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# Eavesdropping on Henry James: Reading Gender in the Correspondence of William and Henry

By Sarah Wadsworth, *Marquette University*

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Recent scholarship has drawn attention to a wide array of reading strategies from which the literary historian or critic may choose. In addition to close reading, we now have distant reading, depth reading, surface reading, and reading over time, to mention a handful of methods featured in recent issues of *PMLA*.<sup>1</sup> Enlisting tropes that range from the spatial to the tactile to the temporal, these methods share an emphasis on the visual processes of decoding texts and even entire systems of texts or corpora: in presenting the reader with three models of distant reading, for example, Franco Moretti explains that they “place the literary field literally in front of our eyes” (2).

Approaching reading through a technique theoretically rooted in sound rather than sight, this paper is about interpreting personal correspondence: private, back-and-forth exchanges from which prying eyes were meant to be excluded. In it, I explore a rhetorical tactic that addresses the problem of readerly exclusion by foregrounding it. Adapted from Krista Ratcliffe’s book, *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (2005), the tactic I apply here is “eavesdropping,” which Ratcliffe reclaims from its pejorative, gendered connotations and proposes as a way of engaging productively with discourse that lies just beyond the listener’s, or reader’s, perimeter of direct access. Advocating rhetorical listening as “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to *any* person, text, or culture” (17), Ratcliffe reframes eavesdropping as a position of “stand[ing] outside . . . on the border of knowing and not knowing” (104–05). This stance is, I suggest, a particularly fruitful one for reading correspondence as it “more sharply tunes listeners into ‘private conversations of others,’ conversations in which eavesdroppers are not directly addressed.” This approach enables us to “hear differently” as we deliberately position ourselves not in direct relation to an authoritative voice but rather obliquely, “listening to the discourses of others” and “hearing over the edges of our own knowing.”

“Eavesdropping”—listening to “inside” discourse from an “outside” point of hearing (literally, listening from under the eaves, where rainwater drips from the edges of the roof [Ratcliffe 104])—provides an apt analogy to the act of reading someone else’s letters. According to William Merrill Decker, “that an exchange of letters should imitate—or provide the written equivalent of—conversation between two individuals physically present to one another” has been “a commonplace of epistolary relationships at least since the seventeenth century” (40). Letters, as Decker explains, constitute “a literature that is overtly dialogic,” and their exchange carries the “distinctive resonance” of “epistolary voices” through “the rhythms of a conversation conducted by letter sheet” (16, 56, 36). Moreover, not only do “letters embody their authors” (Decker 38) but as Margaretta Jolly points out, “all letters embody complex social codes” (3).

In *Rhetorical Listening*, Ratcliffe proposes this rhetorical tactic as a way of “facilitat[ing] conscious identifications needed for cross-cultural communication” (back cover). Bringing this tactic to historical correspondence can heighten awareness of discursive, authorial, readerly, and sociopolitical or cultural agency (120–21) across gender lines as well as cultural ones. As Jolly emphasizes, letter writing is “a social practice very particular to its time and place.” With reference to the correspondence of second-wave feminists, she explains:

The *form* of these letters, their *symbolic function* and *reception*, as much as their content, is crucial to their meaning. These written relationships express an emerging network and in turn play their part in constructing gender-class consciousness. But they are also texts that negotiate less obvious identifications and desires, needs and demands. In this, they tell us about unconscious aspects of group making and group excluding. (13)

Adapting the approaches of both Ratcliffe and Jolly, in this paper I trace moments of identification and disidentification through a sequence of letters in order to illuminate the ways gender and other categories of identity with which it intersects operate within a well-defined epistolary exchange. My larger interest here is to see how “eavesdropping” may help locate and clarify shifts in the way James thought about, wrote about, and related to women through the specific historical time and place of his long literary apprenticeship.

