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Mrs. Brook: Confidence Woman and Mother Usurper .

Rebecca Berg
Honors Essay
April 23, 1983

The presentation of Mrs. Brook in The Awkward Age is problematic. James seems to have intended to portray her sympathetically. Yet he will not allow the reader to feel sympathy for her. I suggest that James undermines the very sympathy he wants to evoke, because Mrs. Brook would otherwise have too much power. Combined in her are two character types which appear frequently in James's novels, and which I call the confidence woman and the mother usurper. Occasionally, a mother usurper may show some of the confidence woman's traits, or vice versa. But the two types always (with the exception of Mrs. Brook) serve discrete functions and exercise discrete powers. As a result of their combination in her, Mrs. Brook shows the tendency to become a much more significant character than James wants either confidence women or mother usurpers to be. It is necessary, therefore, to undo her in some way, and James undoes her by undermining the sympathy we would otherwise have for her.

According to his notebook entry on the novel, James wanted to include the "desperation of mothers"¹ in his story. One might think that James changed his mind, as he often did, by the time he actually wrote the novel, and did not in fact intend to treat Mrs. Brook with any sympathy. But in his preface, which he wrote after the novel, James recognizes that the 'sitting downstairs' from a given date, of the merciless maiden previously perched aloft could easily be felt as a crisis."² Here James treats Mrs. Brook as the victim of circumstances. She lives in a society and an age where no guidelines are provided for dealing with her daughter's awkward age (the age between the time the daughter becomes old enough to marry and the time she marries) and with her own awkward age (the onset of middle-age). On the one hand, she is supposed to

introduce her daughter into society. On the other, she is to prevent the exposure of her daughter to anything which might spoil the latter's innocence. In other European systems, "girls" are not allowed downstairs "till their youth has been promptly corrected by marriage." "Logical people" of these societies see no need to "sacrifice" their social lives to the desired innocence of daughters; "such sacrifices strike them as gratuitous and barbarous, as cruel above all to the social intelligence."³ In other words, James recognizes that it might well be considered unreasonable to expect Mrs. Brook to sacrifice her social life for the sake of her daughter's purity. Mrs. Brook "compromises"; she does let Nanda into the parlor, but she tries to retain her own social life. The situation, according to James, is an example of "the inveterate English trick of the so morally well meant and intellectually helpless compromise."⁴ James thus implies that "Nanda's exposure" is not a sign of calculated immorality on her mother's part; rather, he treats Mrs. Brook as the representative of British society in its well meant but awkward attempts to solve societal problems.

Occasionally, James allows Mrs. Brook to defend her system. Although such opportunities are rare, she uses them effectively to strengthen the reader's sense of her good intentions. Thus she replies articulately and reasonably to the Duchess's declaration that Nanda is no longer fit company for Aggie, because Mrs. Brook has neglected her duty and allowed Nanda to associate with a young married woman:

'If you're all armed for the sacrifices you speak of, I simply am not. I don't pretend to be a saint. I'm an English mother and I live in the mixed English world. My daughter, at any rate, is just my daughter--thank heaven, and one of the good English bunchI've my life to lead, and she's a part of it.'⁵

In contrast to the Duchess, Mrs. Brook advocates reality, plain and simple. She lives in a wholesome, prosaic "English world," where things are not so black and white that she can be called a "monster." She does not pretend to more "sacrifices" than are practical. She recognizes that she has her "life to lead" and cannot realistically plan to center it completely around her daughter. She is saner and less hypocritical than the Duchess, whose drastic and gothic attitude treats the world in its every aspect as a sinister threat to her daughter's purity. If James can formulate such a reasonable response to the Duchess's accusations as the one he attributes to Mrs. Brook, he must certainly understand and sympathize with the latter's point of view.

Nevertheless, a sinister aura surrounds Mrs. Brook. Despite James's own analysis of her as an exploited victim of circumstance, despite the sound attitudes which he attributes to her, Mrs. Brook somehow emerges as the villain of the piece. She appears to be made of clever intellectual stuff, but of inferior moral fabric. Critics of The Awkward Age oftentaccept Mrs. Brook's villainy as a given, without noticing the sources of the impression they receive. Joseph Wiesenfarth believes that Mrs. Brook's conversations with other characters

admirably characterize Mrs. Brook as an unscrupulous opportunist and equivocator. The narrator does not say that she is one; nobody, in fact, ever says so, But the reader sees what happens from scene to scene and judges for himself. James, in casting the burden of decision upon the reader, makes his novel most objective.⁶

But James does not allow the reader to make his own decision. Everyone, the narrator included, insinuates that Mrs. Brook is dishonest. The other characters in the book universally share and express mistrust for Mrs. Brook. The Duchess displays outrage at the way Mrs. Brook

brings up her daughter:

'Many things have altered, goodness knows, since I was Aggie's age, but nothing is so different as what you all do with your girls. It's all a muddle, a compromise, a monstrosity, like everything else you produce; there's nothing in it that goes on all-fours.' (pp.60-61)

As James does in his preface, the Duchess speaks of the English system for raising daughters as a "muddle" and a "compromise." But the Duchess does not characterize this system as a "morally well-meant and intellectually helpless" compromise, as James does in his preface. Nor is Mrs. Brook the earnest but ineffectual representative of this system, in the Duchess's view: she is morally reprehensible. She shirks her duty as mother: "'Perhaps you consider that Tishy takes your place!'" the Duchess reproaches her (p.62). The charge has a double significance: not only does Mrs. Brook neglect her daughter, but she shunts into the influential position, which she refuses to occupy, a woman who is unhappily married and whose sister is having an affair. In other words, Mrs. Brook knowingly subjects her daughter's purity to contamination.

When the Duchess learns that Mrs. Brook has no qualms about sending her son Harold to visit Carrie Donner, because "Harold's a mere baby,'" she responds: "'Then he doesn't seem to want for nurses. Your children are like their mother--they're eternally young'" (p.57). With Harold, as with Nanda, Mrs. Brook refuses to accept a mother's responsibilities, substituting "nurses" of dubious qualifications. Still more damning is the implication that she stays young at her children's expense, that is, by not releasing them from babyhood. "Young" for Mrs. Brook means "eternally" in the bloom of life and at center-stage socially. "Young" for her children consequently, entails eternal denial of their right to burst into the bloom of life. By

refusing the sacrifices expected of her, Mrs. Brook stifles the children she is supposed to nurture. In the Duchess's opinion, Mrs. Brook schemes to do this out of unnatural self-interest.

Harold himself (hardly a baby, with his "voice of a man of forty"), suspects his mother of hatching sinister plots:

'You're always wanting to get me out of the house.... I think you want to get us all out, for you manage to keep Nanda from showing even more than you let me.... How you do like to tuck us in and then sit up yourself! What do you want to do, anyway? What are you up to, mummy?' (pp. 53-54)

Like the Duchess, Harold charges Mrs. Brook with a lack of true mother's concern. He, too, believes that she wants to keep her children "tucked" safely away in babyhood. He implies further that there is no legitimate reason for her to want to do so: "'What do you want to do, anyway?'" In other words, there is nothing for her to do, that she has any right to do, when her children are absent. An honest mother would not be interested in keeping her children "from showing," and her abnormal behavior is a sign that she is "up to" something.

Even the tolerant, amiable Mitchy shares the general suspicion of Mrs. Brook. She tries to persuade him to court Nanda, and when he tells her that Nanda loves Vanderbank (whom Mrs. Brook is in love with herself), she confuses him with an intricate analysis of his own motives. This subtlety is suspicious. Mitchy displays his "appreciation of her perspicacity with a flush, and echoes Harold's question: "'Magnificent--magnificent Mrs. Brook! What are you, in thunder, up to?'" (p. 85). Mitchy, too, wants to know why Mrs. Brook keeps Nanda hidden away. His first words on coming to tea--and, in fact in the novel altogether--are "Where's the child, this time?" He justifies his question with the observation, "'as the months and years elapse, it's more and more of a wonder to think

what she does with herself--or what you do with her'"(p.77). Mitchy is much more apologetic about his suspicions than either the Duchess or Harold. He concludes his sally lamely: "'What it does show, I suppose, ... is that she takes no trouble to meet me.'" But self-deprecation is Mitchy's style; it does not reduce the significance of his mistrust. Mitchy, in fact, is evidence that such mistrust occurs even to those who do not actively seek ways to make their friends uncomfortable.

