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**“Romancing Venice: The Courtship of Percy Shelley in James’s
The Aspern Papers”**

Diane Long Hoeveler

Henry James’s novella *The Aspern Papers* (1888; rev. 1908) has most typically been read as a critical examination of the literary scholar’s obsession with the mystery of creativity.¹ There are, of course, obvious and numerous autobiographical resonances to James’s own life in the tale (for instance, James’s interest in the figures of Pushkin, Walt Whitman, Julian Hawthorne, Constance Fenimore Woolson, etc.),² but this essay will focus instead on the presence of what I would call the strange afterlives of Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Claire Clairmont in the story. Presented as a famous American poet from New York and once the beloved of the now elderly daughter of a prominent American portrait painter, the portrait of the ghostly Jeffrey Aspern—not his papers—is, I would claim, the central and haunting object of desire in the story. One of the most memorable images remaining in one’s mind after reading the story is that beautiful disembodied male head, called a “relic” by the narrator, that has floated from its original and very private storage place in Juliana’s pocket (93) into the pocket of the narrator after Juliana’s death (131) and finally to its ultimate relocation in a public place of honor above the narrator’s writing desk (143). I would claim that James intended this portrait to be modeled very specifically on Amelia Curran’s famous painting of Percy Shelley, completed in Rome in 1819, a portrait that was so well-known that it had assumed iconic and almost religious status by the time James was writing his novella.³ Presenting the poet sitting with a long quill pen in his beautifully shaped hand, the portrait was an

idealized representation of masculine poetic creativity, of the highly feminized male poet in love not with human bodies but with the ideas of art and beauty [Figure 1].

This essay will focus on that portrait as a homosocial exchange object, triangulated within the story by a series of convoluted negotiations between two women and a man (Juliana, Tina, and the narrator), or two men and a woman (Juliana's father the artist, Juliana, and Aspern), or two men and a city (the narrator, Aspern, and the body of Venice as visual spectacle, sexless and yet seductive), just as the earlier historical incident on which the story is based was also triangulated in multiple ways: for instance, by Byron, Shelley, and Claire Clairmont, or Byron, Claire and Allegra, their daughter, or Mary Shelley, Percy, and Claire, or Percy, Claire, and their mysterious daughter. In short, I would claim that *The Aspern Papers* is about how desire endlessly circulates in families and by extension cultures, or more specifically, how the act of creating cultural products actually short-circuits familial desire, producing a strange substitute-formation, the scholarly artifact—whether papers or portrait—as homosocial fetishized exchange object.

It is necessary to begin by noting that the originating anecdote that James heard and that motivated his writing of the story is based on the fact that he had learned that Claire Clairmont (b. 27 Apr 1798?; d. 19 Mar 1879, Firenze) was living with her niece Pauline Clairmont recently in Florence and in supposed possession of some priceless Shelley letters.⁴ At almost the same time he also had a conversation with the Countess Gamba, a relative of Lord Byron's last mistress, the Countess Teresa Gamba Guiccioli, who confessed that she had destroyed at least one scandalous letter exchanged between Byron and Teresa. As James noted after hearing these anecdotes, "I delight in a palpable

imaginable *visitable* past—in the nearer distances and the clearer mysteries, the marks and signs of a world we may reach over to as by making a long arm we grasp an object at the other end of our own table” (x). Grasping the personal histories of both Shelley and Byron from the near past as if they were objects on a table allows James to place them also within our imaginative grasps, but more importantly he seems to be privileging the need to come to terms with the literary heritage of “Romanticism” with a capital R. What James has created in this work is an enactment of the obsessive power of literary and scholarly desire, as if those fetishized and dead male Romantic poets, laid out on a dissecting table, can be grasped, seized, and resurrected as love objects, not by their discarded female paramours, but by the masculine literary tradition itself.

