

**Title:** *THE DANGERS OF FICTION: HENRY JAMES'S "THE LESSON OF THE MASTER"*, By: Milliman, Craig A., *Studies in Short Fiction*, Winter90, Vol. 27, Issue 1

**Section:** Articles

## **THE DANGERS OF FICTION: HENRY JAMES'S "THE LESSON OF THE MASTER"**

As a retelling of the legend of St. George, Henry James's "The Lesson of the Master" can be read as a parallel to the legend, in which the noble English hero Henry St. George rescues the talented young Paul Overt from the perils of marriage as represented by Marian Fancourt, or as an ironic reversal, in which a wily St. George defeats the younger man and claims Miss Fancourt as his prize.<sup>(n1)</sup> In 1975, noted Jamesian Adeline Tintner asserted that "in order to understand 'The Lesson of the Master' one must see it as Henry James's saint's legend--his version of the legend of St. George and the dragon--profaned, burlesqued and converted into a narrative analogue."<sup>(n2)</sup> Focusing sharply on "iconic" details in the text, Tintner reaches the final conclusion that St. George, having been freed from one dragon by the death of Mrs. St. George, sacrifices himself to another dragon, Marian Fancourt, in order to preserve the soon-to-be-sainted Paul "for the glory of England as the patron saint of England should," and that in advising Paul to eschew marriage, "Henry St. George speaks for Henry James" (125-126). But James's tale is less about the integrity of the artist than it is about fiction itself. The theme of "The Lesson of the Lesson" is not the opposition of artistic and personal fulfillment, but the opposition of realism and aestheticism. And the dragon in the tale is neither Mrs. St. George nor Marian Fancourt, but the bewildered aesthete Paul Overt, who is so soundly thrashed by James's perverse St. George that he remains uncertain, even after St. George has claimed the fruits of victory, that any combat has taken place.

James's distrust of marriage as institutionalized emotional tyranny particularly hazardous to the artist has become a critical commonplace that seems to me problematic. Critics place perhaps more weight on a famous passage from James's notebooks than it can bear:

Another [idea] came to me last night as I was talking with Theodore Child about the effect of marriage on the artist, the man of letters, etc. He mentioned the cases he had seen in Paris in which this effect had been fatal to the quality of the work, etc.--through overproduction, need to meet expenses, make a figure, etc. And I mentioned certain cases here .... So it occurred to me that a very interesting situation would be that of an elder artist or writer, who has been ruined (in his own sight) by his marriage and its forcing him to produce promiscuously and cheaply--his position in regard to a younger confrere whom he sees on the brink of the same disaster and whom he endeavours to save, to rescue, by some act of bold interference--breaking off the marriage, annihilating the wife, making trouble between the parties.<sup>(n3)</sup>

This note from January 5, 1888, written only a few months before "The Lesson of the Master" appeared in the *Universal Review*, seems a clear statement of James's theme, but the story contradicts the note. St. George's "bold interference" consists of a two-pronged attack in which he warns Paul away from marriage while wooing Marian Fancourt himself. But he begins his attack on marriage and family in the smoking room at Summersoft before Paul's intentions toward Marian are clear, and he begins courting Marian before he has met Paul--and while his own wife still lives--and continues courting her for nearly two years after Paul has left London to work on his new novel in seclusion, so neither action can be motivated by an altruistic concern for Paul's art. And James's parenthetical phrase "in his own sight" raises the possibility either that St. George only imagines he has been ruined or that if he has indeed been ruined, something other than marriage may have caused his decline.

Critics find another prop for straightforward readings of "The Lesson of the Master" in James's review of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*:

The most perfectly successful passages in the book are perhaps those painful fireside scenes between Lydgate's and his miserable little wife.... There is nothing more powerfully real than these scenes in all English fiction, and nothing certainly more intelligent . . . . The author ... has given us a powerful version of that typical human drama, the struggles of an ambitious soul with sordid disappointments and vulgar embarrassments. As to his catastrophe we hesitate to pronounce (for Lydgate's ultimate assent to his wife's worldly programme is nothing less than a catastrophe).(n4)

The review does not indict marriage in general, but the yoking of noble ambition to vulgar conventionality; the tragedy of Tertius Lydgate is not his marriage to Rosamond Vincy but his acceptance of her bourgeois ambitions. Marriage seems to have had little effect on the art of other Jamesian characters: Ralph Limbert of "The Next Time," for example, tries to prostitute his art for the sake of his family but simply cannot manage it; he turns out one beauty after another. And Mark Ambient resists his wife's worldly program, continuing to write despite domestic turmoil. Submission to conventionality, not marriage, is the enemy of the creative artist.