Later in the novel, Mr. Cashmore comes to tea and repeats Mitchy's question: "'Where, by-the-way, is your daughter?'"(p.132). If underconfident friends ask the question, so do brash flatterers.

Mr. Longdon's hostility to Mrs. Brook is the most influential, both with the other characters in the novel and with the reader; for it is systematic. Julian Kaye, in an article comparing The Awkward Age, The Sacred Fount and The Ambassadors, calls Mr. Longdon "the narrator"; she means that he is the central consciousness of the novel.⁷ He provides a frame of reference, a value system diametrically opposed to the one represented by Mrs. Brook. Mr. Longdon categorically abhors everything that she is. A lady, in his system, is reserved. Mrs. Brook is too free, too verbal, and mixes herself up too much in the social fray. If ever the reader should feel sorry for her, it is when she is placed face to face with this hostile value system. Mr. Longdon treats her as the anathema of everything he holds sacred. He is self-righteously cold; he refuses to play his part in the social game. He shows hardly even a polite interest in her intricate analyses of the situation. And when she tries to spin out her ideas in conversation, he refuses to make the helpful imaginative leaps that so many other characters contribute to her effort. To join in her clever improvisations would spare her the awkwardness of being explicit and would make her ideas mutually theirs. Mr. Longdon holds himself aloof from any such involvement.

As a result, their conversation falls into a pattern in which self-righteous indifference on his part follows pleading overtures on hers:

...she tried again. 'She told me all about your interview. I stayed away on purpose--I had my idea.'

'And what was your idea?'....

'Perhaps you didn't think it, but she knew.'

'And what did she know?' asked Mr. Longdon, who was unable, however, to keep from his tone a certain coldness which really deprived the question of its proper curiosity....

'...if you'll only go on feeling as you do about mamma. To show us that--that's what we want.'

Nothing could have expressed more the balm of reassurance, but the mild drops fell short of the spot to which they were directed.

"Show" you?'

Oh, how he had sounded the word!....

'The great thing for us is that we can never be for you quite like other ordinary people.'

'And what's the great thing for me?' (pp.148-149)

Mitchy, Van or even the Duchess would make the effort to know what Mrs. Brook's "idea" is, and what Nanda "knew." From there they would elaborate on the significance of these pieces of information for Mrs. Brook or for themselves. That is, they would adopt her original thoughts as their own. Mr. Longdon, on the other hand, with his condescending "and," sounds like a virtuous judge catechizing a criminal on the lies and excuses he has already seen through. Mr. Longdon probably "sounds" the word "show" with a mixture of disgust and complete incomprehension. The quotation marks around the word and the question mark imply that the relevance of showing is altogether beyond his conception. How could anyone be so coarse as to think he could "show" his sacred and private love for Lady Julia? Mrs. Brook apparently does not have the spiritual depth to understand the nature of such love.

Vanderbank shares this view of Mrs. Brook. In the end, he proves that he shares Longdon's value system rather than Mrs. Brook's by refusing to marry Nanda. As the Duchess prophesized, "nice" men do not want spoiled goods in marriage. But Vanderbank is not a mere convert.

Although he all along considers himself an admirer of Mrs. Brook, he occasionally lets drop a phrase which shows his fundamental contempt for her character. When he and Mr. Longdon come in to tea, Mrs. Brook anxiously takes him aside and asks, "'will he hate me any worse for doing that?... . with Mr. Longdon I want to avoid mistakes.'" Van answers laughingly, "Then don't try quite so hard "(p.139). In other words, she is affected. She is unable to please Mr. Longdon, because her manners are artificial. All of her social expertise is useless before Mr. Longdon's standard, which demands real feeling from the heart. Vanderbank's piece of advice, then, reveals that he essentially agrees with Mr. Longdon: Mrs. Brook is morally deficient, because she is insincere.

Young, impressionable Nanda imbues Mr. Longdon's attitude towards Mrs. Brook. Although she shows her own profound virtue in the end by pleading for her mother with Vanderbank, she thinks of her mother's influence on her as a stigma she cannot escape. She tells Van: "'I shall be always just the same; the same old-mannered modern, and slangy hack.... Mr. Longdon has made me feel that.'" When Van tells her she sometimes reminds him of her mother, she answers, "'Ah, there it is! It's what I shall never shake off. That, I imagine, is what Mr. Longdon feels!'"(pp.164-165). Nanda has taken Longdon's and Vanderbank's judgement of what she is to heart. She does not speak bitterly of what "Mr. Longdon has made her feel," but "gravely." She has learned to look from Longdon's perspective; she has accepted the value system which abhors her mother's modern manners, even though it finds her own distasteful as well.

Mrs. Brook, then, is surrounded by intimates and friends who regard her with suspicion and mistrust. They have, it turns out, more respect for Mr. Longdon's values than for hers. The very set of people supposed to be a hot-bed of modern values does not believe in them, and consciously

*Do they
trust
her mother
more?*

or unconsciously, despises Mrs. Brook for living by them. Mrs. Brook herself recognizes her essential isolation, as she discusses with Mitchy and Van the "mistakes" she make in Nanda's upbringing. The narrator comments:

What was in her face, indeed, during this short passage, might prove to have been, should we penetrate, the flicker of a sense that, in spite of all intimacy and amiability, they could at bottom and as things commonly turned out, only be united against her. (p.229)

And these two are the core of her intimate circle! The narrator's "indeed," following as it does the description of her embarrassment as "odd" or "almost ludicrous," implies that after all, her embarrassment is appropriate. She ought to feel embarrassed. With his many auxiliary and conditional verbs, the narrator pretends not to know for certain what Mrs. Brook thinks, much less to register any triumph at it. But he manages rather smugly to suggest that Mrs. Brook is being made to realize what she ought to realize, and that it is natural and normal for the other characters to side against her.

In a novel where so much of our information comes from conversations between the characters, a view of one character, held universally by the others, will necessarily influence our assessment of that character. The other characters will express their opinions; they will repeat, confirm and expand on each other's words, until their views have pervaded the book and impressed themselves into our minds. Nevertheless, one might almost think that James concocted Mrs. Brook's hostile surroundings out of sympathy; that is, in order graphically to show the difficulties that face Mrs. Brook as a mother in the awkward age. But the narrator, not any character himself, and omniscient for all he tries not to appear so,

no

you imply "just" - do you mean it? why?

their judgments are similar - their views differ

*what of James
George*

confirms the opinions Mrs. Brook's fellow characters hold of her.

In fact, the narrator is not always as subtle as we have seen him so far. He does not leave it to Mrs. Brook or her friends to show "scenically"⁸ that she is false; he himself drops frequent hints to this effect. With her first entrance, she shows "disappointment, though rather of the afflicted than of the irritated sort" when she finds Harold still in her drawing room after he was supposed to leave the house. Not only is she so unmotherly as to be afflicted by her son's presence, but as it turns out in the scene that follows, all her affliction is an act. She cultivates the image of a long-suffering mother, imposed upon and taken advantage of. The narrator reports that she picks up a book "as refuge from the impression made on her by the boy" (p.51). She picks up the book not for refuge, but "as for" it--in order to appear so afflicted by Harold's behavior, that she must seek refuge from the pain. Even when the source of affliction might legitimately be considered real, her affliction is nevertheless an act. When she expects Harold to filch her money, she pointedly shows him so:

There had been a bunch of keys suspended in the lock of the secretary, of which...Mrs. Brookenham took possession. Her air on observing them had promptly become that of having been in search of them, and a moment after she had passed across the room they were in her pocket. (p.50)

Mrs. Brook's "air"--already in itself something assumed--alters itself opportunistically. Obviously, she was not "in search of" the keys, but begins to pretend to have been as soon as she sees them. Her swift action is a display of exaggerated alarm; its only function is to show what shabby treatment she expects. If Harold has not yet stolen money out of the secretary, he is not likely, in his indolence, to race her to it--so the swiftness of Mrs. Brook's action is superfluous.