It is necessary, however, to recognize the strange errors and oversights that have been made by James scholars, a usually meticulous group of people. Throughout the criticism on *The Aspern Papers* Claire has been erroneously referred to as Percy Shelley’s “second wife,” as well as Mary Shelley’s cousin, her sister, or her half-sister.⁵ In fact, James himself makes this mistake (vii), but Claire was the illegitimate daughter of Mary Jane Clairmont, a woman who was living next door to William Godwin when he became the widower of Mary Wollstonecraft and the father to both their two-week old daughter, Mary, and Wollstonecraft’s illegitimate daughter, the three year old Fanny Imlay. Mrs. Clairmont, as she called herself, had never married and yet she had a son and daughter, paternity unknown (presumably not to her). Godwin was desperate for a caretaker for his two daughters and Mary Jane Clairmont found herself in the right place at the right time. In fact, shortly after their marriage Mary Jane gave birth to Godwin’s only son and namesake, William, a name used later for the unlucky younger brother of

Victor Frankenstein and, of course, the first victim killed by Frankenstein's creature. So much for Mary Shelley's attitude toward her step-siblings. The fact that Claire and Mary grew up in the same large and fairly chaotic household did not make them sisters or cousins. Legally, they were stepsisters, but Mary had nothing but contempt for Mrs. Clairmont and she spent her life bitterly regretting the tie she had with Claire, who saw Mary as a sexual and intellectual competitor her entire life.

Part two of this family romance occurs when Mary Shelley began having an affair with the married and very highly regarded poet Percy Shelley. Like some eerie *doppelgänger*, Claire was compelled to seek out an even more popular and also married poet, Lord Byron, and to begin an affair with him. As Mary became pregnant with Percy's lovechild, so did Claire after four months become pregnant with Byron's child, giving birth to a daughter named Allegra, a child who survived only until her fifth birthday. Byron stepped in shortly after the birth of Allegra and claimed his rights as a father, taking the child away from Claire and eventually placing her in a convent outside of Ravenna where she died from typhus, most likely brought on by neglect.⁶

Part three of the Claire Clairmont story, however, was the subject of the most notorious gossip throughout Claire's life. In 1815, and again when they all lived together in Geneva, Byron, Claire, and the Shelleys were rumored to be engaged in a "league of incest," the four of them randomly intimate with each other, with John Polidori, author of *The Vampyr*, as an impotent witness only too willing to spread the tale far and wide. Even more shockingly, however, in January 1819 Percy Shelley appeared in a Neopolitan courthouse with an infant girl and without his wife in order to take out birth papers for the baby girl that he named Elena Adelaide and who he claimed was his own. This

mysterious action has long puzzled Shelley biographers as Mary did not give birth to a child at this time and both she and Claire destroyed their journals for the period of six months prior to the child's birth. No one knows definitely even today who the mother of this child was, but certainly the theory that Claire was the actual mother has been advanced and been supported by a number of odd events, including the fact that a servant in the household attempted to blackmail Percy about the incident.⁷ Certainly it has long been asserted that Percy and Claire had an affair that even Mary knew about and was forced to condone. Evidence for this affair is strewn throughout Percy's letters as well as his "Epipsychidion," where Claire is represented as a "tempest" to Mary's "moon."

This historical background, well known to scholars of romanticism, makes it clear that Claire was recognized throughout her own era as a fairly notorious woman, giving birth, like her mother, to two illegitimate children, fathered by two different men. By blatantly aligning his portrait of Juliana Bordereau with Claire, James would have been broadly winking to his contemporary reading audience, most of whom would have been in the know about the intimate history of such a woman, who was notorious as something of a poetic groupie. Gossip, it would appear, has become a form of high art in this tale.⁸ But if one does not know that Claire was exchanged between both Byron and Shelley, and that in fact she was rumored to have had an illegitimate daughter with each of these famous poets, then the nuances of James's story are lost.