Yet Adeline Tintner, along with Henry St. George, indicts wives. Building on Paul's bon mot to Marian at Summersoft, which she insists alerts the reader that James intends to use *The Golden Legend* as a vehicle for his fiction, Tintner compares Mrs. St. George and Marian and unearths a wealth of "iconic" detail, which identifies both women as dragons, and Marian Fancourt as the dragon from whom St. George rescues Paul. Like the dragon in the legend, the two women are associated with paganism in that Mrs. St. George has skipped church, and Marian, described as "insatiable" (again, like the dragon), has recently returned from Asia "with all sorts of excited curiosities and unappeased appetites."(n5) And, as Tintner observes, "whereas the . . . only acknowledged dragon, Mrs. St. George, only wears red, Marian lives in a red environment" (123-24). But Mrs. St. George is "acknowledged" as a dragon only by Paul Overt, and Paul himself is associated with dragons. Like the dragon, he is "a faithless smoker" (31), pursuing a pastime Mrs. St. George denies her husband, and he has both skipped church and returned from abroad. And when he suggests in St. George's study that he might "keep up" his art for an audience of one if St. George were the one, St. George responds: "Don't say that; I don't deserve it; it scorches me" (66; emphasis mine). The appearance of this third dragon damages the analogue.

As James grants us one clue to the meaning of the story in Paul's allusion to *The Golden Legend*, he grants us another in Paul's description of Henry St. George. As a writer meeting another writer, Paul sees St. George in textual terms:

he saw more in St. George's face, which he liked the better for its not having told its whole story in the first three minutes. That story came out as one read, in short instalments . . . and the text was a style considerably involved, a language not easy to translate at sight. There were shades of meaning in it and a vague perspective of history which receded as you advanced (17-18).

With this description, James instructs his readers to examine the "text" of Henry St. George.

That text is a slippery one. As a skilled writer, St. George manipulates both Marian and Paul by producing ambiguous textual versions of himself which exploit the expectations of his audience. That audience consists of two confirmed aesthetes. Marian has tried to write a novel and considers art "the only [life]--everything else is so clumsy!" (22). She eagerly laps up every drop of "wisdom" that spills from St. George's lips, and as she fawns over St. George, she also fawns

over Paul. Her conversation ranges from the sophomoric to the insipid, showing but a shallow understanding of either life or art. And Paul, who as a successful writer should perhaps have a more mature view of art, is nearly as naive as Marian; like the narrator of James's "The Author of Beltraffio," Paul never perceives life as it is but instead transforms it immediately into art, arranging things, smoothing them down and rounding them off and tucking them in, twisting fact to fit fiction.(n6) Before meeting Henry St. George, Paul has already constructed a version of the great man's personal life that satisfies his own aesthetic needs. Largely because of her Parisian dress, Paul sees Mrs. St. George as an unlikely wife for a writer, but rather than modify his idea of what a "writer's wife" should look like according to the living example before him, he instead rejects Mrs. St. George because she does not fit the idea. When he learns of the burned manuscript, Paul--though he has absolutely no knowledge of its contents--immediately assumes that the destroyed book "would have been one of her husband's finest things" (11). And when he meets St. George, Paul is disappointed by the great man's "conventional uniform" (15); unlike Continental writers, St. George doesn't look like an artist.(n7)

