

Political Context Re-considered: Henry James and Marriage Reform in *The Wings of the Dove*

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CRITICS CONCERNED TO MAP GENDER-BASED POWER RELATIONS within Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* have tended to focus both on the courtship ritual involving Kate Croy and Merton Densher and on Kate's relationship with her father, Lionel Croy, and Maud Lowder. What has emerged from the various analytical approaches which have attempted to establish a correlation between historical context and *The Wings of the Dove* is a broad consensus that James's characters subvert or collapse the traditional categories of gender difference in Victorian society that prevented women from participating in the public sphere. That is, such critics suggest that Kate Croy and Maud Lowder ambiguously wield a social and economic authority within the novel that was denied to women living in Victorian society at the time of the novel's conception.

The central weakness of this approach has been to treat context and the signifiers associated with it as stable and monolithic, devoid of the expression of individual contradictory political intention. For example, Millicent Bell begins her analysis of *The Wings of The Dove* by endeavouring to review "its precise reference to the social and economic world of the early twentieth century, a stratum of meaning to which its narrative language and formal design are closely attached" (291). Additionally, spe-

ESC 31.4 (December 2005): 75–99

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cific historical events of the economic market involving specific individuals are overlooked in favour of analyses based on practices of exchange. Bell, for example, demonstrates the ubiquity and pervasiveness of a rhetoric or language of exchange, which has a kind of levelling effect in terms of gender-based power relations within the novel. For Kate and Densher, Bell suggests, “their mutual love comes to constitute a commerce by which—Kate dealing with Densher, Densher with Kate—each can bend the other to his purpose” (294).

Michael Moon, too, considers the “text’s representations of sexuality in the context of some of the specific social and historical conditions under which these representations were produced” (427). Moon does provide specific contextual evidence of a “suppressed male-homoerotic thematic” based on the correlation of his construction of a history of homosexual relationships at the turn of the century, which includes the relationship between James’s friend John Addington Symonds and Angelo Fusato, and the dramatized exchange of gazes between Densher and Eugenio in the novel. Moon’s discussion of the power wielded by Aunt Maud and Kate Croy over Merton Densher is, however, couched in the language of monolithic contexts, stable signifiers: “Kate Croy’s Aunt Maud Lowder is the pre-eminent embodiment in *The Wings of the Dove* of the woman who is considered ‘potent’ by virtue of the fetishization by her society of her economic and social power: she presides over the phallicized world of the novel” (429). Lowder’s wealth, which is a socially determined metonym for the phallus, capital accumulation, enables her to subvert the gender specific categories of normalization to achieve power over men. This power is not traced to the specific practices of individuals within a heterogeneous context but is, rather, the byproduct of a stable context of economic and social consensus.

Focussing on Kate’s relationship with Maud Lowder and Mrs Condrip, Hugh Stevens broadens the possibilities for tracing the correlation between political context and literary text. He subsumes under the icon of the New Woman the struggle of a series of individuals to communicate in diverse, but also similar, ways their resistance to structures of repression. This historical figure, a category under which practices of resistance are catalogued, constitutes, for Stevens, a focus for comparison with Kate in the novel: “Kate and Mrs Lowder’s struggles, however, can be specifically linked with anxieties surrounding gender at the fin de siècle, revolving partly around the figure of the ‘New Woman’” (27). The practices to which Stevens refers are briefly summarized with a focus on the New Woman’s challenge to a variety of institutions composing a repressive state appa-

ratus: “The New Woman, in her demands for education and the right to pursue a career rather than marriage, her rejection of the patriarchal family and the life of domesticity, and her demand for political power, actively questioned the biological determinism and gender assumptions of the Victorian era” (27). Stevens’s concern to highlight the breadth of the context of political resistance that establishes a correlation between the New Woman and Kate Croy is laudable. It demonstrates a methodological commitment consistent with Michel Foucault’s aim to challenge the repressive hypothesis by subverting the notion that power is centralized at the level of government and that it is channelled in a simplistic top-down, sovereign-to-governed model; Stevens, in effect, challenges a monolithic conception of context (*History* 92). Still, what remains reductive in Stevens’s approach is his representation of resistance in terms of action rather than language invested with a political intent that is continuously challenged. He represents Kate Croy as simply rejecting the status quo assumptions and prejudices which confront her: “In her disdain for the Mrs Condrips and her own sister’s life, and in her desire to resist societal prescriptions as to who she should marry, Kate’s battle resembles that of the New Woman, but, like many other Jamesian heroines, her battle is carried out in a private and domestic setting” (27).

Stevens’s focus on Kate’s simple subversion of repressive practices indeed produces interpretive limitations that could otherwise be avoided with an examination of political context that acknowledges language as invested with individual intention that is challenged and destabilized by virtue of its immersion in a political heteroglossia, in a system of competing claims for competing signifiers. In his “Discourse in the Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin provides us with a model of literary analysis that enables us to map power relations within *The Wings of the Dove*—indeed establish a correlation between literary text and political context—in a more comprehensive and detailed way without privileging the subject, or without rendering the subject as simply an object of ideological sublimation via a reductive consideration of context. Particularly useful are the following Bakhtinian assumptions:

As a result of the work done by all these stratifying forces in language, there are no “neutral” words and forms—words and forms that can belong to “no one;” language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the “taste”

of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tententious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word. (293)