Notice how the portrait—representing a visual presentation of the idealized and bodiless male poet—functions in opposition to the papers—or the literal and factual—throughout the story. In order to make my case that the portrait of Aspern is intended by James to recall to his contemporary readers the portrait of Percy Shelley it is necessary to

trace the public circulation of Amelia Curran's painting. The earliest public appearance of a copy of the portrait occurred in the ornate frontispiece of the Galignani brothers' edition of *The Poetical Works of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats* (Paris, 1829), containing bust-length likenesses of all three poets. Mary Shelley used a different, waist-length derivation of the Curran portrait as the frontispiece to her edition of Shelley's *Poetical Works* (Moxon, 1839). Another source where James might have seen a variant of the Curran portrait can be found in the third edition of *Shelley Memorials: From Authentic Sources* (1859), edited by Mary Shelley's daughter-in-law Lady Jane Shelley. Harry Buxton Forman used a similar portrait as the frontispiece of his *Poetic Works of P—B—S—* (1876). Forman's 1882 edition of the volume used yet another variant of the portrait featuring the poet's disheveled hair, loose collar, and long quill pen. William Michael Rossetti's three-volume edition of the *Poetry of Shelley* (1878) has a cut-down and slightly revised variant of the head, neck, and loose collar as the frontispiece for volume one. Suffice it to say that James would have had multiple opportunities to have seen both the Curran portrait and the two major adaptations of it done by Edward Ellerker William [Figure 2] and George Clint. The Clint painting was then adapted as an engraving by Edward Francis Finden and used as a frontispiece to the 1839 *Poetical Works of Percy Shelley* (London: Daly) as well as within *Finden's Landscape Illustrations to . . . the Life and Works of Lord Byron* (London: Murray, 1832).

The portrait of Aspern, moreover, is further merged with the spirit of Venice as another source for communing with the idealized Aspern that the narrator has constructed and pursued: "That spirit kept me perpetual company, and seemed to look out at me from the revived immortal face—in which all his genius shone—of the great poet who was my

prompter” (42). Interestingly, throughout the Venetian passage, James uses the words “fraternal,” “mystic companionship,” “moral fraternity” (42-43), all phrases that suggest the homosocial bonding that has occurred between the idealized Aspern, the narrator, and the “body” of Venice, or, by historical extension, between Byron and Shelley over the body of Claire. Venice is also coded throughout the narrative as a “spirit” and we know from James’s travel essays and a later letter to J. A. Symonds that in fact Venice was something of a sexualized locale that had allowed him to admire beautiful young men and then convey that admiration in a somewhat cryptic manner to Symonds. In a travel essay written during a trip to Venice in 1873, James wrote about a group of young men he saw one day while walking, noting that one of the boys “was the most expressively beautiful creature I had ever looked upon....He had a smile to make Correggio sigh in his grave....Verily nature is still at odds with propriety....I think I shall always remember, with infinite conjecture, as the years roll by, this little unlettered Eros of the Adriatic stand” (qtd. Bradley, 47). Years later James sent this piece to Symonds and then waited for the knowing nod or sign of recognition, but nothing arrived. He finally took the more direct tack of writing a letter in which the wink is a bit broader:

I sent you the *Century* more than a year ago with my paper on Venice. I sent it to you because it was a constructive way of expressing the good will I felt towards you in consequence of what you had written about the land of Italy—and of intimating to you, somewhat dumbly, that I am an attentive and sympathetic reader. I nourish for the said Italy an unspeakably tender passion, and your pages always seemed to me that you were one of the small number of people who love it as much as I do—in addition to your knowing it immeasurably better. I wanted to recognize this (to your knowledge); for it seemed to me the victims of a common passion should exchange a look. (qtd Bradley, 53)⁹

Exchanging “looks” would appear to be what the narrator wants to do with Aspern via the portrait, but the “eyes” of Juliana and Tina keep blocking his view. In fact, the

narrator begins to fantasize that he is in direct communion with the spirit of Aspern over the body of Venice as mediated by the fading Juliana, thinking that he hears Aspern nudge and whisper to him, ““Strange as it may appear to you she was very attractive in 1820. Meanwhile, aren’t we in Venice together, and what better place is there for the meeting of dear friends?”” (43)

