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Henry James and the Assumption of Family Responsibility

1872 was a significant year for Henry James. He established a career in which for the first time he made more money than he spent (Lewis 234). He wrote and published as much as he could handle responsibly.¹ His relations with publishers and editors were becoming strong and certain. Acting as literary agent for his son, James's father would have had first-hand knowledge of Henry's professional progress. He would have realized that his son was becoming the only person in the family to build a lucrative career. James became comfortable traveling overseas, acting as a guide for his Aunt Kate and a virtual therapist for his sister, Alice. Within his family, he began to assume the role of the de facto eldest son. The family role that James began to assume in 1872 would become most evident following his father's death late in 1882, when Henry junior, having been named executor of his father's will, returned to the United States to administer it. William, in Paris at the time of his father's death, did not return. Over William's objections, Henry redivided the estate to ensure that his brother Wilkie and sister would be properly taken care of. Henry's capacity to realize the motives of care, as he would with the redivision of his father's estate, might have determined the James family's choice to ask him to escort Alice and their aunt to Europe in 1872. The importance of 1872 becomes apparent when compared with 1869, the year James made his first adult trip to Europe. That time he traveled alone.

In spring 1869, already in England, Henry James began to respond to barely concealed threats that his travel allowance would be cut off and he would be called home unless he adjusted the way he spent his time and his parents' money. James responded by filling letters with descriptions of visits to museums and galleries, prestigious people's residences, and the ever-improving-tomorrow state of his physical health. This James, having been coerced by his parents to learn and represent what Nancy Glazener calls the "ethic of stewardship," began to show himself as what I've called "the good son." The coercion did not often

come from James's parents directly, but via William in his letters to Henry. It would make sense that in 1869 William would speak for his parents. He was the eldest son and his parents' favorite. They had for some time organized the family around him, making at least one transatlantic move to accommodate his interests. But by 1872, it was Henry, not William, who stepped forward when the family needed leadership.

Henry James's biographers and editors of his letters have tended to ignore the 1872 trip with Alice and Aunt Kate. Only 97 of 171 extant letters (57%) from the formative period 1870-1874 have been published to date. And of the 50 extant letters from 1872, 19 (38%) have been published, leaving 31 (62%) unpublished.

Neither Pelham Edgar, Virginia Harlow, C. Hartley Grattan, Robert Le Clair, Lyndall Gordon, nor Cornelia Pulsifer Kelley write about the 1872 trip. Though Edel does not attend closely to the evident shift of James's status within his family, he remarks that "It was as brother and nephew, rather than as writer for the *Nation*, that Henry James sailed for Europe in May 1872" (*Conquest* 63). Jean Strouse and Fred Kaplan also recognize the priority of family over profession for James during the 1872 trip. But crucial for me, and developed neither by Edel nor Strouse nor Kaplan is why the irresponsible son from 1869 was in 1872 entrusted with nurturing the mental and physical health of his sister.² James's letters from spring and summer 1872 help answer this question.

Carol Holly argues that James's sense of control over his life is inversely proportional to the prevalence of the diction of illness in his letters. For it was, she writes, a part of the James family dynamic to use illness as a way to exert control over others during times family members felt "personal uncertainties" (48). By this formula, the more talk of illness, the more uncertainty. Thus it is not surprising that Holly locates a shift away from the "language of invalidism" (49) in James's letters written from 1869 to those in 1872. Holly finds in the later letters "a marked change in the ways in which James characterizes himself to his family. He begins to play down the negative identity of the invalid and to celebrate 'an almost unbounded confidence in my power to do and dare,' to be 'able to work quite enough to support myself in affluence'" (52). In these lines, as in those letters, Henry James's writing displays a confidence

and certainty and direction one might more readily expect from William. These are the moments Henry assumes the eldest brother's role.³