What is important here is Bakhtin's emphasis on the role of the communication of individual intention in language in both political context and literary text, a useful equivalence of language use between texts of distinct contexts, though he does suggest that such contextual forms of signification do undergo a transformation, a stylization of form that maintains the integrity of disciplinary boundaries and categories. His position is consistent with Foucault's here insofar as he does not champion the subject's absolute mastery over language, the primacy of the author. Indeed, Foucault suggests in his *History of Sexuality: Volume I* the extent to which the subject grapples with signifiers of power and with force relations in which the subject is immersed and where control over fulfilling political expectations in any absolute way is ultimately denied by such relations (92). Bakhtin's emphasis is on the multiplicity of intention that constitutes the signification of language. Intention is here understood as inextricably linked to deployment of the sign, a deployment which is always contested, always destabilized by virtue of its immersion in the social, in a context of competing intentions. By extending these principles to a construction of political context and by locating this context within Victorian periodicals, as comprised of the essays written by women's rights advocates and their opponents in the 1890s on marriage reform, we can locate a process of claim and counter-claim of signifiers. Such sharing of signifiers destabilizes monolithic conceptions of context, party or icon, freeing up context to become a more complex focus of comparison, a richer analytical device. Employing Bakhtin's assumption of the equivalence of stylized forms of signification that reveal competing political intentions—coupled with evidence of Henry James's ambiguous expression of political interest in marriage reform, as it appears in a pattern of political provocation and disavowal in his fiction of the 1880s as well as consideration of his foregrounding of marriage in the novels of his late phase—enables us to map power relations as they concern gender and marriage within *The Wings of the Dove* in a much more comprehensive way.

Thus, in establishing a more complete context based on the strategies of the debate over marriage reform in the 1890s against which James's treatment of character can be measured, we see that the pattern of ambiguous

political subversion takes on a more complex shape. Kate Croy's conflict with her father, Lionel Croy, can be seen as more than simply a rejection of patriarchy; rather, it signifies the politicization of Kate's conflicting desires couched in the rhetoric of the political conflict within the women's rights movement. This rhetoric includes the extremist condemnation of the father's neglect of responsibilities in essays written by Nat Arling and Mary Montgomeri Singleton and the contradictions within Millicent Garrett Fawcett's gradualist strategy to achieve women's rights within the family and at the level of State. Similarly, the conflict between Kate Croy and Marian Condrip within James's novel is expressed with signifiers marking a process of claim and counter-claim among the diverse political strategies of Mona Caird, Clementina Black, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, and Eliza Lynn Linton, a central opponent of women's rights, whom James knew and with whom he had grappled in political debate. Indeed, the signifiers marking Kate Croy's relationship with Maud Lowder not only testify to both Maud's and Kate's masculine qualities but to the contradictory political positions presented by women's rights advocates and their opponents in the debate known as the "Revolt of the Daughters." Above all, the most intense thematization of the political appears in the courtship ritual of Kate and Densher, which is constructed from language that endorses opposing political platforms simultaneously: that of the radical marriage as free love contract as advanced by Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy and that of gradualist marriage reform as advanced by Millicent Garrett Fawcett.

James's interest in marriage reform can be traced to his unfavourable review of Eliza Lynn Linton's "The Girl of the Period," challenging her construction of modern women as rapacious predators of men during the courtship process and as economic opportunists sustaining the marriage market:

The various tricks of the marriage market are enumerated with a bold, unpitying crudity. It is a very dismal truth that the only hope of most women, at the present moment, for a life worth the living, lies in marriage, and marriage with rich men or men likely to become so, and that in their unhappy weakness they often betray an ungraceful anxiety on this point. (James, *Literary Criticism* 22)

James continued his passionate defence of these women, lambasting Linton for producing an irrational assessment of the modern woman. He pointed out that "it is impossible to discuss and condemn the follies

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James's comments here can be construed as political, without having to rely on the modern histories of Foucault, by examining the conflation of the private and public, the private and political in essays written by women's rights advocates and their opponents during the 1890s in the debate on marriage reform in which Linton participated. The debate over marriage reform raged during this time because of the perceived failings of the Married Women's Property Act of 1882. Women's rights advocates pointed out that this legislation did not eradicate Coverture, a legal notion which maintained that wives were essentially the property of their husbands (Shanley 103). As Mary Lyndon Shanley points out: "Despite the great change in the law worked by the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, Parliament managed to retain the language of Coverture and of married women's legal status" (130). This debate can be defined as political insofar as it involved leaders of the women's rights movement, Millicent Garrett Fawcett and Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, who sought to change the power relations of the State by attacking inequities practised against women in contexts defined as apolitical. It was argued that if equal rights could be achieved within these spheres—for example, within the legal system and medical profession—such change would exact pressure on those who vociferously opposed the enfranchisement of women. Eliza Lynn Linton fought such political strategies by suggesting that these inequities within apolitical contexts were essential for preserving the stability of society:

The cradle lies across the door of the polling-booth and bars the way to the senate. We can conceive of nothing more disastrous to a woman in any stage of maternity, expectant or accomplished, than the heated passions and turmoil of a political contest; for we may put out of court three fallacies—that the vote, if obtained at all, is to be confined to widows and spinsters only; that enfranchised women will content themselves with the vote and not seek after active office; and that they will bring into the world of politics the sweetness and light claimed for them by their adherents, and not, on the contrary, add their own shriller excitement to the men's deeper passions. (80)

The "girl of the period" became the "wild woman" as politician, the kind of woman, suggested Linton, echoing the tone of her earlier critique, who regards marriage as a "one-sided tyranny" (79). Yet despite Linton's resur-

rection of her hostility toward the girl of the period, Henry James declined to engage in debate with her again in a non-fiction prose medium. Thus we must turn to an examination of James's fictional world to ascertain the extent to which his political passions concerning marriage reform lay dormant.

An unwanted political identity as a champion of women's rights, constructed from his readers' concern to interpret his fiction as conflating art and politics, had been foisted upon James by Eliza Linton, by his brother William James, and by a famous women's rights activist, Sophia Jex Blake. Linton had charged James with an attempt to promote his heroine Daisy Miller as a proud representative of the defiant woman who had been the subject of their earlier disagreement over Linton's "The Girl of the Period." The terms in which Linton expressed her criticism of Daisy Miller were echoed in "The Wild Women As Politicians," where she ridiculed such women for their selfish and socially damaging pursuit of freedom: "Their idea of freedom is their own preponderance, so that they shall do all they wish to do without let or hindrance from outside regulations or the restraints of self-discipline; their idea of morality, that men shall do nothing they choose to disallow" (79). In effect, in her criticism of Daisy Miller, Linton had transferred the terms of her political exchange with James of 1868 to a conflict over narrative method: James's writing, Linton assumed, was a medium for communicating political ideas that would become in the 1880s and 1890s intensely publicized. James's response was to repudiate this conflation of the literary and political, in fact to establish these contexts as mutually exclusive of each other. He simply avoided this invitation for political confrontation by pointing out that Daisy Miller "never really tried to take her revenge upon public opinion to outrage it and irritate it. In this sense I must declare that she was not defiant, in the sense you mean" (James, *Letters II* 303).