Overhearing or “listening in” is a plot element James frequently incorporates into his fiction, which, in addition, often gives readers the sense of eavesdropping on a conversation, whether written, as in “A Bundle of Letters,” or spoken. The classic “bystander” stance, which James not only enacted but replicates in his fiction, appears, for example, in “Daisy Miller,” where the voices of Daisy and Giovanelli reach the ears of Winterbourne as he strolls through the Colosseum after dark (59), and in *The Golden Bowl*, when the shop-keeper attending the Prince and Charlotte listens to their “intimate conversation” (118) while they are under the false but comforting impression “that their foreign tongue covered what they said” (116). James’s lengthy swaths of dialogue put readers, too, in the position of eavesdropping, as Victoria Coulson points out with reference to *The Awkward Age* (17). These works were still in the future, however, during the period with which this paper is concerned.

To explore James’s casual and perhaps unconscious and habitual discursive practices in relation to gender, I focused on the correspondence between William

James and Henry James from 1869 to 1873, a span of five years for which published letters from both parties are readily available. My goal was to better understand the ambiguities, tensions, and shifts that characterize Henry James's private writing about women in the period in which he was a novelist-in-training. Initially, the correspondence is dominated by Henry's plaintive and sometimes almost panicky accounts of his digestive woes and William's brotherly condolences and medical advice. As his health improves, however, Henry's letters become more outward-oriented as well as more reflective. Over time, they gradually form a record of his developing sense of vocation while serving as a sketch pad for his published work. Although some of the letters—or portions thereof—were intended to be shared with family members or a small circle of family and friends, the intended audience remains an intimate group to whom the contents are made privy. The presence of clearly demarcated boundaries between the intended audience and those outside this privileged sphere, or “in group,” is what makes eavesdropping a useful strategy as well as an apt metaphor for reading this selection of letters.

Adapting Ratcliffe's approach to the epistolary exchange between William and Henry from 1869 to 1873, I “listened in” on these early letters, paying particular attention to the way they talk about women and gender. “Eavesdropping” on this written “conversation,” I began to detect recurring themes in the brothers' references to women that I earmarked as occasions for rhetorical listening: beauty vs. ugliness, for example; youth vs. age; and normative vs. non-normative performances of gender.<sup>2</sup> In addition to uncovering recurring themes, however, “eavesdropping” on the correspondence helps reveal sites of identification and disidentification and attunes us, as Ratcliffe proposes, to “moments of productive rhetorical usage” in which “bodies, tropes, and cultures may converge” (120).

To illustrate how this tactic might translate into a context of literary-historical scholarship, I begin with an anecdote culled from the journal of Louisa May Alcott. The setting of this anecdote is the James family home in the spring of 1865, less than a year after the publication of *Moods* (1864), Alcott's first novel, which she published at the age of thirty-one when James was only twenty. The incident occurred three-and-a-half years before the commencement of the exchange I isolated (the letters dated 1869–73, as noted earlier) between William and Henry.

First a little backstory: In October 1863, when Alcott was hard at work writing *Moods*, which had proceeded by fits and starts, her father, Bronson Alcott, happened to mention the work to fellow philosopher Henry James Sr. In an entry in her journal in which she reported that three publishers and several papers had asked for her work, Alcott recorded, “Father spoke of ‘Moods’ & the great James desired to see it. So I fell to work & finished it off, thinking the world must be coming to an end & all my dreams getting fulfilled in a most amazing way” (120–21).<sup>3</sup> Four months earlier, Henry James Sr. had written her “a fine letter” (Alcott, *Journals* 119) regarding *Hospital Sketches* (1863), her “charming pictures of hospital service” (*Selected Letters* 101). When *Moods* was published the following year, Alcott, perhaps in gratitude for his interest and praise, sent Henry James Sr. a copy of the second edition: the first edition had sold out before she had the chance.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after receiving the volume, James informed Louisa's father that his family were reading it “with great interest” (A. James 71).<sup>5</sup> About a month later, in March 1865, James Sr. invited Louisa to come to dinner at his family's Beacon Hill home.