It couldn't have been that William was not available to care for his sister and aunt on their 1872 trip. He was in Cambridge prior to the journey, just like his brother. Yet the fact that he had just taken an appointment at Harvard as instructor in physiology, was preparing himself for the job, and thus had begun his own professional life, is telling because it helps to explain the family's reliance on Henry. The appointment followed a prolonged period during which William, now thirty, had failed to build a career. There was frustration in the family over this. Mrs. James had grown restless with William's self-absorption and nervous debilitation and the "morbidity," as she called it, that it produced (Lewis 233). During the summer of 1872, William was pre-occupied with himself, spending a part of the season in Maine trying to cure his "fits of languor" and "philosophical hypochondria," as he called it (*Correspondence* 1: 167). Given this, rather than seeing her "favoritism" for Henry as a product of simple and long-standing preference, one could, as Lewis does, see Mary James's preference for Henry as wholly practical. For just as Lewis imagines William saw Henry in 1872, so I propose had his parents regarded Henry before the departure. Lewis writes, "Even from across the water, the shadow of his healthier, professionally and financially prospering younger brother must have loomed large indeed" (233).

The way Lewis imagines that William saw Henry, however, depends on professional status, not importance within the family. It doesn't answer completely the question in terms of a family's needs why was Henry rather than William given the responsibility of caring for Alice's health and Aunt Kate's welfare. It makes sense to look for the answer to the question in the James parents' sense of Henry's responsibility—the same responsibility that HJ had worked to represent in the "good son" letters from 1869. Not only had he responded to his parents' challenge to develop himself as a cultural steward, he became in fact the family's steward as well. James's parents must too have judged that Henry's career (and perhaps his personal strength) could bear such a burden of stewardship where William's could not. That responsibility, that personal strength, as it were, are represented in James's management of his professional and family lives.

His 21 July 1872 letter to his parents is representative in subject and tone of its contemporaries. After having summarized the state of Alice's health under his care ("her marvelous improvement") and the state of their finances ("We have got a good deal for our money"—about \$1,100 in nearly three months, which converts by one estimate to approximately \$15,400 today), James wrote that "Change as we have sought it, seems to me to have been the great agent in her marvellous improvement during the last ~~few~~ ^{two} months. [. . .] These facts, I trust, will interest you; for I endeavor to strike the happy medium between talking too much + too little about our money matters" [or Alice's health]. Thus James shows that his actual value resides in his ability to assist in Alice's "marvelous improvement."

To understand how James cared for his sister and Aunt without his career grinding to a halt altogether is to glimpse James's management of his own life as well as that of his family. James's productivity as an essayist and letter writer during 1872 may be explained by his use and reuse of the same material from his letters for his travel essays—or is it material from his travel essays in his letters? So while he had to write steadily to keep his literary contracts and his personal contacts, he did not have to invent new things to write to each. He also used every spare moment to work on letters or essays, probably early in the morning when Aunt Kate and Alice were sleeping and then, after they rose, while they prepared themselves for the day. He also worked late at night, after his companions retired. He would finish work in the morning, if he needed more time. On 29 June 1872 from Paris: "I resume again this a. m. while my companions are giving the finishing touches." And on 3 September 1872, completing a letter begun several days before, James gives a glimpse of how he organized his professional and family lives. "We have as yet seen little—for this is before breakfast + I add these lines while A. K + Alice are dressing."

James's ability to manage time and money and perceptions while also caring for his sister, who was probably not the easiest person to travel and live with, and providing companionship to his Aunt Kate (who would have been able to verify upon her return to Cambridge James's competence and the history he wrote into his letters home), define not only his commitment to his work and, at the same time, to his family. They define his competence as a leader in his family at a time when William was unable or unwilling to care for Alice. They also define the traits that must have recommended him over his older brother as the executor of their father's will, when he dominated the family with a kind, firm leadership. Finally, they

help to explain how a person who represented his professional life as if it were easy labor could have produced as much as he did over the course of what became a great career. His 13 July 1872 letter to his mother suggests not only how he cared for Alice, but also how he managed other family relations:

P.S. Alice tells me that she ~~has~~ notified [^]you[^] of a few purchases she made the other [^]day[^] ~~in~~ at Montreux [. . .] She prefers, I believe, you should not know the nature of her treasures; but I wish to mention the sum, so that you should not think it [^]has[^] been swallowed up by travelling.[. . .] I may tell you (though you ~~may~~ [^]must[^] appear not to know it) that [^]among them were[^] two beautiful embroidered dresses, in St.=Gall work.