Yet James's correspondence with Grace Norton and the controversy surrounding *The Bostonians* suggest both his continued interest in the political implications of women's role within marriage and his reluctance to participate directly in political debate. In an 1884 letter to Grace Norton, James ambiguously compared marriage to enfranchisement:

There are all sorts of things to be said about it; mainly this, that if marriage is perfectly successful it is the highest human state; and that if it fails of this it is an awful grind, an ignoble, unworthy condition. I have never regarded it as a necessity, but only as the last and highest luxury. I don't think all the world

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has a right to it any more than I think all the world has a right to vote. (James, *Letters III* 54)

Here James refuses to disclose the political context informing his comparison of the vote and marriage. We cannot know whether or not he is equating women's experience within marriage, as victims of oppression, with the broader injustice of their political exclusion, since he does not provide a specific political context for his analogy. Thus, we are unable to affix to him the kind of political identity that his review of Linton's work might suggest.

This pattern of political provocation and disavowal also emerged in the controversy surrounding *The Bostonians*. In his sketches that preceded the creation of this novel, he admitted that he wanted to write a tale about the most salient point in American social life, "the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf" (James, *Complete Notebooks* 20). Yet, when he faced, as with Linton, the public's inability to separate literary and political intentions, evidenced in a rebuke from his own brother for satirizing a family relative and prominent member of the women's rights movement through a character in *The Bostonians*, Miss Birdseye, Henry James again denied the conflation of artistic and political intent. He apologized to William James, claiming that "Miss Birdseye is a creation" (James, *Letters III* 69).

Similarly, James's avoidance in the 1890s of involvement in the political debates in Victorian periodicals concerning marriage reform is curiously combined with the arguably contradictory political impulse of presenting within a string of novels—*The Spoils of Poynton*, *What Maisie Knew*, *The Golden Bowl*—the ways in which strong female characters cope with circumstances determined in some way by marriage. What is also of interest during this decade was the persistence with which members of James's audience reflected upon his 1880s fiction as conflating political and artistic intentions. Leading women's rights advocates like Sophia Jex Blake, for example, enthusiastically endorsed James's characterization of Dr. Prance of *The Bostonians* as an accurate portrayal of a woman doctor (41). Blake was concerned that unflattering literary portrayals of women doctors would discourage women from entering the profession and from advancing an agenda promoting equal political rights. In this way, Blake advanced the notion that fiction was a medium for transmitting political ideas (41).

James's ambiguous interest in marriage reform is revealed again in the 1890s in our consideration of the correlation between James's *The Wings of the Dove* and this political context. Such an interrelationship is evidenced

by the hybridization of political signifiers, their appearance in both the political strategies of the debate over marriage reform and in the form of narrator commentary and character dialogue within this late phase novel. In turning to Kate's relationship with her father, Lionel Croy, we see that the language in which their relationship—or, more appropriately, their conflict—is expressed signifies more than Kate's personal struggle. Elizabeth Allen suggests this in her comparison of Kate with Maisie of James's earlier *What Maisie Knew*: "There is the same demand for lying and rejection in order to free the parent as an act of love by the child. But Kate is making her last effort to escape the conventional world for herself, and, frustrated in this by her father, she is not 'moved by charity'" (154). The father was appropriated by women's rights advocates as a signifier, an object of repression to be repudiated within the context of family in order to persuade men to assume equal moral responsibility for household duties and also for the purpose of promoting women's inherent moral superiority as a justification for the extension of their political rights. Nat Arling, in advancing the necessity of expanding women's moral influence to politics, defined the state of ignorance and tyranny within the home that women's rights advocates were to assault: "Just as, in spite of game laws, farmers and labourers are still helpless in the hands of their landlords, so, in spite of amended marriage laws, are women in the hands of men. The husband contrives to get the power of the purse, and can refuse to have his daughters satisfactorily educated" (579). Mary Singleton sought to explain the biologically and socially determined propensity for the immoral conduct of the father toward his wife and child: "Marriage, paternity, the duties and pleasures of home-life, do not always appeal to his more selfish nature in their most attractive form ... To him the idea of marriage is too often associated with loss of freedom, parental displeasure, and an increased expenditure" (208).

Similarly, Millicent Garrett Fawcett in the early 1890s deployed this rhetorical technique, this construction of the father as part of her political debate with Frederic Harrison who argued vociferously for the preservation of women's morality, a stabilizing force within the home that could only be sustained, according to Harrison, if women could be kept out of politics. The destabilization of the family, the dissolution of marriage, Fawcett suggested, was not so much a consequence of women being unable to balance their domestic and social commitments but was more likely the result, she maintained, that women were victims of the immorality and selfishness of husbands who often drove women "to suicide by the nameless and hideous brutalities to which they have been subjected; women

who are driven on the streets that their husbands may loaf in idleness on their earnings” (680). Yet Fawcett reversed her position in a review of Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did*, in which she repudiated what she believed to be Allen’s “attack on marriage” and his desire “to weaken the family tie” in his portrayal of Herminia. Fawcett criticized Allen’s protagonist, whom she identified as a representative of women’s rights and whom she castigated for deserting her father and for contributing to the collapse of the extended family unit: “The course of true love is marred by the discovery of her illegitimacy, and the child deserts her mother, just as Herminia, some twenty years earlier, had deserted her own father” (628). The attack on the father of her earlier article is superseded by the responsibility for familial breakdown that she associates with Herminia as representative of free love radicalism.