Alcott dined with the James family at Ashburton Place a matter of weeks before the Civil War finally came to an end. Her once-abundant waves of shiny dark hair had been shorn when she fell ill of typhoid fever at Georgetown's Union hospital, and she had not yet grown it long again. At that time, the two younger James brothers were still away fighting in the war, but Henry was present, together (most likely) with fifteen-year-old Alice, their parents, and their Aunt Kate. (William, a student at Harvard, probably missed the event.) Alcott's brief account of the evening suggests that the hospitality was gracious and the atmosphere convivial despite the somber reminders of war: the guest of honor felt she was "treated like the Queen of Sheba" (*Journals* 139). Although Alcott had sent her newly published novel to the James patriarch, it was young Henry who greeted it, and its author, with the keenest of interest that night: "Henry [Jr.] wrote a notice of 'Moods' for the North American [Review] & was very friendly, being a literary youth," she recorded in her journal (139). At the time of the dinner, James's review of *Moods* had not yet been published. Alcott would have to wait another three or four months to read his formal appraisal in the July issue of *North American Review*.

For a first-time novelist already anxious about the novel's reception, James's review must have been painful to read. In it, he characterized the novel's premise as hackneyed, its hero "monstrous" and plot "unnatural" (*EL* 189, 190, 193). For all the barbs, however, there can be little doubt that the young critic admired her talent. After faulting the novel for being out of touch with human nature he praised it for its "cleverness," "beauty," "vigor," "imagination," and "grace" and went on to rank its author in the upper echelon of American writers: "With the exception of two or three celebrated names, we know not, indeed, to whom, in this country, unless to Miss Alcott, we are to look for a novel above the average" (194–95). Still, coming from a young man scarcely out of his teens, the faint praise undoubtedly struck Alcott as cheeky, if not arrogant. In hindsight, his friendliness at the James family dinner may have seemed to the author of *Moods* condescending and pert. It was most likely in the wake of this review that Alcott returned to the journal entry in which she had written glowingly of her evening at the James home, took up her pencil and inserted a tart or, in an alternate interpretation, good-natured gloss—a line that has been variously read as "he gave me advice as if he had been eighty [80] and I a girl" and as "he gave me advice as if he had been so as a girl." The penciled-in line following this insertion has been read unambiguously as "My curly crop made me look young tho[ugh] 31 [thirty-one]."<sup>6</sup>

What I find most interesting here—aside from the fact that "eavesdropping" even on the written word can be like a game of telephone—is that these two competing interpretations of Alcott's annotation imply different, even oppositional, stances in relation to hierarchies of gender and age.<sup>7</sup> As Ratcliffe argues, "eavesdropping as a rhetorical tactic possesses potential for mapping places of identification, disidentification, and non-identification" (107). In this example, version 2—"he gave me advice as if he had been so as a girl"—suggests both gender and age *identification*, while version 1—"he gave me advice as if he had been eighty [80] and I a girl"—suggests *disidentification* on the basis of both age and gender, with Alcott using hyperbole as well as age inversion to convey a sense of authority and seniority on the part of the younger, less experienced James—a mere neophyte by comparison. This kind of mapping of identification, disidentification, and non-identification surfaces in ways

both conspicuous and subtle when we “listen in” on the correspondence between William and Henry.

When we turn from Alcott’s journal to James’s correspondence, eavesdropping—which Ratcliffe offers as an ethical rhetorical tactic for investigating whiteness and other forms of privilege—allows us to discern moments of identification and disidentification in other situations in which age and gender intersect. One striking example of the latter occurs in a letter from Henry to William, dated April 26, 1869. At this time Henry was in Oxford, where he wrote, after strolling “thro’ the lovely Christ Church meadow” in “the interminable British twilight” he “thought [his heart] would crack with the fulness of satisfied desire” (W. James 69). A few days into his visit, he had lunch with the rector of Lincoln College, Mark Pattison, and his wife Francis Pattison, the future Lady Emilia Dilke.