Need to describe it of new more particularly for this subject & hold

no

If he has already stolen money, the keys in the lock can do Mrs. Brook no more damage, and her action itself is superfluous. Harold does fulfill Mrs. Brook's worst fears; he has already stolen. Since the Brookenham household is financially cramped, Mrs. Brook might very well be justified in feeling afflicted. Yet we are not allowed to view her affliction without being shown that it is fake. Thus, the contradictions inherent in the narrator's treatment of Mrs. Brook emerge: if she merely affects affliction, then she does not experience an unmotherly affliction at her son's presence and his insatiable needs. In which case, she is not trying to shirk motherly duties, and has, therefore, no motive for affecting affliction. On the other hand, if she does have a reason for her affectations, then she is probably afflicted, and though she may exaggerate, is not the full-fledged hypocrite that the narrator represents her as. One could have sympathy for an afflicted mother, even if one thought she had no moral right to affliction. But James's narrator cannot resist undermining any appeal Mrs. Brook might make to our sympathies, even though he does so at the risk of incoherence.

Nor are we to think that Mrs. Brook cultivates the image of martyrdom only in her dealings with Harold. The narrator establishes affectation as an inherent part of her character:

define? She had about her the pure light of youth--would always have it; her head, her figure, her flexibility, her flickering colour, her lovely, silly eyes, her natural quavering tone all played together toward this effect by some trick that had never yet been exposed. It was at the same time remarkable that--at least in the bosom of her family--she rarely wore an appearance of gaiety less qualified than at the present juncture; she suggested, for the most part, the luxury, the novelty, of woe, the excitement of strange sorrows and the cultivation of fine indifferences. This was her special sign--an innocence dimly tragic. It gave immense effect to her other resources. (p. 52)

That is, Mrs. is devious in her very essence, and especially in her family--in her role as mother and wife.

So your point is...?

But you don't show this - she is affected by his presence

Misapprehensions of dramatic method here using

I think there is a misreading of the intent of the passage!

It is difficult to sympathize with the plight of an unmitigated villain; yet James wanted to write a story which would "take in the desperation of mothers." Why, then, does James make Mrs. Brook such a sinister character? Why do the other characters, tacitly or explicitly, reinforce Mr. Longdon's point of view? Why does James's narrator promote this point of view? Why does he undermine our sympathy for Mrs. Brook when given the objective situation, she has earned it?

The confidence woman and the mother usurper are both women of great influence and resource. Their union in Mrs. Brook thrusts her into center stage as the novel's main character, and threatens to make her the novel's central consciousness as well.

The confidence woman is not a subset of the confidence man discussed in Susan Kuhlmann's Knave, Fool and Genius, although she does share some of his traits. For Kuhlmann, a confidence man or woman is anyone who dupes someone else. Consequently, she cites as examples several characters who are more appropriately called mother usurpers. Furthermore, she treats the sex of the confidence man or woman as incidental, not as a defining feature of the sex.⁹ My confidence woman earns her title because she is typically taken into confidence, she is typically confident in her own qualifications, and she is typically versed in the devious ways of the world. James uses her as a structural device. Her plotting helps further his plots, and she makes the hero's consciousness more accessible to the reader by giving him someone to talk to. She is a ficelle, as James calls Maria Gostrey in his preface to The Ambassadors: her very essence is a trick--her own trickiness, and the trick the author plays on his audience by using her. She is a thread, a connector; she connects plot events and characters to each other, or characters to the

12
reader. She facilitates the author's task. James recognizes that "one half the dramatist's art is...in a deep dissimulation of his dependence on them [ficelles]."

*
of novels

James calls Maria Gostrey "the most unmitigated and abandoned of ficelles."¹⁰ But there are thoroughgoing ficelles in some of his other novels as well. In Roderick Hudson,¹¹ Mme Grandoni provides Rowland and the reader, who looks through Rowland's consciousness, with information necessary to any understanding of the character Christina Light. Since our knowledge of events is limited to what is available to Rowland's perception, James cannot use a flashback to inform us of Christina's past. Instead, he provides Rowland with a confidante who, conveniently, has known Christina and her mother for many years.

In The American,¹² Mrs. Tristram's passion for match-making induces her to introduce Christopher Newman to Mme de Cintre. She thus sets the scene for all the plot action which follows. Otherwise, how would Newman ever come into contact with the reclusive French lady?

not, double
speaking
fully in
the French

Mrs. Prest urges the narrator of The Aspern Papers¹³ to a bold plan which he would never have imagined and implemented on his own. Furthermore, her interrogation and his answers (pp.18-19) allow James to make the narrator betray unscrupulous intentions and methods without testifying against himself. Thus Mrs. Prest helps James to prevent the narrator from displaying more self-knowledge than James wants him to have.

Yes

James usually justifies these women's presences in his novels by providing them with motives for their actions. He decorates them with personalities so that they are not blatantly functional. But they are not real participants in the plots of the novels. They are generally characterized by attributes which not only enable them to exercise their advising profession unhindered, but also ensure that their involvement

will never be anything but vicarious. Thus, most confidence women are middle-aged and married, though their husbands may be either ineffectual or dead. Because they are past the age of romance, there is no danger that the heroes who pour their hearts out to them will fall in love with them and involve them in the action. Because they are married, they are members of the initiate, qualified to advise the heroes. They do not have to account for themselves to weak or nonexistent husbands; they have freedom of movement, so that there are no complications when James needs them for plot manipulations, or when some hero needs one to confide in.

Maria Gostrey,¹⁴ supposedly the epitome of the ficelle, is an apparent exception to this pattern. James can allow her this deviance precisely because she is such a perfect ficelle. She is scrupulously self-effacing and would never intrude on a plot where she was not wanted. There is therefore no need to make her older than mid-thirties (old enough to be initiated in the ways of the world).

The confidence woman's knowledge of the world equips her with a sophisticated comprehension of drawing-room poise, social perspicacity, and observer's wit. She is thus the most logical person for a hero to advise with. Mme Grandoni, for example, is "highly esteemed in Roman society for her homely benevolence and her shrewd and humorous good sense" (RH, p.92). Mrs. Tristram is characterized by an "infernal ingenuity" as her bumbling husband expresses it (The Am, p.188). Newman calls it "beautiful ingenuity"--at least, before he has suffered by it. The narrator of The Aspern Papers says he "had taken Mrs. Prest into... his confidence" (p.11). Given a knowledge of the Misses Bordereaus which is "scarcely larger" than the narrator's, she has the

perspicacity to know that these proud, aloof ladies will take the narrator as a lodger and receive him better than they did her. She explains: "I went to confer a favour and you will go to ask one" (p.12). Miss Gostrey is "subtly civilized" (The Ambs, p.9) in Strether's eyes, and knows "even intimate things" about him at their very first meeting (p.10).

The confidence woman tends to adopt a bold, often risqué tone when advising. Her lack of verbal inhibition shows itself either in the teasing, chafing tone in which she catechizes the hero, or in her willingness to reveal what might be considered embarrassing secrets of her sex, or in both. Mme Grandoni tells Rowland that Augusta Blanchard is marrying Mr. Leavenworth, not for love of the latter, but because she is in love with Rowland. "'She thought of the pleasure her marriage would give me,'" says the straightlaced Rowland. "'Ay, pleasure indeed! She is a thoroughly good girl, but she has her little grain of feminine spite, as well as the rest,'" answers Mme Grandoni. (p.248). She tells on Christina Light, too: "'She cried profusely, and as naturally as possible....I assure you it's well for you susceptible young men that you don't see her when she sobs'" (RH, p.143). With one stroke, Mme Grandoni thus exposes Christina and gets in a jab at Rowland's gullible sentimentality. She scolds without inhibition: "I knew you were of what we Germans call a subjective turn of mind; but you had a touch of it more than was natural," she tells him (p.247). Such freedoms of speech would be considered flirtatious in a woman Rowland's age or younger--in a Christina Light, for example.