Because their youthful aesthetic idealism demands "purity" in art, both Paul and Marian readily accept the romantic stereotype of the artist constantly striving for lofty perfection yet continually foiled by the necessity of reconciling art and commerce in order to make a living. As romantics rather than realists, neither will, as Mark Ambient insists the artist must, see things as they are; neither will read St. George's "text" with a critical eye. Playing the role of the fallen artist, St. George creates two different textual versions of his wife, one a paragon of virtue who has made him a success, the other a parasite who has sabotaged his artistic integrity. First he displays for Marian; the second he holds up as a warning to Paul. To Marian he describes his wife as "the making of him" (26), to which assessment, when Marian repeats it, Paul replies that the great man is often obscure. Marian cannot catch his meaning for two reasons. First, St. George has not told her of the book burning because the impropriety of denigrating his wife to a young woman would diminish in Miss Fancourt's eyes both his own gallantry and the luster of the position of "author's wife," a position for which St. George may already be grooming Miss Fancourt. Second,(n8) Marian brings to the "text" of Henry St. George a critical perspective antithetical to Paul Overt's: she views the "author's wife" as a valuable aid to an artist's career, while Paul, who already suspects Mrs. St. George of causing her husband's decline, sees at least one author's wife as a detriment. Marian thus reads literally a phrase that Paul interprets ironically.

Because Paul embraces the aesthete's belief in the incompatibility of social and financial obligations and art, and in the danger literary quantity poses to literary quality, he readily accepts Mrs. St. George as the cause of St. George's alleged decline.(n9) Paul's own view that "admirably as Henry St. George wrote, he had written for the last ten years, and especially for the last five, only too much" (12) seems to support Mrs. St. George's culpability, but as Peter Barry reminds us, St. George "has been married for more than twenty years, so that the fact of his marriage alone cannot be sufficient an explanation of the decline," if in fact there has been a decline.(n10)

Barry does not take his re-interpretation of the tale far enough, however; his attempt to be fair to Mrs. St. George stops short of indicting St. George, who admits his own commercialism to Paul when he describes "the mercenary muse whom [he] led to the altar of literature" (67). And St. George, instead of raising his aesthetic torch after the death of his allegedly draconic wife, stops writing altogether before his marriage to Miss Fancourt. Perhaps St. George had simply decided for himself that he wished to make money; perhaps he is either a charlatan or a mature artist who, like Gloriani, has made the necessary compromise with perfection. Or perhaps he is simply "a man all the same" (76), who, rather than serve art, makes art serve him.(n11)

As a successful writer who has earned a handsome living by gauging the tastes of his audience, St. George knows how to use the opposed critical perspectives of his two young "readers." While he praises his wife to Marian, he never misses a chance to criticize her to Paul. His wife, he tells Paul, doesn't allow him to smoke or drink, and has designed a "cage" in which she locks her husband up with his work every morning. Yet with the exception of the book-burning,

nowhere in the story does Mrs. St. George exert any behavioral control over her husband save in the words of St. George to Paul, not even when he ignores her in order to flirt openly with Marian Fancourt at Summersoft. And the "cage," despite St. George's incessant complaining, seems not such a harsh prison: "Lord, what good things I should do if I had such a charming place as this to do them in!" (64) Paul exclaims to himself as he surveys the great man's study. Again, Paul's preconceived idea tramples the evidence. A devoted artist would want to be in such a place, but Paul is so determined to see Mrs. St. George as a villain that, along with most critics, he swallows whole the notion that Mrs. St. George acts as the great man's jailer. But we have only St. George's word on that point. It seems unlikely to me that the mercenary female Philistine St. George has described to Paul would, if she forced St. George to work, force him for only three hours a day. (In the smoking room at Summersoft, St. George claims that he works each day between ten and one.)

While wooing Marian and outwitting Paul, St. George throws himself into his dual role. At a private art viewing, he tells Marian that people send him more invitations to such events than he wants, hinting that notoriety, not family, is the artist's bane. (His wife is conspicuously absent. (n12) During the viewing, St. George invites Marian to the park, but since he cannot, as a great "artist," let slip a simple desire to enjoy so common a diversion, he tells the girl, who breathlessly relays the news to Paul, that they are going merely "to look at the people, to look at types . . . we shall sit under the trees; we shall walk by the Row" (49). And overhearing Paul's surprise at the idea of the great writer enjoying the park like an ordinary citizen, St. George claims that he goes there "once a year, on business" (49), an absurd notion. What types will he find on display at the fashionable Row that are not before him in the gallery? Could Henry James--or any working novelist--confine his observations to a single annual outing?