The Rector is a desiccated old scholar, torpid even to incivility with too much learning; but his wife is of quite another fashion—very young (about 28) very pretty, very clever, very charming & very conscious of it all. She is I believe highly “emancipated” & I defy an English-woman to be emancipated except coldly & wantonly. As a spectacle the thing had its points: the dark rich, scholastic old dining room in the college court—the languid old rector & his pretty little wife in a riding-habit, talking slang. (W. James 70)

Despite the praise of Mrs. Pattison’s beauty, intelligence, and demeanor, the passage clearly pronounces a negative judgment on the rector’s wife: a judgment conveyed largely through tone and rhetorical flourishes. “Clever” can be a backhanded compliment. “Charming” is also double-edged as it can be associated with artificial manners as opposed to natural affect. “Pretty” seems unambiguous, but “pretty little wife in a riding-habit, talking slang” is clearly belittling. Henry seems to bristle at the woman’s charm, poise, cleverness, intelligence, and the way she displays these qualities with self-awareness. Interestingly, as in the Alcott exchange (if we read the two-symbol construction in Alcott’s penciled insertion as “80” instead of “so”), James, although younger than the woman he is interacting with—he had turned twenty-six a few days earlier—assumes a stance of superior authority that he expresses in terms of age. Moreover, although James describes her as “emancipated,” he ironizes the term with inverted commas, while the words “coldly” and “wantonly” hint of sexual dysfunction and transgression, respectively. He does not acknowledge her words or her agency as a speaker in this passage. Instead, he erases them.

Elsewhere, too, both Henry and William write of women in their marital or romantic relation to men as though women’s intellect and affection were mutually incompatible or inversely related to one another. Of the newly married Clover Hooper Adams, Henry writes, for example, “Mrs. Clover has had her wit clipped a little I think—but I suppose has expanded in the ‘affections’” (W. James 201). Also interesting here is that Clover’s uncharacteristically subdued demeanor seems to meet with James’s tentative approval—it’s not an affront as is the rector’s wife’s energy and wit in the face of her husband’s languor. Implicit in this equation is the hegemonic suggestion that a woman’s intellect unfits her for love and marriage, while the implied comparison between a young wife and a caged bird with its wings clipped to facilitate

its domestication rehashes conventional tropes of men “taming” women in order to make them acceptable wives.

In a letter from William dated April 6, 1873, we find an extension of this familiar logic, derived from nineteenth-century gender ideology, as William recounts, with condescension, his interactions with Theodora Sedgwick.

I sat with Theodora & Sara for an hour—conversation largely consisting of us chaffing Theodora. That amiable but narrow sympathied creature is fretting for a larger sphere than Cambridge affords tho’ I doubt if she knows what’s the matter with her. To all her complaints the black-draped females of the house have no remedy to offer but that she should read some instructive book, and it is quite refreshing to hear her kick out occasionally. To day she confessed that she ought to “keep up” her German, if only there were anything decent to read. Sara suggested Goethe’s *Wahrheit u. D.* when she broke out “Oh! I can n’t STAND a third life of Goethe in 6 months” with a genuine impulsiveness that was quite amusing. She ought to be in a brilliant moving social medium, with continual novelties, and plenty of men to see, and I don’t wonder that she *morfonds* herself here with never a man but Child & myself, and all those grimly conscientious women. (195)

In this letter, William diagnoses Theodora’s sense of confinement and resulting restlessness as though it were an illness, deploying the language of disease (“complaint,” “what’s the matter with her”) and treatment (“remedy”). Equally striking is the lack of empathy on William’s part. His own freedom as a white male intellectual from an affluent, well-connected family clearly impedes identification with Theodora, and he “chaffs” her and enjoys seeing her discomfort as she “kicks out” against the restrictions that limit her, his diction evoking an unruly mare. Moreover, he is “amused” by her spontaneous outburst of sheer frustration. The cure, or “remedy,” he prescribes is society, novelty, and, especially, “plenty of men to see.”

In this early phase of a much longer (indeed lifelong) epistolary conversation, Henry’s responses to women’s intellectual and artistic endeavors could be equally disparaging. From Rome, in April 1873, he writes dismissively of the mother of Alice’s friend Ella Eustis, describing her as “apparently, with the same ink stain on her nose she had at Oxford!” (W. James 202). In another instance he acknowledges a woman’s intellectual—in this case, scientific—achievement but frames that achievement negatively by foregrounding age and appearance over intellectual accomplishment, referring to “elderly & ugly Miss Bradford of Chesnut St. Boston—a great botanist—a devotee of the ‘Flōwra’ of America” (W. James 86). Here, too, it’s worth noting that in writing out “Flōwra” phonetically in this way, he introduces an auditory element into the letter that suggests he’s not so much registering the substance of Miss Bradford’s words as merely hearing her elocution, as he mimics her pronunciation for comic effect.