Mrs. Tristram is as forward as Mme Grandoni:

The talk was of many things, and at last Mrs. Tristram suddenly observed to Christopher Newman that it was high time he should take a wife.

"Listen to her; she has the audacity!" said Tristram.... (The Am, p.33)

Mrs. Tristram also teases Newman. She tells him he is conceited (pp.32-33), that he is vain (p.35), and that she "should not be sorry" to put him into "a fine fury" (p.31).

Even Mrs. Prest, in her short appearance in The Aspern Papers, finds occasion to tease the unresilient narrator:

She reproached me with wanting boldness and I answered that even to be bold you must have an opportunity: you may push on through a breach but you can't batter down a dead wall. She answered that the breach I had already made was big enough to admit any army and accused me of wasting precious hours in wimpering in her salon when I ought to have been carrying on the struggle in the field.... I began to perceive that it did not console me to be perpetually chaffed for my scruples.... (pp.34-35)

Though filtered through the narrator's voice, Mrs. Prest's gleeful exag^{erations} make clear that she does not "want" in "boldness."

Miss Gostrey is never so hard on Strether, but neither is she shy of prodding him in tender spots. "'You're doing something that you think not right,'" she informs him in her first conversation with him. Her observation "so touches ...the place, that he quite changes ...colour" (The Ambs, p.13).

The confidence woman usually has a lively imagination. Often this imagination has romantic tendencies. In other words, she has a vision, a storybook ideal, of how matters ought to be arranged. Mme Grandoni, writes the narrator of Roderick Hudson,

had beneath her crumpled bodice a deep-welling fund of Teutonic sentiment, which she communicated only to the objects of her particular favour. Rowland had a great regard for her, and she repaid it gy wishing him to get married. She never saw him without whispering to him that Augusta Blanchard was just the girl. (p.93)

Mme Grandoni's romantic imagination induces her to meddle--that is, to plot, to design, to try to manipulate other characters. Although James made her this way and needs her this way in order to work out his

plot, the tendency to manipulate is a disturbing trait even in so benevolent" a character as Mme Grandoni. It implies deviousness, untrustworthiness; it resembles too closely the notorious "Jamesian" sin of using people.

Mrs. Tristram's imagination and her consequent urge to meddle prove to be a source of the catastrophe in The American. Life with her husband bores her, so she amuses herself by arranging a match between Newman and Mme de Cintre. When her plan falls through, she says, "it was the highest flight ever taken by a tolerably bold imagination!" (p.308). Mrs. Tristram's imagination manifests itself in her ability to reverse her own thinking:

The inconsistent little lady of the Avenud d'Iena had an insuperable need of changing place, intellectually. She had a lively imagination, and she was capable, at certain times, of imagining the direct reverse of her most cherished beliefs, with a vividness more intense than that of conviction. (p.114)

Mrs. Prest exhibits the same ability to reverse her own thinking. She provides the narrator with a plan of action and encourages him to think he will be successful. Later, however, she changes her attitude, and the narrator records his dismay at her words:

'The aunt will refuse; she will think the whole proceeding very louche!' Mrs. Prest declared....She had put the idea into my head and now (so little are women to be counted on) she appeared to take a despondent view of it. (The Aspern Papers, p.24)

It was Mrs. Prest's imagination to begin with which provided the narrator with a plan he would never have thought up himself. The catastrophe at the end is less her fault than it is Mrs. Tristram's in The American; nevertheless, she is to some extent responsible, since

she applied her imagination in behalf of the narrator's unscrupulous ambitions.

*open suggestion
Mrs. Gostrey's influence
and power*

Thus, the confidence woman's imagination, though a powerful tool, is fundamentally a menace. Its flights are clever and inventive but either essentially wrong, or disastrous: Rowland could never marry Augusta Blanchard, because he is in love with Mary Garth; Mrs. Tristram's attempt to marry Newman and Mme de Cintre' results in his lovesick grief, her retreat into a convent; Mrs. Prest's plan sends a scoundrel into the lives of the Misses Bordereau.

Only Miss Gostrey's imagination does not have this dangerous side. Because James does not depend on her to initiate any of the plot action, he does not have to allow her to design and meddle. She exercises her imagination only in understanding Strether and helping him to the expression of his feelings.

*but this
this is in
fact? And
fully applied
only to M.G.*

Always with the exception of Maria Gostrey, the confidence woman is a dangerous tool for James. His structural dependence on her, her lively imagination, and her love of meddling make her difficult to control. The problems James had with her are most obvious in Roderick Hudson, where he resorts to Mme Grandoni as a mouthpiece. She narrates the past history of Christina Light and her mother. Since we see the novel's events through Rowland's limited point of view, and there is no way he could know Christina's past, a narrative by Mme Grandoni seems the logical way to give us necessary information. The problem is that Mme Grandoni's information is too correct. Rowland desires a "veracious informant," and "finds one in the person of Mme Grandoni" (p.121). Her words are endowed with the authority of her creator. His story becomes her story, for the time being. In other words, she has momentarily taken over the authorial perspective.

*up
sheba*

17

This is the danger inherent in the use of an articulate, assertive ficelle. Because she often stands in the observer's role, outside the action of the plot but influencing it, it is possible for the author's identity to merge with hers.

Although James sometimes deliberately allows this merging to occur with his confidence men, he avoids it as much as possible with his confidence women. Thus, confidence men and women play very different roles in his novels. There is a difference in kind between the two character types; and for this reason, it is inadequate to use the term "confidence women," as Kuhlmann does, to designate a subset of confidence men.

James allows confidence men like Ralph Touchett and Rowland a centrality in his novels which never occurs among confidence women. In fact, James seems to take special care to prevent confidence women from exerting any prolonged influence on the reader's sympathies. He carefully reveals them to be not only fallible, but brazen or vulgar or unscrupulous as well. In this way he undoes the damage done by Mme Grandoni's momentary capture of the narrative voice. Mme Grandone may correctly assiss Christina Light, but she shows a lack of sensitivity in her assissment of Roderick Hudson. Rowland writes home to his friend Cecilia:

*Mme
Melle?*

'There is an excellent old lady with whom I often chat and and who talks very much to the point. But Madame Grandoni has disliked Roderick from the first, and if I were to take her advice I would wash my hands of him....I am half ashamed of my letter, for I have a faith that is deeper than my doubts. (p.206)

The implication (though Rowland himself may not be aware of it) is that Mme Grandoni, despite her "Teutonic sentiment," is literal-minded.

Unlike Rowland, she does not have the sensitivity to appreciate the

artistic promise in Roderick. Furthermore, when faced with a mistake of her own (her attempt to match Rowland with Augusta), she refuses to acknowledge it. She turns to arch scolding. "Why didn't you tell me at once? You would have saved me a great deal of trouble," she tells Rowland (p.247). He would also have saved her a little embarrassment; for she has clearly committed herself to a miscalculation. She has encouraged Augusta in the expectation of marrying Rowland. Mme Grandon claims that Rowland ought to have told her he was in love with someone else; then she would not have made this mistake. In her disappointment and frustration, Augusta has made a pathetic marriage to Mr. Leavenworth. Mme Grandon is in fact responsible for this minor catastrophe. But instead of acknowledging her fault, she thrusts the blame onto Rowland.

Mrs. Tristram displays similar brazenness when the marriage she has arranged between Newman and Claire de Cintré falls through. She hardly apologizes to the stricken Newman, but defies him with "triumphant bravery" (p.308). She displays little sensitivity to the depth of Newman's disappointment, admonishing him:

'I have not forgiven, so of course you can't. But you might forget! You have a worse temper about it than I should have expected. (p.320)

Apparently Mrs. Tristram has not forgiven the Bellegardes because they have ruined her game. She does not realize (or will not) that she has played with real people and emotions. And she expects Newman to share her sportsmanlike attitude. "Don't be a sore loser," she seems to be telling him.