Curiously, St. George does not invite Paul to the park for an afternoon of literary conversation, a diversion he claims his wife rarely allows him. Instead, he hurriedly separates Marian and Paul, signalling a cab and drawing her toward it, forcing her to finish her conversation with Paul "over her shoulder" (49), thereby avoiding a threesome which would be at best awkward and frustrating and at worst dangerous to his plan. (He can neither woo Marian in Paul's presence nor warn Paul away from marriage in Marian's; to do either would be to risk exposure.) Later, St. George cancels his scheduled Sunday visit to Marian's drawing room for the same reason, though he claims to be staying away in fairness to Paul, who thus has Marian to himself. St. George alights from a cab moments after Paul's departure, but Paul, rather than becoming suspicious of such an unlikely coincidence, feels "glad that St. George hadn't renounced his visit altogether," decides on the spot that "the world was magnanimous," and "mentally congratulated his successor on having an hour still to sit in Miss Fancourt's drawing room" (57). That St. George has a hidden agenda never occurs to Paul; his naivete clearly establishes an ironic distance between himself and his middle-aged creator.

St. George plays that naivete like a Master. During their conversation in the smoking room at Summersoft, St. George flatters Paul incessantly, complimenting him on his "very distinguished book," *Ginistrella*, which he claims is "in the air . . . in the papers . . . everywhere," while he insists that Paul himself is "on all men's lips and, what's better, on all women's" (33), a curious observation for a man who will soon speak so badly of women. Rather than analyzing St. George's words, Paul projects meaning onto St. George's tone, which seems to him "the very rustle of the laurel" (33). St. George claims to have spent fifteen minutes reading *Ginistrella*, but Paul, who has been occupied by the same social forms that have claimed St. George's time, cannot figure where St. George found even those fifteen free minutes. St. George artfully deflects Paul's doubts by flattering Paul with the news that Marian travels with her copy of *Ginistrella*--a tidbit rendered doubtful by the fact that the gushing Miss Fancourt failed to mention it to Paul earlier in the day. Further, St. George claims that he can see proof of Paul's promise in only twenty quickly read pages. Such a claim seems entirely unrealistic except as mere courtesy, yet Paul accepts it at face value, as he accepts all of St. George's flattery. Whether or not the great man actually read even a paragraph of *Ginistrella* is impossible to determine, but, given the constraints of time and the vagueness of his comments, it seems likely that all he knows of Paul's novel he has learned at dinner from Marian Fancourt. He makes no specific reference to the text and seems only to know that the novel is set abroad, a fact he could easily

have acquired in casual conversation. Yet Paul fails to notice--as he had failed to notice in Marian--the utter vapidness of the commentary.

Later, in a masterful exposition, St. George convinces Paul that art and marriage are mutually exclusive. When Paul asks point-blank if he should give up his love for Marian, St. George, displaying an unerring sense of audience, replies: "Bless me, no. [Give up] your idea . . . the idea of a decent perfection" (75). Having correctly assessed Paul as an aesthete, St. George knows that in Paul's view no mere woman, indeed nothing with the mark of life about it, can compete with the sacred ideal of Art.

Because Paul's naive aesthetic sensibilities make him the perfect audience for St. George's fiction, he fails to catch an outright lie in St. George's text. In the smoking room at Summersoft, St. George has advised Paul to "make up to" Marian Fancourt; later, in his own study, he insists that women can only hurt the artist. Struck by the discrepancy, Paul questions St. George, who replies that he had advised Paul to court Marian "because she'd make a splendid wife! And I hadn't read you then" (77). In fact, St. George probably hadn't read Paul at Summersoft, but he had already claimed to have read enough of Marian Fancourt's copy of *Ginistrella* to appraise Paul's literary promise and to divine his character. Either he had read *Ginistrella* at Summersoft, if only for fifteen minutes, or he hadn't; either he had recognized Paul's talent or he hadn't. As with the two contradictory versions of his wife, both of these claims cannot be true.