And yet—in the sequence of letters I “listened in on,” a gradual shift occurs in Henry’s letters once he settles in Rome and meets many American women with whom he spends ample time. Consider the following situation in which we find Henry himself in a stance of open-minded eavesdropping and, if not actually hearing what others are saying, observing closely as two women of his acquaintance converse:

Calling last evening, by the way, on Miss C[leveland]. to tell her in answer to a note that I would drive with her, I found her mother in *tête à tête* with Mrs. Kemble, of whom I had thus half an hours contemplation. She is very magnificent, & was very gracious, & being draped (for an evening call) in lavender satin lavishly *décolleté*, reminded me strangely, in her talk and manner, of the time when as infants, in St. John's Wood, we heard her read the Midsummer night's dream. It was very singular how the smallest details of her physiognomy come back to me. (W. James 186)

Here direct observation, which is both highly attentive and retentive, modulates into an auditory experience as James's gaze and visual contemplation give way to the act of listening before shading into a distant but still vivid memory of Kemble's voice and face. In this instance, the memory of shared experience establishes a subconscious identification despite disparities of age and gender, which, as we've seen in earlier letters, had occasioned conscious, emphatic disidentification.

During this period, Henry's social circle (as biographers note) became largely female. In addition to Fanny Kemble, James spent significant amounts of time with Kemble's daughter, Sarah Butler Wister; Alice Mason Sumner; Alice Bartlett; and Lizzie Boott, all of whom became long-term friends. Let's listen in on Henry's descriptions of these women as he introduces them to William (and family members listening in or reading along) in letters of winter and spring 1873. Of Sumner and Bartlett, he wrote:

They are both superior & very natural women, & Mrs. Sumner a very charming one (to Miss B. I feel very much as if she were a boy—an excellent fellow)—but they are limited by a kind of characteristic American want of culture. (Mrs. W[ister]. has much more of this—a good deal in fact, & a very literary mind, if not a powerful one.) (W. James 198)

Here James foregrounds these women's intellectual and artistic pursuits (even while downplaying his own), for example, "I lately formed a contract with Miss Bartlett to come twice a week and read *Tasso* with her (delicious stuff!) & this I hope will progress as finely as my inevitably falling into a three hours' dead sleep over my dictionary will allow" (200). At the same time, when he faults these women it tends to be for conforming to national stereotypes (uncultured, indelicate) and gender stereotypes (such as passivity) rather than deviating from them—a striking contrast to what we observed in the instance of the rector's wife several years earlier. Of Lizzie Boot, for example, James writes:

Lizzie is as sweet & good as ever, & is greatly enjoying Rome. She has a little studio, where she paints little tatterdemalion Checcos & Ninias—with decidedly increasing ability. She also rides three or four times a week with Miss Cleveland & a groom—& that would be enough to make misery smile. Lizzie has still the attribute of making you fancy from her deadly languid passivity at times, that she is acutely miserable. But she is evidently very happy & has plenty of society. (188)

And later:

Lizzie still makes one pity her—though I don't know why. Her painting has developed into a resource that most girls would feel very thankful to possess, & she has had a very entertaining winter. Her work will always lack the last delicacy, but if she would only paint a little less *helplessly*, she would still go far—as women go. But with her want of *initiative*, it is remarkable that she does as well. I should think she might make very successful little drawings for books. She has made a lot of excellent sketches. (201)