Mrs. Prest knows that the narrator of The Aspern Papers wants to trick Miss Bordereau out of letters which might ruin her reputation if he

publishes them. Nevertheless, Mrs. Prest unscrupulously enters into his cause and advises him how to proceed.

It seems, then, that in order to prevent the confidence woman from claiming either the reader's sympathies or the novel's point of view, James establishes her as unreliable, dishonest, or wrong-headed. As Christopher Nash writes, "each ficelle-character...for her ultimate and most decisive gesture aligns herself with the essential lie on which each whole drama hinges."¹⁵ Since James does not always thus discredit his confidence men, one must conclude that not the confidence role, but the use of a woman in that role, disturbs him.

Mrs. Brook differs from other confidence women in one way: she participates in the plot as well as manipulates it. Otherwise, she displays all the traits of the type. James uses her as a ficelle; she sets a large portion of the action into motion with her manoeuvres. She sends Harold into Carrie Donner's arms, urges Mitchy to court Nanda, discourages Van from doing so, and finally manipulates Longdon into adopting Nanda permanently. With her famous drawing room, she also provides opportunities for the other characters to meet with each other and expound on their ideas. In fact, it is at her house that Mr. Longdon first meets Van, his future close friend.

Mrs. Brook has the typical confidence woman's freedom of movement. Her husband is as little of an impediment to her freedom as any confidence woman's husband. He is taciturn and passive. The narrator writes that there is "something in him that... has long since pacified impatience and drugged curiosity"(p.69). He does not even mind his wife's liason with Van, about which he comments, "'Every Jenny has her Jockey!'"(p.75).

Your discussion is
losing direction.
Repeating without clear
objectives.

Mr. Nash?

Recent
factor

But this
is a feminist
(a
definitive)
affirmation

No

22

With respect to social prowess, Mrs. Brook is the epitome of the confidence woman. Her "notorious perception" (p.69) gives her a social sense which is at times almost inspirational. Her husband tells her to "wait and see" whether Mr. Longdon will lend Harold money, and whether they will have to pay him back. But Mrs. Brook does not need much time to see:

She waited only a minute--it might have seemed that she already saw. 'I want him to be kind to Harold, and I can't help thinking he will.' (p.73)

Mrs. Brook's knowledge of character--in this case, Mr. Longdon's--provides her with an immediate answer. She "sees" like a prophet.

Mrs. Brook's imagination is as explicitly recognized as her perspicacity. When Nanda tells Mr. Longdon that her mother said Lady Julia had no imagination, he says, "Your mother then has a supply that makes up for it" (p.126). Mr. Longdon's "then" is significant. At first glance it implies a simple contrast: Lady Julia had no imagination, but her daughter does. However, in light of the opinion just attributed to Mrs. Brook, "then" suggests a syllogism: "if Mrs. Brook can say such a thing of magnificent Lady Julia, then she has and imagination." And Mr. Longdon is right; after all, Mrs. Brook shows she can imagine (whether correctly or not) the style of Lady Julia's thinking, which is so different from her own.

*of what?
Longdon
was not
necessarily
correct*

Mrs. Brook's social powers include the ability to think deviously. For instance, the Duchess does not want people to know that she is "making up" to Lord Petherton, but Mrs. Brook deciphers her movements:

'her coming here [to tea] to be with him when she knows I know--don't you see?--that she's to be here, is just one of those calculations that are subtle enough to put off the scent a woman who has but half a nose.' (p.69)

*But is
d? (not this part)
the point of the
novel - the
it is not*

In other words, no one can take Mrs. Brook in. *This is not "demonic" is it?*

Mrs. Brook sometimes performs social magic with her deviousness.

She is, for example, a polished hostess:

The Duchess...marked it to Mitchy, as infinitely characteristic that their hostess, instead of letting one of her visitors go, kept them together by some sweet ingenuity...and sat there between them as if in pursuance of some awfully clever line of her own, she were holding a hand of each. (p.97)

Mrs. Brook works her social miracles by inscrutable methods.

Mrs. Brook often adopts the bold, chaffing tone of the confidence woman. When Mr. Cashmore comes to advise with her about the complexities of his married life, she teases and scolds: "I've no patience when I hear you talk as if you weren't horribly rich," she says, and "'you know I don't believe a word you say'" (p.131). She discusses his and his wife's love affairs without the least embarrassment. She exhorts him to continue his relations with Carrie Donner. When he reveals that he is in love with Nanda, she scolds him further. He tells her in frustration that he likes her daughter better than her. "'Is that perhaps because I don't prove your purity?'" she asks flippantly (p.138). Mrs. Brook seems to relish thus loudly commenting on her own reputation for looseness; for she does so often.

Mrs. Brook's perspicacity makes her an attractive confidante for the members of her circle. Petherton eulogizes her advice:

'Mrs. Brook's awfully kind to her his sister and awfully sharp and Fanny will take things from her that she won't take from me.... There are people... who are awfully free with their advice, but it's mostly fearful rot. Mrs. Brook's isn't...I've tried some myself.' (p.94)

Mrs. Brook's imagination apparently also attracts advisees. She tells

Cashmore:

'You come to me, I suppose, because ...I've a kind of vision of things, of the wretched miseries in which you all knot yourselves up.' (p.132)

Cashmore admires her figure of speech and agrees: "'You do lift the burden of my trouble!'"

Likely any confidence woman, Mrs. Brook meddles! The Duchess tells

Petherton:

'One can't know Fernanda, of course, without knowing that she has set up for the convenience of her friends, a little office for consultations....Of course we know that the great business she does is in husbands and wives.' (p.94)

The Duchess has for once been less censorious than she could have been; for Mrs. Brook's "business" seems to be as much in love affairs as in marriages. Nevertheless, the principle is the same; Mrs. Brook amuses herself by using people as pawns and moving them in and out of formations and combinations. She plays the same meddling game that all confidence women (except Maria Gostrey) take their pleasure in.

Mrs. Brook also has the confidence woman's usual flaws. For all her cleverness, her perception of human worth is rather coarse. The most valuable, the finest aspects of human nature do not register with her faculties of appreciation, which are not very fine-tuned. She complains of Nanda: "'She's as bleak as a chimney-top when the fire's out, and it it hadn't been, after all, for mamma--'" (p.3210. Her unfinished sentence implies that Nanda has been such a favorite with Mr. Longdon and has received so much attention from others in Mrs. Brook's circle, only because she happens to resemble Lady Julia. There is fire in Nanda, but Mrs. Brook misses it, because Nanda is not clever, polished and brilliant. By

this is, of course, the "fire" referred to

the generous energy with which Nanda handles Van at the end of the novel, as well as by her strong feelings for Mr. Longdon, she proves just how insensitive her mother's judgement of her is.

Like most confidence women, Mrs. Brook finally gets caught in a mistake, and refuses to acknowledge it. Mrs. Brook's mistake is one of strategy. She wants to prod Mr. Longdon into adopting her daughter officially, for once and for all. So she pretends to want Nanda back. But the Duchess, in "the determination of her character," pounces on Mr. Brook who has just entered the room--not in time to hear the new tack his wife has taken. "'Do you, dear,...want Nanda back from Mr. Longdon?'" the Duchess asks him. Before Mrs. Brook can signal him, he answers: "'We wouldn't take her'"(p.299). The Duchess accuses Mrs. Brook of lying, but the latter refuses to accept humiliation. She makes a triumph out of the very fact that she has no plausible excuse:

'This must appeal to you as another useful allustration of what London manners have come to,' [she tells Mr. Longdon] , 'unless, indeed,... it only strikes you still more--and to a degree that blinds you to its other possible bearings--as the last proof that I'm too torturous for you to know what I'd be at!'" (p.301)

Mrs. Brook is clever, sarcastic, defiant, but not apologetic.