The narrator, of course, initially claims that he wants to purchase the Aspern papers and his original design is to try to locate where they are stored in the shabby Venetian rooms that the women inhabit. He settles on a “particular tall old Empire secretary with brass ornaments of the style of the Empire—a receptacle somewhat infirm but still capable of keeping rare secrets” sealed with a “peevisish little lock” (100). When he seems to be staring too blatantly at the secretary, he diverts Tina’s attention by mentioning the portrait of Aspern, suggesting that the portrait and the papers are in some way tied together in his mind. And they are, because the secretary with its “peevisish little lock” becomes increasingly identified with the literal and by extension, with Juliana’s body, just as the portrait reminds us of the narrator’s obsession with the metaphorical, the idealized and abstract, a bodiless poet. In his manic pursuit of the remains of Jeffrey Aspern, the narrator enacts a recognizable cultural script: he desires to recreate the masculine poetic genius as all mind, free from the taints or corruptions that are inherent in associating with the female body, and concomitantly with generation, reproduction, and emotion. To say that the text encodes a loathing for the female body is not to say anything particularly new about it.¹⁰ What is most psychologically telling about the tale is the way that Claire Clairmont’s personal sexual history functions as a very broad wink to his reading audience, an unspoken and yet underlying source of scandal and nausea,

suggesting a revulsion toward the female body which in turn sets off the even more intense need to fixate on the masculine and beautiful disembodied head.

In juxtaposition to the open and engaging face and beautiful eyes of Aspern, we are presented with Juliana's rather eccentric habit of wearing a green eye shade to conceal her eyes, a gesture that transforms her into something of a death's head: "the upper half of her face was covered by the fall of a piece of dingy lacelike muslin, a sort of extemporised hood which, wound round her head, descended to the end of her nose, leaving nothing visible but her white withered cheeks and puckered mouth, closed tightly" (104). The veil is finally raised when Juliana catches the narrator in the act of raiding the secretary for the papers:

Juliana stood there in her night-dress, by the doorway of her room, watching me; her hands were raised, she had lifted the everlasting curtain that covered half her face, and for the first, the last, the only time I beheld her extraordinary eyes. They glared at me; they were like the sudden drench, for a caught burglar, of a flood of gaslight; they made me horribly ashamed. (118)

This scene is the moment we have been waiting for since the story began: the confrontation of the hero with the Medusa's head. Like a little boy rustling around for some secret in his mother's drawers, the narrator is caught in a nursery drama, the reenactment of a primal scene in which he has attempted to ferret out the sexual secrets of his substitute parent figures. It would appear, in fact, that this act is an invasion of the tainted female body in order to remove for safe keeping the literal remains of his masculine poetic deity. This raid on the mother's territory is, for the narrator, an act of homosocial loyalty, a way of disengaging Aspern from his earlier and unfortunate association with the promiscuous and unworthy Juliana.

For her part, Juliana does not survive this shock for long, and very quickly the narrator is into the final stages of negotiating for his desired property with Tina, the heir of Aspern's legacy:

I looked at Jeffrey Aspern's face in the little picture, partly in order not to look at that of my companion [Tina], which had begun to trouble me, even to frighten me a little—it had taken so very odd, so strained and unnatural a cast....I but privately consulted Jeffrey Aspern's delightful eyes with my own—they were so young and brilliant and yet so wise and so deep....now that I held the little picture in my hand I felt it would be a precious possession. 'Is this a bribe to make me give up the papers?' I presently and all perversely asked. 'Much as I value this, you know, if I were to be obliged to choose the papers are what I should prefer. Ah but ever so much!'" (131)