Not only does HJ rationalize his expenses to his parents with a facility and confidence not present in the letters from the earlier trip—especially given that these purchases are expensive dresses. He also manages Alice’s moods: twice in twelve lines he asks his mother not to reveal that he has told her about Alice’s purchases. Evidently, Alice must be allowed to do that herself.

During the 1869 trip James worked to represent the way European travel improved his health. During the 1872 one he worked to show its benefits to Alice’s. In so representing his sister’s improvement, he effectively casts himself as her therapist. From Geneva 6 July 1872, HJ wrote the following to his parents: “Of the salutary effects of Paris our journey to Geneva was an illustration. The express goes at night—the day \diamond trains being horribly tedious. Alice bore the night journey not only with resignation but with smiles [. . .] It was a happy inspiration coming here, while we decide where to go next; for we couldn’t have found more repose + comfort + more cheerful entertainment for the eye. We are living, not at the lowest Swiss rates but at rates very moderate compared with English ones: i. e. at about 13 frs. a day [^]apiece, of course,[^]at a maximum.” Once again, note the linkage of expense with Alice’s health and HJ’s role as rationalizer of the relation of the one to the other.

As Henry James himself said of his brother William’s letters, so could we say about Henry James’s: “he was so admirable a letter-writer that they will constitute his real and best biography” (*Life in Letters*,

526). But to understand that biography, one would need to have access to as many letters as possible or risk overlooking part or parts of that biographic record. In terms of the James family in 1872, the biographic record in letters calls into question what seems to be the consensus understanding concerning the family, which I find represented in Anna Robeson Burr's claim from *Alice James, Her Brothers, Her Journal* (1934), "From this time [the early 1870s] onward the picture is no longer that of a family group, but of five individuals, widely separated by distance and circumstance" (50). We now know from Henry James's letters that the conception expressed in Burr's strong claim does not hold.

Notes

¹ In 1872 James published one play, eight reviews, six travel essays, and one story. In 1873 he published ten reviews, eight travel essays, and two stories. Some 1873 publications would have been written, of course, in 1872.

² Jean Strouse, writing Alice's biography, recognizes the important role Henry James played in working with his sister to find health (144-60). This, evidently, was clear to everyone. A family friend wrote that the trip to Europe "will do her a great deal of good" (qtd in Strouse, 144). Mary Walsh James wrote to Alice, "what a benign medicine this journey is proving to you" (qtd in Strouse, 150). Yet like Henry James's biographers, Strouse does not explore Henry James's family role in caring for his sister—even though her account of the trip is consistent with James's letters: he took full charge of Alice's travel therapy. Like Strouse, Fred Kaplan recognizes Henry's care for Alice and even Aunt Kate, but does not find in it anything especially significant (133-37). But Kaplan's excerpt from a June 1 letter from Aunt Kate to her sister, Henry and Alice's mother, is telling. Aunt Kate writes that Henry "Is always at our door about five or ten minutes before breakfast hour, and if you were to see him invariable folding, in the most precise manner, the shawls and rugs, which are brought in from our drives, and smoothing them down in some quiet corner, with the parasols and umbrellas, tears would flow from your eyes and you would say, he is my own son indeed. He forgets nothing, and his care and consideration for Alice is unceasing" (qtd. in Kaplan, 134).

³ Lewis also implies James's role in guiding the two women, calling him "the companion and shepherd of his sister and Aunt Kate" (223), and notes that Aunt Kate might have been on the trip to help care for Alice (224). But Like Edel, Lewis does not explore the reason for Henry's role.

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