She is as untrustworthy as any confidence woman. But she is somehow more menacing than most. She arouses more fear among other characters than do Mme Grandoni, Mrs. Tristram, Mrs. Prest and Miss Gostrey. According to the narrator, there are no worthy motives for anything she says or does. No other confidence woman is such a villain. Mme Grandoni, despite her fallibility, is a likeable, sensible old woman. Mrs. Tristram can hardly be considered a villain when the Bellegardes appear in the same novel. Mrs. Prest is not as morally reprehensible

as the narrator of The Aspern Papers. And Miss Gostrey, of course, is perfect. On the other hand, none of these confidence women is as central in her novel as Mrs. Brook. Mrs. Brook, after all, is a mother usurper as well as a confidence woman.

again - a factor which disqualifies her as a confidence woman

The character of the mother usurper can range from wickedness incarnate (Mme de Bellegarde) to perfect, amiability (Mme de Vionnet). She may share some traits with the confidence woman--age, for example, or social skill--but this is not necessarily the case, and her function in a novel is always different from the confidence woman's. At any rate, the mother usurper is in certain respects always the same. ¹⁶ She is the mother of a marriage-aged daughter. She usurps what is not naturally hers--often motherhood itself; for many mother usurpers are self-appointed guardians. Whether she is a natural mother or not, the mother usurper usurps her daughter's right to life. She is ready to sacrifice her daughter or to use her in her own self-interest. In so doing, she may distort her daughter's nature or divert her from her true destiny. Her influence --over her daughter, or over others is unnaturally powerful. As a result, she exudes an aura which suggests fairy tales, magic, and dark, melodramatic mysteries. She is also disturbing, because she has a larger significance than her direct bearing on the plot. She is the leader, the representative, the symbol or the source of a confederation, a way of life or a society. Weird customs and warped mores seem to rule her confederation. Whether she is a specimen of sophisticated European society in a novel with a naive American protagonist, or merely the leader of a personal enclave, she partakes of a value system which seems perverted and incomprehensible to the hero or to the central consciousness of the novel.

It is one of the mother usurper's most disturbing characteristics, that she seems to be just on phase of a vicious, self-perpetuating cycle. Often, an acknowledgement of the sources of the mother usurper's behavior suggests the existence of this cycle; the narrator may reveal that she has suffered, that her needs have been thwarted, or that she has been exploited as she now exploits her daughter. In other words, the mother usurper is the product of the evil forces to which she has been subjected. She has become their instrument and subjects her daughter to them in turn. As the flowering of a sinister cycle, then, the mother usurper is particularly menacing; for she has within her the seeds of future mother usurpers.

But the revelation of the mother usurper's past makes her sympathetic as well as menacing. Because we know the suffering that has shaped her, we may understand and pity her.

Mme de Bellegarde, whose bewildering, inhuman wickedness would make any sympathetic treatment by the narrator implausible, is an obvious exception. It does not, however, follow that there is no suggestion of a cycle. Hints about the past of present mother usurpers may indicate the workings of a cycle, but so may hints about the futures of present daughters. The daughter may begin to assume some of the mother usurper's traits or to join her confederation. When this is the case, a daughter never escapes fulfilling the cycle except by renouncing, either literally or symbolically, her claim to life.

Mrs. Light, like many mother usurpers, is willing to prostitute her daughter to her own interests. "Mrs. Light having failed to make her own fortune in matrimony has transferred her hopes to her daughter and nursed them till they have become a monomania," comments Mme

Grandoni (p.124). Mrs. Light bestows the unwilling Christina on the Prince Casamassima and receives in return the satisfaction of her ambition. Although Christina tries to assert her independence, she is reduced in the end to the mere medium through which Mrs. Light acquires rank and money. Mrs. Light will not let Christina live her own life, but treats her daughter as an extension of her own..

Mrs. Light's confederation is a purely personal one, consisting of herself and the submissive Cavaliere. It is dedicated to the raising and marrying of her daughter. At first it seems that the Cavaliere might break ranks; for he obviously takes pride in Christina's willfulness. But we learn that the Cavaliere's rather romantic notions are just a manifestation of the strange ideals upheld by the confederation. No matter how willful she is, he will compel Christina to marry the prince she does not want. Her imperious manners are just further proof that "she would make too perfect a princess to miss her destiny"(p.173). Mrs. Light's ambition seems to be the Cavaliere's religion. He is so devoted to the cause, that he will inflict "cruelty" on his beloved Christina, because "it must be"(p.276).

Mystery shrouds Mrs. Light's power over her daughter. Christina has no respect either for her mother or for the Cavaliere; she calls Mrs. Light an "idiot" and treats the Cavaliere like a dog. Yet she yields to some pressure that these two exert on her. The Cavaliere drops dark hints, saying that one half of himself "suffers horribly at what the other half does," that Christina sits under "the sword of Damocles" and that Rowland "will not make it out"(p.277). Rowland does "make out" something, and his guess is plausible, given the personalities of the

characters involved. But no one ever confirms his explanation.

Mrs. Light, of course, is an unscrupulous woman, very much concerned with the superficialities of high society, fortune and brilliant life. Christina, however, takes only half of her personality from her mother. Her other half longs to act out of high principles. This part of her not only dislikes Prince Casamassima, but scorns a marriage of ambition and disdains the life of a princess. When Mrs. Light crushes this side of Christina, she commits her daughter to a life of dissatisfied brilliance. Christina will move in the circles that her mother has aspired to, she will share her mother's concerns, but her discontent will manifest itself, one feels, in predatory tendencies. She is potentially a future mother usurper who will further the cycle of exploitation.

Like Mrs. Light, Mme de Bellegarde sells her daughter for money and lineage. In fact, she almost does so twice. The first forced marriage occurs before the novel begins. Claire de Cintre's doddering husband has died, and her mother seems to think that property rights have reverted to herself. Like Mrs. Light, Mme de Bellegarde is the leader of a personal confederation which exploits her daughter. Her partner is her eldest son. These two want Claire de Cintre to marry again to bring money into the family. Mme de Bellegarde, however, is more than just a ringleader. For Newman, she is representative of the intricate, gothic French customs, and of the alien concept of aristocracy. Mrs. Tristram tries to explain to him the source of her authority over her daughter:

'In France you must never say Nay to your mother, whatever she requires of you. She may be the most abominable old woman in the world, and make your life a purgatory; but after all she is ma mere and you have no right to judge her. You have simply to obey.' (p.72)

Such absolute authority is incomprehensible to Newman's democratic mind. Later, when Claire de Cintre follows orders and breaks her engagement with him, he tries to reason with her. But he finds his arguments blocked by her inexplicable obedience to her mother's and brother's inexplicable aristocratic squeamishness.

Mme de Bellegarde's wickedness is melodramatic. For the sake of power, she is capable of anything, even of psychological murder. And the power she has over her daughter is still more sinister and mysterious than that of Mrs. Light. She is truly, as Fryer designates her, a "witch-bitch."¹⁷ When Newman asks Claire de Cintre why she obeys her mother, she answers, "I am afraid of my mother" (p.221). Newman constantly asks Mme de Bellegarde and her son, "What have you done to her?" But neither he nor the reader ever learns for sure how Claire de Cintre was compelled to break her engagement.

Part of Mme de Bellegarde's melodrama is that her pride, her power and her wickedness are too extreme to be explicable. Therefore, no account of past suffering or of intelligible motivation suggests that she is just one phase in a cycle of mother usurpers. On the other hand, such a cycle threatens through Claire de Cintre, who joins her mother and brother in dishonesty when she perjures herself by breaking her engagement. It seems that she will take on the characteristics of her family in surrendering to it. And she believes she cannot escape the dark traditions of her family:

'There's a curse upon the house; I don't know what--I don't know why--don't ask me. We must all bear it. I have been too selfish; I wanted to escape from it. You offered me a great chance --besides my liking you. It seemed good to change completely, to break, to go away. And then I admired you. But I can't--it has overtaken and come back to me.' (p.251)

In fact, Claire de Cintre does escape this evil, exploitative cycle, but only by renouncing life itself. She retreats to the absolute seclusion of a carmelite nunnery. "'Do you suppose I will go on living in the world, still beside you, and yet not with you?'" she asks Newman (p.253).