The construction of Kate’s father by the narrator through the narrative focalization of the daughter is described with the shared signifiers of both the radical political tactics of Singleton and Arling and that of Millicent Garrett Fawcett, suggesting that there is more to Wendy Graham’s contention that Kate’s relationship with her father represents her determination to “establish a relationship with a straight man” (221), in her relationship with Merton Densher, “a metonymy of her desire never again to be ‘hustled’ by Lionel Croy” (221). While Graham’s characterization of Croy’s duplicity in terms of an economic critique is valuable, it can be further contextualized as a central constituent of the political strategies of women’s rights advocates when we observe the way in which Croy has, according to Kate, victimized her mother:

She had gone to Mrs Lowder on her mother’s death—gone with an effort the strain and pain of which made her at present, as she recalled them, reflect on the long way she had travelled since then. There had been nothing else to do—not a penny in the other house, nothing but unpaid bills that had gathered thick while its mistress lay mortally ill, and the admonition that there was nothing she must attempt to raise money on, since everything belonged to the “estate.” (*WD* 33)

The “unpaid bills” refers to Lionel Croy’s abnegation of economic responsibility, the father as economic loafer and liability in Fawcett’s strategy, indeed, the selfish father of Singleton’s political strategy as well. The signifiers of these political strategies are reinforced by Kate’s sense of shame over her family history: “the dishonour her father had brought them, his folly and cruelty and wickedness; the wounded state of her mother, abandoned

despoiled and helpless" (*WD* 55). The use of the terms "cruelty" and "wickedness" suggests that Kate's mother has been abused psychologically, and perhaps even physically, by Lionel Croy, making him a central constituent of Nat Arling's father as tyrannical patriarch. Kate's loyalty to her father as expressed in her refusal to desert him seems consistent with Fawcett's reversal in her article on Grant Allen's novel in the late 1890s. Kate subverts herself by not deserting a father who sees her, in vulgar materialistic terms, as a commodity from which he may profit, in the same way Fawcett subverts the morality of women within the context of family by lambasting Herminia as representative of familial breakdown.

The gender-based binary opposition implied by the institution of family characterized in terms of patriarchy, as the dominant male exercising authority over the subservient mother and daughter, was challenged by the debate within the journal *Nineteenth Century* known as the "Revolt of the Daughters" and serves to illuminate Kate's power-based relationship with Maud Lowder. A reconsideration of context allows us to extend Carolyn Karcher's limited interpretation of their relationship as revealing Mrs Lowder as "the chief author of the family script dictating a marriage of convenience" (228). Indeed, Mrs Lowder may also signify the central object, the pre-eminent target of an ambiguous women's rights political strategy, challenging Wendy Graham's contention that "if Kate is not Maud's revenge on aristocrats for real or perceived slights, a missile aimed at the heart of bloods, then she is a tool of power and access" (226). Metaphors of war were deployed within this debate to mark a series of contradictory political positions aimed at both extending the rights of daughters to reject marriage or to marry by choice rather than by economic arrangement, while simultaneously accepting and therefore endorsing the status quo of commercial marriage. B. A. Crackanthorpe began the debate by noting the seriousness of the dissolution of the family as represented by a "very large percentage of households where war, open or concealed, exists between mother and daughters" (23). Though Crackanthorpe argues that "marriage is the best profession for a woman" (25), she boldly claims that if women have the opportunity to achieve economic independence outside this institution then she is "entirely with the girls in their revolt" (26). Crackanthorpe criticizes mothers for creating the circumstances for the revolt with a catalogue of rhetorical questions: "But do these ladies ever pause to reflect that they themselves are the prime authors of the bother, if bother there be? Why do they write books?—Why do they write plays? Why do they sit on committees here and committees

there, slumming in the East, drinking tea and promoting 'causes' in the West?" (*Last Word* 426).

Similarly, May Jeune avoided criticizing commercial marriage and the mother who perpetuated it by imposing a "maternal control" upon her daughter, suggesting that "such a marriage market has always existed" (273). Jeune offered a kind of ambiguous resistance to maternal authority; she favoured the mother's surveillance of any daughter under the age of twenty-five but stressed the importance of an education that would enable the daughter to achieve self-reliance. She points out that "if a girl is to be left to exercise her own discretion in such things, it can be only after a fuller knowledge of life and its problems have been unfolded to her, for she could not be launched on her new career without full instruction in the mysteries of the book of life" (274). M.E. Haweis provides a clearer condemnation of a repressive surveillance on the part of the mother, suggesting that "the mother must yield" to the independent spirit of girls, "for the instinct is healthy though the way in which it is exhibited is often hideous, and parents and relations ought to co-operate in guiding and aiding the launch in a sensible spirit, instead of too often making the crisis in the child's life subserve their own small ends and private grudges" (436).

The signifiers used to describe from Kate's perspective the state of war that marks her relationship with Aunt Maud, based upon Maud's determination to see her marry Lord Mark and thus make a commercial marriage, establishes the relationship between the political context of the "Revolt of the Daughters" and James's treatment of character. Kate's sense of being imprisoned by Maud Lowder is conveyed by the narrator:

What they mainly postponed was the question of surrender, though she couldn't yet have said exactly of what: a general surrender of everything—that was at moments the way it presented itself—to Aunt Maud's looming "personality." It was by her personality that Aunt Maud was prodigious, and the great mass of it loomed because, in the thick, the godlike air of her arranged existence, there were parts doubtless magnified and parts certainly vague. They represented at all events alike, the dim and the distinct, a strong will and a high hand. (*WD* 36)