Later, when he first hears Tina timidly put forward the idea that he needs to become a "relation" in order to possess the papers, the narrator turns his attention again to the little portrait: "It was embarrassing, and I bent my head over Jeffrey Aspern's portrait. What an odd expression was in his face! 'Get out of it as you can, my dear fellow!' I put the picture into the pocket of my coat and said to Miss Tina: "Yes, I'll sell it for you" (133). Claiming that he has sold the portrait and is sending her the proceeds, the narrator later comments that as he looks at the portrait hanging above his writing desk, "When I look at it I can scarcely bear my loss—I mean of the precious papers" (143). But James's earlier version of this line (1888) had read: "When I look at it [the portrait] my chagrin at the loss of the letters becomes almost intolerable" (*CT*, 382). There is a shift here that suggests something deeply dishonest. "Chagrin" becomes transformed into "loss," and simple embarrassment becomes instead a trauma that is almost unbearable as the narrator has contemplated the events over time (or the author has had twenty years to consider the real object of his character's quest).

But that revised qualification about “loss,” added as a tag at the end of the sentence, functions as a dodge, a way of trying to express what he knows he in fact can bear, the loss of the papers. So is it the papers or the portrait that have functioned as the fetishized love object throughout the novella? If we consider Freud’s explanation of fetishism (limited, to be sure, to the male libido as “normative”), we can assume that it is the mother’s *difference* from the male body that strikes horror in the boy because it reifies his own fear of castration, his own nausea at her “wounded” body (hence the focus on Juliana’s eyes and her horribly withered face). As long as the substitute fetish object that denies the visual trauma can be kept in view (the portrait of Jeffrey Aspern), it allows the boy to continue to believe in the imaginary wholeness of woman (and hence his own wholeness).¹¹ The fetish, then, becomes a “permanent memorial” to the horror of castration that he had glimpsed in the mother’s body. The fetish also is a “token of triumph” and a talismanic safeguard against castration necessary for the male psyche to survive, let alone create works of art (Freud, “Fetishism,” 153).

I have argued that the papers—the literal remains of Aspern—were never the real object of the narrator’s quest. He has been from the beginning obsessed with vicariously experiencing on an artistic or visual level the relationship that Byron and Shelley had with Claire. He is, in short, a voyeur of the most fastidious kind. He himself does not want to sully his hands with Tina, the probable child of Aspern and Juliana. Instead he wants to court the idea of the ghost of Percy Shelley or masculine poetic creativity in his imagination. He wants to participate in an act of homosocial bonding, an alternative sphere that replicates itself not in human beings, but in portraits of human beings. In love with the male image, he seizes the portrait and spends his days staring at it, content with

reminiscing about his foray into the castle of Duessa. He braved the female dragons, and emerging with his treasure: the disembodied sacred male head.

As a coda, I would like to note that James rewrote his tale in 1908, but in the meantime, four years earlier, Edith Wharton wrote her own version of the same story, “The House of the Dead Hand.”¹² Published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1904, Wharton’s story is set in Siena where Wyant, a young British dilettante, has come to see a treasured painting by Leonardo owned by the daughter of the eccentric Dr. Lombard. In this story the quest for the connoisseur is to possess the painting of the virgin, called the Lux Mundi, but the painting is unattainable because the daughter, Sybilla, refuses to part with it even after her father’s death. Most striking as a clue to the psychic similarities of the tales is the device of the dead hand that hangs over the entryway of the Lombard house: “the hand was a woman’s—a dead drooping hand, which hung there convulsed and helpless, as though it had been thrust forth in denunciation of some evil mystery within the house, and had sunk struggling into death” (509). Like the secretary that holds the Aspern papers and the fetishized portrait, the dead female hand controls property and thereby forces itself into the domain of male bonding. Like the women of *The Aspern Papers*, the female dead hand droops over art and beauty while the dream of an all-male enclave, a brotherhood of beautiful artists, struggles to emerge from her powerful and ultimately dead hand.