Olive Chancellor, despite her youth, plays the role of mother usurper in The Bostonians.¹⁸ Fryer refers to Olive both as the archetypical "Great Mother" and as an example of what she calls the "mother surrogate."¹⁹ Olive is blantly a usurper; for she literally buys Verena Tarrant from the latter's parents. Olive exploits Verena as thoroughly as any other mother usurper does her daughter, but her interests are different. Olive sacrifices Verena to a cause rather than to an unwanted husband. When necessary, she will display Verena before vulgar, gaping masses as well as before those interested in her cause. Basil Ransom thinks to himself that Verena will thus be the crowd's "entertainment," its "victim" (p.355). For this reason, he believes that for Verena to stand before such a crowd-- even once--is for her to prostitute herself. If he is to marry her he must carry her off before she is sullied. "'Not for worlds, not for millions shall you give yourself to that roaring crowd,'" he tells her (p.363).

Olive's confederation is "the Bostonians." It is a circle of women who are silly or misguided, who are "roaring radicals," (p.3) and who plan to reform the morals of the world. The group includes Olive, Verena herself, Miss Birdseye, Mrs. Farrinder and some minor male hangers-on. But the group is apparently much larger; for Olive attends "meetings." These New Englanders stand for everything alien to Basil Ransom. He is southern, much more conservative than they are radical, and emphatically male.

Olive and her confederation are sinister as well as slightly

ridiculous. Howard Pearce, in his article "Witchcraft Imagery and Allusion in James's Bostonians" writes that though Olive and Basil are much alike and his ideas as wrongheaded as hers, he is emotively, imagistically less malevolent.²⁰ Pearce points out that allusions to witchcraft, vampirism and Faust surround Olive. Pearce also suggests that James intended to draw parallels between Olive and Geraldine of Coleridge's poem Christabel. Like Geraldine, Olive is herself a victim, but also a propagator of evil. As Pearce writes, "the danger is the same in both works --that in 'using' the victim, in feeding off it, the wickedly powerful figure converts it to its own likeness."²¹

All the signs of a full-fledged cycle of mother usurpers are present. Olive's bitterness and loneliness, her anger at "the oppression of women" induce her to exploit Verena. By submitting to Olive, and by adopting her attitudes, Verena will become like the mother usurper. She will never marry. She will hate men. She will devote her life to Olive's cause. Verena of course escapes the cycle by renouncing or rather, being forced to relinquish public life. It is likely that in her "private" life as Basil's wife, she will be almost as sequestered as Mme de Cintre in her carmelite nunnery.

In Portrait of a Lady,²² Mme Merle usurps the guardianship of Isabel from Mrs. Touchett in order to sacrifice Isabel to her own former lover. Mme Merle wants Isabel's fortune for Pansy, her blood daughter. She also wants a successful marriage for Osmond. "My ambitions are principally for you," she tells him. Success for her is his success, because, as Osmond recognizes, "I [Osmond] am part of your [Mme Merle's] life," and because "yourself includes so many other selves" (p.220). In other words, Mme Merle expects to derive vicarious pleasure from the sacrifice of Isabel. Later, she thinks,

Success for Gilbert Osmond would be to make himself felt....
Osmond's line would be to impress himself not largely but deeply;
a distinction of the most private sort. A single character
might offer the whole measure of it; the clear and sensitive
nature of a generous girl would make a space for the record. (p.282)

Mme Merle will knowingly sacrifice Isabel, whom she likes and admires,
to the gratification of Osmond's vanity.

Mme Merle is representative of the corrupted, Europeanized
American. Like Osmond, and like Isabel, she has done the rite of
passage from crude American naïvete to European sophistication. The
language in which the narrator describes the contrast between her
American nativity and her European manners deliberately posits her as
a symbol:

Isabel would never have supposed that she had been born in
Brooklyn....It was true that the national banner had floated
immediately over the spot of the lady's nativity, and the breezy
freedom of the stars and stripes might have shed an influence upon
the attitude which she then and there took towards life. And yet,
Mme Merle had evidently nothing of the fluttered, flapping
quality of a morsel of bunting in the wind; her deportment expressed
the repose and confidence which come from a larger experience. (pp.162-163)

James is not being ironic!

The flag James places over Mme Merle's birthplace makes her emblematic
of the American born lady. The terms with which he characterizes the
flag follow the same progression that Mme Merle's character and tastes
have supposedly followed. The narrator shows first a democrat's
appreciation for "the breezy freedom of the stars and stripes," then
a cynic's condescension towards a "fluttered, flapping.... morsel of bunting
in the wind." *→ of which*

Mme Merle herself claims to embody the archetypal contrast to
Isabel's fresh American enthusiasm:

'I am old, and stale, and faded.... You are young and fresh, and of today....I atlk as if I were a hundred years old, you say? Well, I am, if you please; I was born before the French Revolution. Ah, my dear, je viens de loin; I belong to the old world.' (p.181)

Mme Merle's speech is sinister. Her exaggerated claim to old age suggests a dark past filled with suffering. She says in effect that she is worn and jaded, unnatural and ghostlike. She is as magical and mysterious as any mother usurper.

The presence of the mother usurper cycle is esoeicially prominent in The Portrait of a Lady. Mme Merle has apparently suffered a great deal. She is a woman of promise whose ambitions have been thwarted (much as Isabel's will be). She reveals her frustration in her envy of Isabel:

'I would give a great deal to be your age again,' she broke out once, with a bitterness which, though diluted in her customary smile, was by no means disguised by it. (p.184)

Mme Merle has been exposed to corruption, and has suffered so that we pity her, but she has herself become a carrier of corruption. She, like Olive Chancellor, is another Geraldine.

The novel ends ambiguously, so we never learn whether Isabel completes the cycle; but she comes dangerously close. Her own suffering has made her adopt the devious, unnatural manners which earlier were the only fault she saw in Mme Merle (p.178). Isabel has lost her frankness. She tries to hide her unhappiness from her friends. She has become less open, more fearful:

Covert observation had become a habit with her; an instinct, of which it is not an exaggeration to say that it was allied to that of self-defence, had make it habitual....She had learned caution--learned it in measure from her husband's very countenance. (p.385)

Isabel very nearly completes the cycle; she not only acquires some of

Mme Merle's traits, but finds herself tempted at one point to sacrifice her step-daughter Pansy to her fear of Osmond. She almost becomes, as the result of her suffering, another oppressor. James seems to have intended a direct parallel between Mme Merle's relations with Isabel and Isabel's with Pansy. He attributes to Isabel the same envy of the younger girl that Mme Merle has had of her:

A wave of envy passed over her soul, as she compared the tremulous longing, the definite ideal of the young girl with her own dewpair.

(p.488)

*I think this
is a misreading
of the original
text.*

Although we cannot know for sure whether Isabel escapes the role of mother usurper, there are hints towards the end of the book that she may do so.

She regains her frankness and generosity at Ralph's deathbed. And her

return to Osmond might be characterized as the same genre of renunciation through which so many other Jamesian women avoid the mother usurper cycle.

In The Awkward Age, the Duchess serves as a foil to Mrs. Brook. She puts on virtuous airs and pretends to sacrifice herself to her adopted daughter, but in reality she, too, is a mother usurper and uses Aggie as an ornament. According to Mrs. Brook,

?
*awk
transformation
of
self*

'Aggie...is the Duchess's morality, her virtue; which by having it, that way, outside of her you...can make a much better thing of. The child has been for Jane, I admit, a capital little subject, but Jane has kept her on hand and finished her like some wonderful piece of stitching.' (p.228)

The Duchess denies her daughter the right to live her own life, just as Mrs. Light, Mme de Bellegarde, Olive Chancellor and Mme Merle do.