The use of "surrender" here is evocative of a war metaphor. Kate can be seen as battling for her independence against Maud Lowder as a domineering surrogate mother. Surveillance here is described in terms of Maud's "looming personality." Kate's resistance to Aunt Maud as based upon her desire to have it all, a marriage comprised of both commercial success

and love, is consistent with both Crackanthurpe's and Jeune's ambiguous resistance to the commercial marriage market. Jeune's critique of moral authority is echoed in Kate's desire to resist the "high-hand," the equivalent of maternal authority, and in Kate's ability to scheme, at a level equivalent to that of Maud Lowder, to continue to entertain the notion of marrying Densher despite the economic intimidation that she faces in Maud. This suggests that Maud is challenged by her own political creation in the same way that Crackanthurpe argued that mothers created their own revolting daughters. Indeed, the use of "strong will" and "high hand" may also signify the conflict of resistance and domination as they concern pedagogical processes within the context of family, of breaking the will of a child with authority, an important constituent of Haweis's political strategy. Aunt Maud can be seen as Haweis's mother as target, representing the imposition of educational authority for selfish ends and the objectification of daughters by self-serving parents, consistent with Graham's interpretation of Aunt Maud's ambitious use of Kate for the purpose of achieving access to aristocratic power.

Referring to the desire for money as an important component of Kate's consciousness and a way of explaining her manipulative conduct in the novel, Millicent Bell argues, with specific reference to the courtship ritual involving Merton Densher and Kate Croy, that "it is no use our saying they could have married without it; their personal and class premises make a grubby survival in Chelsea, like that of Kate's sister, inconceivable—and Susan Stringham's example of the independent woman who earns her own living is simply not available to Kate as an alternative" (291). Yet the signifiers that comprise a rhetoric of commodity fetishism appearing in a dialogue of resistance and domination between Densher and Kate can be recontextualized within the marriage reform debate to achieve a more comprehensive mapping of their relationship of power. This demonstrates that the signifiers that mark their dialogue of conflict and reconciliation echo the conflicting political strategies within the debate between free love radicalism and marriage reform.

Free love radicalism was embraced by Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy who had been a vociferous campaigner on behalf of married women's property rights and had ostricized herself from the more moderate and influential leaders of the movement by living with her lover Ben Elmy outside marriage (Holton 200). Wolstenholme Elmy promoted their unconventional relationship as a free union, an important symbol of her political beliefs concerning marriage. Despite her inability to command respect from the more powerful moderate forces within the women's rights

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movement, she continued to advance her belief that marriage reform was simply futile. In an article in *The Westminster Review* in 1897, Elmy pointed out the persistence of legal inequality within marriage, vilifying men within the legal system as unresponsive to women's struggle for legal and political equality. She constructed men within marriage as tyrannical despots of the home, seemingly seeking to reduce their wives to the obsequious and humiliating role of sexual slave:

It was not difficult to find members to take charge of a married women's property Bill or a custody of infant's Bill; but it is within the personal knowledge of the present writer that one woman, deeply indignant at the iniquity of the existing marriage law of England, as declared by thirteen judges in the case of *Queen v. Clarence*, heard in 1888, a law which makes the wife the absolute sexual slave of the husband, has, during the last fourteen years, in vain asked some forty to fifty different Members of Parliament to introduce a Bill, the draft of which was submitted to them, for the abolition of this infamy. (365)

The clarity of Wolstenholme Elmy's political radicalism was echoed in Mona Caird's condemnation of the commercial marriage market and male tyranny within the family, though Caird refused to endorse the dissolution of marriage. Caird focused her attack on the economically-based oppression practised by husbands against their wives. She attempted to alleviate women's apparent state of false consciousness concerning this form of victimization within marriage by stressing its damaging economic and legal effects for women:

One seldom hears of very bad cases of ill-treatment when a woman has private means under her own control. Wives who have begun their married life without such means, and acquired them afterwards, notice that a marked difference is discernible in the husband's attitude towards them. It is the unconscious recognition of the new status. (311)

Caird unabashedly vilified husbands, suggesting that they were only receptive to notions of equality within marriage when their position of economic superiority was threatened. Moreover, Caird pointed out that, under the pressures of the Victorian social convention of commercial marriage, husbands actively sought to possess and to control their wives: "It is the fatal sense of power and possession in marriage which ruins so many unions and acts as a sort of disenfranchisement to the romance of pre-marital days" (319).

Caird's economic critique of marriage was buttressed by similar political strategies offered by Jane Hume Clapperton, who agreed that the commercial marriage market should be rendered extinct as a social custom. She argued that activists often avoided addressing the root causes of injustice against women both within and beyond the context of marriage, "that [which] so much as touches the deep underlying causes—organic, economic, social—that throughout the length and breadth of the land create necessity for, and in many cases, deplorably justify commercial marriage" (714).

Yet the transparent political intention executed in these strategies was occluded by the deployment of signifiers with contradictory political effects as they appeared in the women's rights political strategies of Clementina Black and Millicent Garrett Fawcett. Black's and Fawcett's attacks on male tyranny and commercial marriage were accompanied by disclaimers that subverted their compelling critiques and created the perception of a monological political movement. Black went so far as to cite Caird's political strategy, initially endorsing the terms of Caird's critique:

There is ground for Mrs Caird's complaint of the position of many wives in regard to money. Indeed, the complaint might fairly include many sisters and daughters living with their brothers or fathers. It is a painful thing for a woman to have always to ask a male relation for money before she can have it, even though that relation be her husband. (592)

Indeed, both Caird and Black emphasized the importance of a marriage based upon love, friendship, and mutual respect. For Caird, the most important qualities for a successful marriage were "respect for individuality and freedom as in friendship" (321). Similarly, Black promoted the "opportunity of friendship between man and woman which is also the opportunity of the best and most enduring kind of love, and of the happiest marriage" (592). Yet Black's political reversal cannot be denied here:

But no opportunity and no form of marriage that can be devised can make beautiful or civilised the relations of those who are themselves unbeautiful and uncivilised: nor can any machinery of law or custom avert the suffering brought on human beings by their own faults and follies, or by the faults and follies of those who stand nearest to them. (594)

The gendered dichotomy that contributes to the political valence of her strategy, men as villains oppressing women as victims, is neutralized by

Black's construction of the failed marriage. Instead, Black suggests that suffering within marriage is a consequence of human error rather than of power abuses attributed to the husband or of social conventions reinforcing gender-based power inequities.