All St. George has told Paul--and James's readers--is rendered suspect by this demonstrable lie, which Paul misses completely. Perhaps Mrs. St. George, despite St. George's accusations, has never coerced her husband save in the one incident of book burning; perhaps the burned manuscript really was bad; perhaps St. George himself, and not Mrs. St. George, seeks high social and financial position; perhaps the "text" St. George presents to Paul is a didactic fiction, intended to get Paul out of the way so St. George can woo Marian Fancourt and her money without competition. When his ailing wife dies, St. George wastes little time in claiming that prize. Reading the great man in this way clearly makes his relation to Paul a combat, a bitterly ironic version of the St. George legend which, by casting the hapless Paul Overt as the dragon rather than Mrs. St. George or Marian Fancourt, contradicts the iconic readings of Tintner and others as well as the aesthetically palatable but inaccurate parallel that Paul himself sees in Mrs. St. George's burning of her husband's book. St. George has, after all, taken the maiden away from Paul, whom James also associates with dragons.

Paul fails miserably with the "text" of Henry St. George because he continually subverts the evidence of the great man's words and actions to his own aesthetic creed, violating Mark Ambient's principle that the artist, in order to get at the truth, should portray life as it is rather than mold it into an aesthetically palatable form. As aesthetic fictionalizing by the narrator precipitated the death of Ambient's precious Dolcino, so it leads to Paul's needless loneliness. Such is one of many *lessons* of the Master.

(n1) Charles R. Smith "'The Lesson of the Master': An Interpretive Note," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 6 (Fall 1969), 654-58, outlines the various interpretations and includes a bibliography of criticism.

(n2) Adeline R. Tintner, "Iconic Analogy in 'The Lesson of the Master': Henry James's Legend of St. George and the Dragon," *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 5 (May 1975), 116; subsequent references are in the text.

(n3) Henry James, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 43-44.

(n4) *Galaxy*, 15 (1873); quoted in Smith, "The Lesson of the Master": An Interpretative Note," p. 655.

(n5) Henry James, "The Lesson of the Master," in *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, New York Edition, Vol. XV (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), p. 42; subsequent references are in the text.

(n6) Hana Wirth-Nesher, "The Thematics of Interpretation: James's Artist Tales," *Henry James Review*, 5 (Winter 1984), 121.

(n7) according to Edel, James experienced a similar disappointment upon meeting Robert Browning at the London home of newspaperman G. W. Smalley in the winter of 1878-79. James found a puzzling paradox in the great poet's middle-class conventionality, which contrasted sharply with the bohemian lifestyles of writers he had met on the Continent, but James reconciled the paradox, he did not confuse Browning's appearance with his art, nor did he blame Browning's social conventionality on his deceased wife.

(n8) Mrs. St. George, as Lady Watermouth informs Paul, suffers from poor health as the story begins. Lady Watermouth considers Mrs. St. George's condition an inconvenience, but St. George hardly seems to notice it, he certainly wastes none of his time--which he can use to better advantage in dazzling Miss Fancourt--attending to his wife. Given her poor health at Summersoft and her death a few months later, the cynical reader might well wonder at St. George's intentions

(n9) James did not share either St. George's affected or Paul's honest distrust of society: he had once responded to American diplomat Ehrman Syme Nadal's criticism of other Americans for their failed attempts at social climbing by asserting that "a position in society is a legitimate object of ambition" (Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* [New York: Harper and Row, 1985], p. 223).

(n10) Peter Barry, "In Fairness to the Master's Wife: A Re-Interpretation of 'The Lesson of the Master,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 15 (Fall 1978), 388.

(n11) The problem of the artist's integrity may be a moot point. Brook K. Horvath writes that in James's fiction "the accounts of artistic production are couched in terms stale and stolen because the art the Jamesian artist manages to produce is just that--trite and insipid, though overlaid with a veneer of originality." But readers of Henry James cannot read Henry St. George any more than Paul Overt can read St. George's burned book, so we cannot determine the quality--which so worries Paul--of those forty volumes. See "The Life of Art, the Art of Life: The Ascetic Aesthetics of Defeat in James's Stories of Writers and Artists," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 28 (Spring 1982), 98.

(n12) James himself, similarly flooded with invitations, maintained his creative discipline by accepting only evening engagements.

~~~~~

by CRAIG A. MILLIMAN

---

Studies in Short Fiction, Winter90, Vol. 27 Issue 1, p81, 8p