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NOTES

¹ All quotations from *The Aspern Papers* (except one) from the New York Edition of James. Also see Person for a reading of the story as an exploration of the masculine creative process: “Throughout, [the narrator’s] behavior is consistent with a desire to idealize Aspern and to divorce eroticism and creativity, the letters from their meaning” (23).

² Tambling sees Walt Whitman as the model for Aspern, while O’Leary sees Pushkin. Edel reads James’s anxiety about his own letters to Constance Fenimore Woolson into the conception of the story (339-41), while Scharnhorst sees Julian Hawthorne as embedded in the name “Juliana” and as the “publishing scoundrel” of the story for publishing his own father’s private papers.

³ The National Portrait Gallery has seven portraits of Shelley, including the 1819 Curran oil painting and an oil by George Clint, “after Amelia Curran, and Edward Ellerker Williams,” known as the composite portrait (ca. 1829). The Clint painting [<http://www.npg.org.uk/live/search/portList.asp?search=sp&sText=percy+shelley>] seems like a “better” portrait than Curran’s, with more detail and facial definition. Mary Shelley apparently tried to commission an improved version of the Curran in 1829 by requesting a composite of the Curran and Williams portraits. For further information on the Shelley portraits, see Trelawny’s Preface to his *Recollections*; White; Smith; and Barker-Benfield.

⁴ Claire’s letters to both Percy Shelley and Lord Byron are collected in *The Clairmont Correspondence*, which also contains the letters related to her years in Italy and sent to

her niece Pauline (Plin) Clairmont, the model for Miss Tina. For a full account of Pauline's life, see Stocking.

⁵ Edel identifies Claire as the "cousin" of Mary Shelley (p. 337). Other misidentifications occur throughout the secondary criticism of *The Aspern Papers*; for instance, Person identifies Claire as "Shelley's second wife" (30).

⁶ Shelley's visit with Allegra at the convent in Bagnacavallo is described in Gittings and Manton (pp 64-5). For a description of Shelley's attempts to act as a go-between with Claire and Byron over the care of Allegra, see Holmes, pp.420-23; 439-49. And for a full-length biography of Claire, see Grylls.

⁷ See Holmes (2003), "The Tombs of Naples" (ch. 18) for an extended and updated discussion of this vexed question. The most recent, full-length biography of Shelley discusses the mystery of the Neopolitan child at length, concluding that it is impossible now to prove definitively who the biological parents of the girl were (see Bieri, vol. 2, ch. 5: "Paradise of Devils: Naples").

⁸ In a similar fashion, Goodman has observed: "James's love of gossip—justified by the belief that 'art is long & everthing else is accidental and unimportant'—sometimes makes him appear almost ruthlessly detached from other people and their pain. For him, gossip was an art" (61).

⁹ MacDonald (80-91) has discussed James's "Italian Hours" (1909), including his earlier Venetian writings, "Venice" (1882), "The Grand Canal" (1892), and "Two Old Houses and Three Young Women" (1909), all of which convey James's historical immersion in the themes of *The Aspern Papers*. Reading Venice as a sexualized locus of meaning, Bradley discusses James's letter to Symonds as a way of identifying himself as

a homosexual by revealing his attraction to the young men he had glimpsed fleetingly in Venice (47-48; 53).

¹⁰ See, for instance, Church; Reesman; Veeder; Brown; and Hadley for various approaches to the misogyny that is implicit (or explicit) throughout the story. Reesman notes that “the literal is the realm of the female body, and the male body is, in contrast, unreachable, undefinable, and unsayable” (43).

¹¹ See Freud, “Medusa’s Head,” for a summary of the psychic dynamics here: “To decapitate = to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother. . . . The sight of Medusa’s head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone” (264).

¹² For a discussion of Wharton’s adaptations of the ghost story, see Allen Smith.

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FIGURE 1

<http://www.xs4all.nl/~androom/biography/i002657.htm>

FIGURE 2

<http://www.xs4all.nl/~androom/index.htm?biography/p000047.htm>