Answering Frederic Harrison's critique of the women's rights movement as a threat to the stability of family and society, Millicent Garrett Fawcett catalogued those "who are in rebellion against all order in society; who think marriages should be dissolvable at will" (675), so as to emphasize that "they are in effect anarchists" and that "they are not the people who have had anything whatever to do with the movement for the emancipation of women" (675). This position was, of course, further confirmed in Fawcett's rejection of free love in her critique of Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did*:

The author, therefore, has made a deliberate attempt to attach the fatal and perfidious bark of free love, which has no capacity in itself even to keep afloat, to a substantial craft which has proved itself seaworthy, and has shown great power of making way, even when wind and tide were against it.[...] He is not a friend but an enemy, and it is as an enemy that he endeavours to link together the claim of women to citizenship and social and industrial independence, with attacks upon marriage and the family. The whole of the social revolution sketched in *The Woman Who Did* would amount in its practical result to libertinage, not to liberty; it would mean the immeasurable degradation of women; it would reduce to anarchy the most momentous of human relationships—the relation between husband and wife and parents and children. (630)

Yet while Fawcett highlighted the immoral conduct of the husband (the main constituents of Clapperton's and Caird's political strategies) in order to enable women to construct themselves as the moral sex who were mandated to reform both the family and the political system, her position was nonetheless contradicted by her critique of the system of repression which she associated with the commercial marriage as perpetuated by women. Such rhetoric constituted a more deliberate and extreme reversal of Black's political disclaimer, aligning Fawcett equally with the political strategies of anti-suffragettes. Just as Linton had denigrated women for aggressively pursuing marriages based exclusively on economic considerations, so too did Fawcett offer a scathing critique of women's conduct during the courtship process in an article in which she was promoting feminine moral power:

Many of the shipwrecks of domestic happiness which most people can call to mind, have been caused either by the wife having no real vocation for the duties and responsibilities of marriage, or from her having married without deep affection for her husband, simply because she felt it was a chance she ought not to miss of what is euphemistically called “settling herself in life.”

It is to sell what should never be sold: sensual and materialising, it is this and things like it, which really debase the moral currency and desecrate the noblest duties of woman, not factory or any other honest labour, nor any claim on the part of women for a fuller recognition of their citizenship. (Fawcett, *Emancipation* 679)

In turning to Kate’s notion of marriage as evidenced in her repudiation of the Condrips, what Hugh Stevens identifies as a “disdain for the Mrs Condrips and her own sister’s life” (27), as simply resembling in part what he implies is the stable political icon of the New Woman, we can assign Kate an interpretive flexibility stemming from the contextual political dialogism of the debate. Such versatility is achieved when we locate signifiers within the text that point to the conflicting political ends for which the immoral, tyrannical husband was deployed in the respective strategies of Caird, Black, Wolstenholme Elmy, and Fawcett. Kate’s view of her sister’s marriage is described by the narrator:

She was little more than a ragged relic, a plain prosaic result of him—as if she had somehow been pulled through him as through an obstinate funnel, only to be left crumpled and useless and with nothing in her but what he accounted for. She had grown red and almost fat, which were not happy signs of mourning.... If that was what marriage necessarily did to you Kate Croy would have questioned marriage. It was at any rate a grave example of what a man—and such a man!—might make of a woman. (*WD* 41)

James’s narrator conveys Kate’s view of the domineering and possessive qualities of Marian Condrip’s deceased husband; consistent with Caird’s critique of economic possession and Wolstenholme Elmy’s tyrannical husband, Kate views her sister as economically deprived, “ragged,” and the object of some form of abuse, her being “crumpled and useless.” Her catalogue of the effects of abuse leads Kate to question marriage, provoking us to consider her endorsement of an alternative to marriage. Still, the interpretive flexibility is preserved in the last sentence of the excerpt in

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which the particular case is favoured over a generalization of sex and the institution of marriage, of Mr Condrip specifically as an abusive individual rather than as a representative of his sex, a position consistent with Black's political disclaimer.

Indeed, Fawcett's strategy is also paralleled by Kate's and Marian's discussion of the importance of money in assessing Densher and in Henry James's deployment of Kate as the author of Marian's identity as a supporter of the Victorian commercial marriage. In response to Marian's confession of disliking Densher and her encouragement of Kate to reject him, Kate figures Marian in these terms via a question: "Do you mean he hasn't money?" (*WD* 42). Marian confirms Kate's construction of her: "Yes, for one thing. And because I don't believe in him" (*WD* 42). Kate's repudiation of Marian after this admission, constructing her as vain and selfish, her implication that Marian expects her to seek out men for a commercial marriage, those who want her to "scatter gold," combined with the stark fact of what amounts to her sister's "shipwreck" of a life, ill-provided for and victimized, surely parallel the constituents of Fawcett's contradictory political strategy, though Kate's repudiation of her sister precludes us from associating Kate with the political strategy of Eliza Lynn Linton: "I like the way you arrange things—I like what you take for granted. If it's so easy for us to marry men who want us to scatter gold, I wonder we any of us do anything else. I don't see so many of them about, nor what interest I might ever have for them. You live, my dear, in a world of vain thoughts" (*WD* 42). Like Fawcett's strategy sustained by the contradiction of authoring women's self-victimization for the purpose of their political emancipation, Kate advances Marian's self-victimization in her comments on the effects of marriage offered earlier, and her comments above that constitute a rejection of Marian's endorsement of the conduct associated with commercial marriage.