Whereas in the example of Theodora Sedgwick, William tends to fault women when they fail to measure up against the conventional yardstick for appraising women in the nineteenth century, Henry, in these examples from the time of his Roman period criticizes women when they *do* conform to gender expectations, while praising them when they do not. For Henry, at least—despite the ambivalence of “she would still go far—as women go”—it begins to seem that the yardstick itself is flawed.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most significant shift that occurs in this epistolary conversation is that Henry, in his written dialogs with William, goes from writing about himself, especially his health, to writing about art, scenery, and people—especially women. Initially, he tends to mention women merely in passing, but increasingly he studies them; and he studies them in an increasingly nuanced way—as complex human beings who cannot be reduced to “types,” especially gender-based stereotypes. From Rome, he tells William: “I have seen few new people & no new types, & met not a single man, old or young, of any interest. There have been several interesting women ‘round’—Mrs. Wister being the one I saw most of—but none of the men have fait époque in my existence” (W. James 198); to which William responds as though once again advising his brother on the subject of digestion: “I am only sorry you should say that you have met not a single man of any account during the winter. I am afraid of an exclusive diet of women” (203). Far from being detrimental, however, in a period when Henry frequently references his development as a writer, keeping company with women, and learning to listen to and not just hear (or merely see) them, was as crucial to his education as a novelist as the reading, reviewing, and sightseeing that he documented so meticulously in his public writing.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Curley-Egan; Halpern and Rabinowitz; Hollywood; So and Roland; and Wolff.

<sup>2</sup>In these letters neither brother raises the topic of gender to the level of a subject for discussion in its own right—although, interestingly, both were reading about the theoretical rights of women in John Stuart Mills's newly published *On the Subjection of Women*, and William wrote about the topic in a review essay of Mill and Horace Bushnell's *Women's Suffrage: The Reform against Nature* published in the *North American Review*. Moreover, Henry James Sr. wrote and published a series of articles on “woman” and marriage for the *Atlantic* during this period, a contribution the brothers read with interest if not agreement. See “The Woman Thou Gavest Me,” “Is Marriage Holy?,” and “The Logic of Marriage and Murder.” See also William's letter of January 19, 1870 (W. James 141).

<sup>3</sup>This entry was transcribed differently by Cheney, with no mention of “the great James” (154).

<sup>4</sup>In this period, Alcott responded favorably, though not always confidently, to the praise of Henry James Sr. Of her book *On Picket Duty, and Other Tales* (1864) she had written to James Redpath, her publisher: “as the great James professed to like it [the title] I thought I'd try to suit him; I didn't, nor myself either.” (See *Selected Letters* 100).

<sup>5</sup>Alice James, who was a young girl at the time, recalled many years later that in her father's version of events, he had said to Bronson Alcott, “They are reading *Dumps* at home with great interest,” to

which Alcott had responded, “*Dumps?*” James’s reply, “Yes, *Dumps*, your daughter’s novel!,” together with Alice’s dismayed retrospective remark, “The suggestive *Moods* reduced to *Dumps!*” raises the possibility that James Sr. was taking a dig at Bronson Alcott, with whom he had a rather fraught relationship. See *The Diary of Alice James* (71).

<sup>6</sup>The former interpretation is that of Cheney (165). The latter is that of Myerson and Shealy (see Alcott, *Journals* 147n13). An enlarged scan of the relevant page of Alcott’s journal confirms the difficulty in deciphering the phrase, which Alcott inserted sideways along a narrow margin, working around the line endings of her preexisting entry. Either way, the scan makes it clear that Alcott changed a comma to a period and capitalized the letter “B” so that the insertion is introduced by the phrase (formerly attached to the preceding sentence) “Being a literary youth.” I am grateful to Emily Walhout of the Houghton Library at Harvard for her prompt and helpful response to my query concerning this ambiguity.

<sup>7</sup>The disparity in interpretations of Alcott’s marginal gloss highlights the way different readers may “hear” a written “conversation” differently: that is, they interpret tone and subtext differently, which may influence how they decode letterforms. The inferences we make may be influenced, in turn, by how structures of power such as hierarchies of age and gender are articulated and received, that is, “spoken” and “heard” (or not heard).

<sup>8</sup>By contrast, William criticizes men for not being sufficiently masculine. He describes Thomas Sargeant Perry as “femine [*sic*] to the last degree, but very good at bottom” (120) and Samuel Torrey Morse as “silently blushing, squinting & showing his dazzling teeth in a lady like manner at the head of the table” (W. James 191).

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