, but decked out daintily with pretty china and crystal, the linen also snowy white, and his daughters in pretty dresses sitting about him. It was such a cosy table!" (M. R. HIGHAM, *The Other House*, cit., p. 9).[↵]
13. H. JAMES, *The Other House*, cit., p. 6. Henceforth all page references in the text will refer to this edition.[↵]
14. "She waited...in the presence of a large red rug and a large white tablecloth, as well as of sundry basket-chairs and of a hammock" (Ivi, pp. 74-75).[↵]
15. On the "Edenic mother's garden" as a crucial space of nineteenth-century American domestic culture, see E. SHOWALTER, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 14.[↵]

16. On this cluster of themes, see also J. L. JENKINS, "The little hour of violence": *Domesticity and Desire in James's The Other House*, "The Henry James Review", 20 (2), 1999, pp. 166-184. By privileging a synchronic perspective, Jenkins reads the novel through the lens of René Girard's notion of mimetic violence. [↵]
17. "[The house] is a very effective instrument [of topo-analysis] precisely because its use is difficult ...In fact, the house is foremost a strongly geometrical object. One is tempted to analyze it from a rational point of view. (...) But the transposition to the human is immediately effected, when we take the house as a space of solace and intimacy, as a space which has to condense and defend intimacy." (G. BACHELARD, *La poétique de l'espace*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1957, pp. 58-59, my translation). Although marked by a comparatively universalizing, a-historical perspective, Bachelard's exploration of the symbolic and affective significance of the home is richly suggestive for any study of the centrality of the house topos in nineteenth-century literature (Bachelard's own examples are mostly drawn from nineteenth- and twentieth-century French literature). [↵]
18. According to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the literary field, the "space of possibles" presents itself as the resulting legacy of the position-takings of the field's agents, as experienced through the categories of perception and evaluation of a certain agent (in turn conditioned by his or her habitus, that is to say the incorporated social dispositions). As Bourdieu explains, "the hierarchy of genres, and with them the relative legitimacy of styles and authors, is a fundamental dimension of the space of possibles. ...It presents itself as a given which must be reckoned with, whether in order to oppose it or to transform it" (P. BOURDIEU, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 89). James's relationship with the popular (sub)genre of sensationalism was clearly a transformative one. [↵]
19. D. WYNNE, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine*, Palgrave, New York, 2001, p. 9. [↵]
20. "Mary Elizabeth Braddon", in H. JAMES, *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, New York, The Library of America, pp. 741-746, p. 745 ("She knows much that ladies are not accustomed to know, but that they are apparently very glad to learn"). [↵]
21. On the sophisticated sabotage of the sensational literary machinery in "Georgina's Reasons," see D. IZZO, *Portraying the Lady: Technologies of Gender in the Short Stories of Henry James*, Lincoln, Nebraska University Press, 2002, pp. 192-212. [↵]
22. Rose, who is almost thirty, is thus physically contrasted to her diminutive fiancé Dennis: "With his want of stature and presence, his upward look at her... he might at this instant have struck a spectator as a figure actually younger and slighter than the ample, accomplished girl" (p. 29). [↵]
23. The novel narrates a desperate widow's attempts to save her sick children, ending with her tragic decision to kill the surviving one and then herself after discovering that she is doomed and everybody has abandoned her; among its admirers were Robert Browning and Thomas Hardy. For a praising review, see Anonymous, "The New York Times," August 23, 1885, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=F40615FD3E5B10738DDDA0A94D0405B8584F0D3>. For an assessment of the infanticide theme in early nineteenth-century literature, see C. L. KRUEGER, *Literary Defenses and Medical Prosecutions: Representing Infanticide in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, "Victorian Studies," 40, 1997, pp. 271-290; with regard to the eighteenth century, see *Writing British Infanticide: Child-Murder, Gender, and Print, 1722-1859*, ed. J. THORN, Newark, De, University of Delaware Press, 2003. [↵]
24. S. GILBERT, S. GUBAR, "George Eliot as the Angel of Destruction," in *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*, New Haven, London University Press, 1979, pp. 478-535. [↵]
25. On all these aspects, V. MORRIS, *Double Jeopardy: Women Who Kill in Victorian Fiction*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1990; J. KNELMAN, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*, Toronto, The University of Toronto Press, 1998; M. DIAMOND, *Victorian Sensation, or, the Spectacular, the Shocking and the Scandalous in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, London, Anthem Press, 2003; L. RODENSKY, *The Crime in Mind: Criminal Responsibility and the Victorian Novel*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003; J. STURROCK, "Murder, Gender, and Popular Fiction by Women in the 1860s: Braddon, Oliphant, Yonge," in *Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation*, in A. MAUNDER and G. MOORE (eds.), Ashgate, Aldershot and Burlington, 2004, pp. 73-88. [↵]
26. See Eleanor Gordon, Gwyneth Nair, *Murder and Morality in Victorian Britain: The Story of Madeleine Smith*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009, and Sheila Sullivan, "What is the Matter with Mary Jane? Madeleine Smith, Legal Ambiguity, and the Gendered Aesthetic of Victorian Criminality," *Genders*, 35 (2002): http://www.genders.org/g35/g35_sullivan.html. Gordon and Nair stress the polarization of Victorian opinion over Smith's culpability, while Sullivan insists on the