The indefinability of Kate's relationship with Densher, conveyed from Kate's point of view and in her dialogue with Densher, echoes the political heteroglossia that marks the debate over marriage reform. Throughout the narrative, this gendered binary structure—Kate in conflict with Densher over determining the status of their relationship—sustains multiple political viewpoints on the issue of marriage reform without endorsing one in particular. Like the deferment of a consistent, definable policy within the women's rights movement for achieving equal marital rights, the indefinability of Kate's relationship with Densher is advanced via James's narrator using signifiers analogous to those which mark the debate on marriage reform: "They had accepted their acquaintance as too short for an engage-

ment, but they had treated it as long enough for almost anything else, and marriage was somehow before them like a temple without an avenue" (*WD* 52). Though nothing has been decided with respect to marriage, the narrator highlights Kate's feelings toward Densher, suggesting that if she is to marry, it will be for love, a constituent of the ideal marriage endorsed by Caird, Clapperton, and Black. Indeed, Kate is seemingly positioned politically to oppose the commercial marriage market: "She was in love—she knew that" (*WD* 53). The narrator explains further from her focalization that her view of her relationship with Densher is a private affair, that "it was wholly her own business" (*WD* 53).

Kate is also equally capable of sustaining a correlation with the political strategy of Millicent Garrett Fawcett, insofar as her conduct is synonymous with Fawcett's contradictory position, conveyed ambiguously by promoting women's moral superiority while condemning women for "debas[ing] the moral currency" by supporting the marriage market. Economic language is deployed to preserve and subvert simultaneously the political status quo. Michael Moon identifies Kate's power over Merton as an "optical illusion," emphasizing the extent to which Kate is "represented as being deeply dependent" upon his gazes (431). Yet rather than simply explore this relationship in terms of a dependency, a structure of power contained within James's text we should also note, the signifiers sustaining such a viewpoint can be seen as constitutive of political texts against which the novel can be read. There is no doubt a sense of Kate's dependency upon Densher's gazes in her determination that "whatever might happen, she must keep them," but it is also revealing to consider that she "must make them most completely her possession" (*WD* 53). Kate's use of possession here constitutes an act of appropriation, of objectification that is associated with economic transactions, signalling, as with Fawcett, a constructed and simultaneously subverted female resistance to male authority.

As the intensity of the conflict between Kate and Densher increases, so too do the signifiers that mark it, suggesting the correlation of James's text with the more extreme political strategies challenging the institution of marriage itself, those of Wolstenholme Elmy. What David McWhirter refers to in his discussion of Kate and Merton's courtship, in an analysis devoid of political contextual considerations, as their "free imaginings" (97) are assigned an unstable political significance associated with free love radicalism when they are read against the context of the debate on marriage reform. Indeed, this correlation is also accompanied almost simultaneously by signifiers employed by Densher that echo severe critiques offered within the texts of more moderate political reformers, of those who did not

advocate the dissolution of the institution of marriage altogether (Mona Caird, for example). Toward the end of the novel, however, the signifiers in which the final stages of Kate's and Densher's relationship are couched are again evocative of the political strategies of Black, which, of course, undermines a monological political reading indebted to Caird. The effect of the co-existence of these political evocations is to offset a monological political reading endorsing a specific policy concerning marriage reform or, in other words, a stable monolithic context.

There is much evidence in Kate's relationship with Densher to suggest that she delights in their private, free union, a deployment of signifiers associated with Wolstenholme Elmy's political strategy. Kate admits that she enjoys the socially unrecognized status they share as secret lovers: "I think ... our relation's quite beautiful. It's not a bit vulgar. I cling to some saving romance in things" (*WD* 60). Indeed, in the garden of Lancaster Gate, Kate announces her lifelong pledge to Densher in what amounts to a private union. After saying that she engages herself to him forever, she continues to delineate the terms of their relationship: "And I pledge you—I call God to witness!—every spark of my faith; I give you every drop of my life" (*WD* 72). James's narrator explains the private significance of this declaration, an action which gains enormous social and political significance from its location. Since Lancaster Gate is really representative of all that comes with commercial marriage and is occupied by the powerful advocate of Victorian respectability, Aunt Maud, the nineteenth-century reader is provoked to associate Kate's declaration with Wolstenholme Elmy's political strategy of endorsing free unions. James's narrator in effect does just this in reporting the terms of their contract: "They had exchanged vows and tokens, sealed their rich compact, solemnised, so far as breathed words and murmured sounds and lighted eyes and clasped hands could do it, their agreement to belong only, and to belong tremendously, to each other" (*WD* 72). The reader may wish to note the extent to which the private nature of "their agreement" is emphasized here.

This correlation may also be constructed in terms of a structural symmetry between literary text and political context, between Wolstenholme Elmy's once symbolic free union with Ben Elmy and Kate's relationship with Densher. The dissolution of Elizabeth's and Ben Elmy's free union in a political context, the perception that Wolstenholme Elmy forfeited her principles as a consequence of marrying Ben Elmy, seems to complement Densher's role within the narrative as a political foil. He endorses views concerning marriage that promote his vilification as a possessive, autocratic lover, a constituent of Mona Caird's more moderate political

strategy. The ability of Kate's relationship with Densher to sustain a correlation between James's text and the political strategy of Wolstenholme Elmy is then problematized by the collapse of their relationship. The terms of this collapse, of the conflict that marks the breakdown of Densher's relationship with Kate, suggest a correlation with the marriage reform debate in so far as he signifies both free union radicalism and an opposing moderate political strategy; the structural political heterogeneity of the debate is, therefore, preserved within the text.

Densher cannot accept the free union that constitutes his relationship with Kate. Though their relationship is initially predicated upon love, Densher strives to possess Kate or to acquire from her the commitment of security reminiscent of a husband who dominates his wife. After Densher arrives in London following his visit to the United States, we are told that his desires have grown, that he cannot tolerate his inability to see her in public without damaging her respectability. He changes his philosophy, from the reactionary, supportive co-conspirator of Kate's plan, which is to circumvent Aunt Maud's efforts to enlist her in a commercial marriage to Lord Mark, to that of a demanding partner whose conduct is more representative of commercial marriage than free unions. The narrator describes Densher's dissatisfaction with the status of his relationship with Kate in terms that would have made him the focus of condemnation by marriage reform advocates like Caird. James's narrator relays to us a metaphor suggesting that Densher equates his conduct toward Kate with exchange economics: "His letters from the States had pleased whom it concerned, though not so much as he had meant they should; and he should be paid according to agreement and would now take up his money" (*WD* 189). His relationship with Kate should be mastered in the same way that an effective businessman masters brokering a profitable deal. Caird and Clapperton, of course, had sought to dispel the economic justification of male domination of women within the family that is advocated by Densher here. The signifiers with which Caird and Clapperton identify the problems of power imbalance within the institution of marriage are used to describe what ails Densher, what he finds so intolerable about the status of their relationship: "It was all there for him, playing on his pride of possession as a hidden master in a great dim church might play on the grandest organ" (*WD* 189). The term possession is, of course, repeatedly used by Caird, and the metaphor of the church is complementary to the moral and economic constituents of her political strategy. Through it, Densher's mindset is conveyed, suggesting that he sees himself as a potential groom unable to realize his ambition to possess his wife.

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While the terms of the dissolution of Kate's and Densher's relationship as a free union seem to mirror the conflict between the moderate and radical political strategies within the marriage reform debate, those of Caird and Wolstenholme Elmy, their relationship is also evocative of the bifurcation represented by Wolstenholme Elmy's political strategy and that of Eliza Lynn Linton. Densher's critique of Kate in the initial stages of their courtship as the domineering partner, and in the final stages of their relationship as one who is recklessly dominant, is certainly reminiscent of Linton's *Wild Woman*. Densher offers his view of the extent to which he is rendered powerless by Kate: "You keep the key of the cupboard, and I foresee that when we're married you'll dole me out my sugar by lumps" (*WD* 194). Kate's response to Densher is evocative of Wolstenholme Elmy's political strategy because she affirms her repudiation of the institution of marriage by endorsing her control outside of it: "She had replied that she rejoiced in his assumption that sugar would be his diet, and the domestic arrangement so prefigured might have seemed already to prevail" (*WD* 194).

Toward the end of the novel, the motivation for Kate's plan is deferred even while it is being executed, postponing an unequivocal endorsement of a particular political strategy concerning marriage reform. In executing her plan, Kate pushes Densher into the arms of Milly, presumably so that he will be able to inherit Milly's money which in turn will enable Kate to marry for love, to keep Aunt Maud from pressuring her into a commercial marriage with Lord Mark. This is, of course, suggestive of a marriage reform strategy advancing marriage based on love and friendship. Yet in the process of executing her plan, Kate, in endorsing Densher's marriage to Milly, is so convincing from Densher's perspective that he suspects that Kate does not truly love him and that she is happy at the decline of their relationship into friendship: "You say we can't meet here, but you see it's just what we do. What could be more lovely than this?" (*WD* 195). Kate then seems representative of Black's political strategy which neutralizes a critique of commercial marriage. The novel closes with an irreconcilable conflict that mirrors that of the marriage reform debate. Like Black and Caird, whose once united front of criticizing the economic repression associated with commercial marriage collapses with Black's political disclaimer, Kate's political disclaimer, her convincing conduct that suggests she will not marry Densher, is accompanied by Densher's dialogue which, in effect, serves as a constituent of Caird's political strategy, criticizing husbands for being possessive: "What it amounted to was that he couldn't have her—hanged if he could!—evasive" (*WD* 195).

The scene in Venice in which Merton Densher demonstrates his power over Kate Croy by making her come to him can be seen, as Hugh Stevens argues, as a destabilizing act of signification, evidence of the dissolution of “the distinction between love and power” (29). The signifiers marking his expression of power can be connected to the marriage reform context but also to a process of destabilization affecting the political strategies they sustain. Indeed, signifiers of political strategies not only interrupt monological political readings by stimulating the collapse of binaries between strategies but also question the integrity of the strategies themselves. Densher’s threat to abandon Kate’s plan and her decision to comply with his demands are constructed from the structuring of signifiers that challenge the integrity of these very strategies. For example, Densher pleads with Kate: “Why not have done with it all and face the music as we are?” (*WD* 293). Appealing to Kate to take him as he is, to give up the commercial marriage, precludes us from associating him with the political strategies of Fawcett and Caird along economic lines, yet it is still a bid for power marked by a selfish act of possession for which he expresses little concern, other than from the perspective that it is “a charge of selfishness” which Kate is able “to make” (*WD* 293). The collapse of the bifurcation of signifiers as represented by the opposition of Caird’s and Black’s political strategies is evidenced in Densher’s plea as representing an endorsement of marriage based upon true love and possession. The conflation of the political effect of these signifiers invariably problematizes a correlation between literary text and political context along the lines of competing strategies as stable structures. Nevertheless, the value of identifying this process of destabilization is still indebted to the political strategies that such combinations of signification fragment. Although Densher can be seen as violating competing strategies, as reconfiguring the signifiers that sustain them in competition in his proposal which amounts to a new “political” strategy or a new bid for power, mapping such a strategy is entirely dependent upon the context that it challenges, and strives to subvert, upon the binaries and the traces of signification that mark such strategies.

Although James did not directly participate in the debate over marriage reform in the 1890s, his interest in the debate and expressed sympathy for women within the institution of family is evidenced in his correspondence throughout the 1870s and 1880s as well as in his concern to foreground issues of courtship and marriage in his late phase fiction. By mapping gender-based power relations along Bakhtinian lines, by accepting the notion that language is a social process, that it is the focus of struggle amongst

individuals attempting to appropriate and to deploy it for purposes of conveying though never ultimately mastering the communication of political intent, by accepting that language penetrates imposed disciplinary boundaries, we can see that James's novels are comprised of signifiers of political conflict, of signifiers that are politicized in articles written by individuals who comprise a diverse, democratic movement aiming to alter power relations at the level of State. Context as a heteroglossia of political intent enables us to map power relations that are diverse and not restricted to the limitations of a simplistic notion of political resistance.

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