- verdict as the proof of the ideological impossibility to reconcile Smith's image as a respectable young woman on display with that of a passionate lover and a master criminal.[\[↵\]](#)
27. In May 1896, the baby-farmer Amelia Dyer was tried in London for the murder of one child, but according to some estimates she had killed approximately 400 babies, by drowning them in the Thames; she was hanged in June of the same year (Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, cit., pp. 174-180). James started to re-work his three-act play into a novel in May, and very likely he came across the stirring case, which dominated the news for three months.[\[↵\]](#)
 28. Henry James to William Roughead, W. S., June 16 1914, in *The Letters of Henry James*, P. LUBBOCK (ed.), New York, Scribner's, 1920, vol. 2, pp. 386-388, 387-388, James's emphasis.[\[↵\]](#)
 29. M. OLIPHANT, Novels, "Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine", September 1867, cit. in *A Serious Occupation: Literary Criticism by Victorian Women*, S. C. ROBINSON (ed.), Toronto, Broadview Press, 2003, p. 173.[\[↵\]](#)
 30. See A. MANGHAM, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture*, Hampshire and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, and N. AUERBACH, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1982.[\[↵\]](#)
 31. See MORRIS and KNELMAN, cit.; see also C. DAUPHIN, "Fragiles et puissantes, les femmes dans la société du XIXe siècle," in *De la violence et des femmes*, C. DAUPHIN and A. FARGE (eds.), Paris, Alban Michel, 1997, pp. 88-103.[\[↵\]](#)
 32. J. STURROCK, "Murder, Gender, and Popular Fiction by Women in the 1860s: Braddon, Oliphant, Yonge," cit., pp. 73-88.[\[↵\]](#)
 33. D. A. MILLER, *The Novel and the Police*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, pp. 165-166.[\[↵\]](#)
 34. A few months after letting her boy die by withholding his medicine, the mother killer of "The Author of Beltraffio" is reported to have died. On the theme of the killing mother, see D. IZZO, "Killing Mothers: Decadent Women in James's Literary Tales," *Henry James Against the Aesthetic Movement: Essays on the Middle and Late Fiction*, D. G. IZZO and D. T. O'HARA, Jefferson, N.C. and London, McFarland, 2006, pp. 55-86.[\[↵\]](#)
 35. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman*, New York, The Modern Library, 1998, p. 438. These opinions are filtered through the point of view of Tess' husband Angel, but the narrator never disclaims them.[\[↵\]](#)
 36. See G. M. SWEENEY, *The Curious Disappearance of Mrs. Beever: The Ending of The Other House*, "Journal of Narrative Technique", 11 (3), Fall 1981, pp. 216-228; according to Sweeney, Rose "has no soul" (p. 218).[\[↵\]](#)
 37. *The Correspondence of William James: William and Henry*, I. K. SKRUPSELIS and E. M. BERKELEY, Charlottesville, The University Press of Virginia, 1992-1994, vol. II, p. 416.[\[↵\]](#)
 38. Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. 272-401. Of course James had already explored the figure of the decadent killing woman in "The Author of Beltraffio."[\[↵\]](#)
 39. "She pretended to munch [the little plump pink arm]; she covered it with kisses; she gave way to the joy of her renounced abstention" (p. 154, my emphasis). Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* was published in 1872.[\[↵\]](#)
 40. Bram Dijkstra, cit., pp. 309-311.[\[↵\]](#)
 41. See particularly Michael Egan, *Henry James: The Ibsen Years*, London: Vision Press, 1972, pp. 57-66.[\[↵\]](#)
 42. *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Michael Egan, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 226, p. 230, p. 241; Henry James's review "On the Occasion of Hedda Gabler" was published in the *New Review* in June 1891, then reprinted in *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (1893).[\[↵\]](#)
 43. P. L. WALTON, "The Tie of a Common Aversion": *Sexual Tensions in Henry James's The Other House*, "The Henry James Review", 17 (1), 1996, pp. 1-11.[\[↵\]](#)
 44. See WALTON, cit., p. 15; Jenkins, cit., p. 177; Egan, cit., p. 60.[\[↵\]](#)
 45. In the emotionally charged conclusion of the novel, Jean will repeat her confession to Tony: "It was just because she was yours that she was mine. It was because she was yours from the first hour that I ---!... What could I do, you see? To you I couldn't be kind" (p. 216). On "the regime of secrecy" imposed on woman's desire in James's stories, see D. IZZO, *Portraying the Lady*, cit., p. 185 ff.[\[↵\]](#)
 46. M. NOBLE, "An Ecstasy of Apprehension: The Gothic Pleasures of Sentimental Fiction," in *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, R. K. MARTIN and E. SAVOY, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1998, p. 166.[\[↵\]](#)
 47. With reference to Bourdieu's model, the "purists" tend to value the non-fungibility of goods, that is to say recognition among peers and the principle of art for art's sake, while at the opposite end of the spectrum the "profiteers" value the commercial purport of literature. On Ibsen as a point of reference for purist groups, see P. D.

MCDONALD, *British Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, Oxford, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. pp. 41-42.[↗]

48. See McDonald, cit., pp. 1-21.[↗]

49. M. POOVEY, *Forgotten Writers, Neglected Histories: Charles Reade and the Nineteenth-Century Transformation of the British Literary Field*, "ELH", 71, 2004, pp. 433-453.[↗]

50. *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews*, K. J. HAYES, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 245-259. Henceforth page reference in the text refer to this edition.[↗]

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