She treats her daughter as an object, a possession, an extension of herself. If we doubt the truth of Mrs. Brook's charge, succumbing to the rampant suspicion of her veracity, the narrator shows us that

one mother usurper may be pitted effectively against another. His analysis confirms Mrs. Brook's:

The Duchess had brought in with the child an air of addid confidence for which, in a moment, an observer would have seen the grounds, the association of the pair being so markedly favorable to each. Its younger member carried out the style of her aunt's presence quite as one of the accessory figures effectively thrown into old portraits. The Duchess, on the other hand, seemed, with becoming blandness, to draw from her neice the dignity of a kind of office of state--hereditary governess of the children of blood. (p.87)

The Duchess usurps the foreground at the expense of a daughter in her prime; Aggie is a mere "accessory figure."

The Duchess has no confederation except the group of intimates she shares with Mrs. Brook, but she represents the continental as opposed to the British philosophy on the raising of daughters. Though she calls herself "old fashioned," her philosophy is no less strange and objectionable to Mr. Longdon than Mrs. Brook's. Nor is the tradition behind the Duchess any more truly committed to innocence than is Mrs. Brook with her lack of tradition. The Duchess's tradition is the French tradition, the same tradition represented by Mme de Bellegarde. The French tradition, as Mrs. Tristram says, puts the daughter at the disposal of "ma mere." The Duchess wants Aggie innocent before marriage. but not, as Mr. Longdon would want, to ensure that her daughter would become a virtuous, victorian wife. Thus, the Duchess, though she funtions in the novel as a contrast to Mrs. Brook, represents only another version of corruption.

The fairy tale powers always associated with mother usurpers appear in the passages which describe how the Duchess keeps Aggie passive. She seems to have the power of hypnosis over her daughter:

The Duchess, during this brief passage, never took her eyes from her neice [i.e. her usurped daughter], who rewarded her attention

with the sweetness of consenting dependence....Her look might have expressed, the modest detachment of a person to whom the language of her companions was unknown. (p.89)

The Duchess's eye contact has Aggie under a spell. Later, Mr. Longdon characterizes her magical control as melodramatically brutal. Aggie is like a lamb "with its neck in a pink ribbon," which "...[has] no consciousness but that of being fed from the hand with the small sweet biscuit of unobjectionable knowledge" (p.181). Aggie does not renounce life, and consequently, begins to resemble the Duchess. Once married, she joins her mother's circle of intimates. She participates in their racy conversation and carries on a flirtation with Petheron. She thus threatens to perpetuate a cycle of mother usurpers.

Mme de Vionnet, another French mother usurper, uses her daughter in much the same way the Duchess uses Aggie--as a symbol of her own virtue. Mme de Vionnet reveals this selfishness in a conversation with Strether:

'I did, I do, want my child....to do what she can for me.'

Strether for a little met her eyes on it; after which something that might have been unexpected to her came from him. 'Poor little duck!' (p.251)

Essentially, Mme de Vionnet wants to use Jeanne as appeasement for Chad's puritanical family. She further sacrifices Jeanne by marrying her off. Both Mme de Vionnet and Chad know that Jeanne is in love with him; nevertheless, they arrange a marriage between her and another man. The purpose seems to be to get Jeanne out of the way, or as Strether and Miss Gostrey deduce, to satisfy Mme de Vionnet's jealousy. Mme de Vionnet asserts that Jeanne was consulted and willing, but one feels that her daughter has accepted the young man for the same sort of reason for which Claire de Cintre accepts her mother's authority. In fact, the

absence of opposition from the daughter makes the mother usurper's tyranny appear the greater.

Mme de Vionnet and Chad, whom she has made what he is, are a confederation for the marriage of Jeanne. Mme de Vionnet is also representative of French motherhood. As an older woman, separated from her husband, as an adultress in love with a younger man, she represents everything unspeakable according to the customs of Strether's puritan background.

Mme de Vionnet's powers as a mother usurper have the same magical effect as the Duchess's. Jeanne, the product of these powers, is the same sort of passive, unconscious ornament, the same sort of polished objet d'art as Aggie. Strether feels "that whatever her nature," she is "thoroughly bred" (p.160). She is even, like Aggie, perceived as a picture:

She was fairly beautiful to him--a faint pastel in an oval frame; he thought of her already as of some lurking image in a long gallery, the portrait of a small old-time princess of whom nothing was known but that she died young. (p.159)²³

Since Jeanne is the product of her mother's work, her picture-like unconsciousness is a symptom of the latter's mysterious, hypnotic power over her.

The fact that we have pity for Mme de Vionnet, because she has suffered suggests that she is a phase in a cycle of mother usurpers. She admits herself that because her needs have been thwarted she is a predator:

'What I hate is myself--when I think that one has to take so much, to be happy, out of the oves of others, and that one isn't happy even then' (p.349)

Mme de Vionnet apparently chose the wrong path at the crossroads where those women who escape the mother usurper cycle choose the path of renunciation. Unhappily married, separated from her husband, she has

been, as little Belham puts it, "'alone, and in her horrid position'"(p.174). Instead of committing herself to a gesture of generosity, instead of, say, foregoing the satisfaction of her own need for male companionship in order to dedicate herself to her daughter's welfare, Mme de Vionnet finds "an interest" in Chad Newsome. She has chosen to indulge her own needs, with the result that she becomes dependent on Chad and sacrifices her daughter in order to keep a desperate clutch on her lover. Thus, Mme de Vionnet provides a detailed example of how a victim becomes an exploiter in the mother usurper cycle.

The theme that James sets out to treat in *The Awkward Age* necessitates that Mrs. Brook be a mother usurper. There would be no conflict of awkward ages if Mrs. Brook renounced her own self-interest and thus escaped becoming a mother usurper. And in fact, Mrs. Brook is as thoroughly a mother usurper as she is a confidence woman. For her own convenience, she is willing to marry her daughter to Mitchy, whom Nanda does not love. By doing so, she could assure herself that she would not lose Van to Nanda.. At the same time, she would also remove Nanda from her parlor, where the latter detracts attention from her. Although this plan collapses, Mrs. Brook does succeed in sacrificing her daughter's reputation--by publicly demonstrating that Nanda has read a French novel. Of course, Mrs. Brook herself is responsible for Nanda's unmarriageability. She has ruined her daughter and then displays the damage in public.

Like most mother usurpers, Mrs. Brook has her confederation. James constantly refers to "Mrs. Brook and her intimates." She is the ringleader or a little set which believes itself the incarnation of modernity. Mrs. Brook is the representative of modern values; she is the modern woman, the modern mother, and anathema to Mr. Longdon's old-fashioned values. She stands for a society whose way of life is strange and menacing to the novel's central consciousness.

The sinister aura surrounding Mrs. Brook derives, as with the Duchess, from Mr. Longdon's (and others') perception of the power she wields over her daughter. Nanda, like Aggie, is a helpless lamb soon to be sacrificed. While Aggie is unconscious of impending doom, Mrs. Brook's lamb "struggles with instincts and forebodings, with the suspicion of its doom and the far-borne scent, in the flowery fields, of blood"(p.181). Nanda, for all her knowledge, is the gelpless victim of melodramatic cruelty.

James underplays those aspects of Mrs. Brook's life which might evoke pity, and which might suggest a cycle of suffering and exploiting mother usurpers. Nevertheless, hints that Mrs. Brook herself is a victim are available to the reader who wishes in defiance of all discouragement to sympathize with Mrs. Brook. For instance, we may consider her husband, who allows her such freedom, to be tolerant and easy going--or, cold and indifferent. At one point, he "looks coldly, from before the fire, over the prettiness of her brown, bent head"(p.72). One wonders if Mrs. Brook's youthfulness and vitality are not wasted on a husband who is "lean ...and stiff" and bony (p.68). Another such isolated hint--this time, that Mrs. Brook is sexually frustrated, appears in her conversation with Cashmore. Cashmore suggests that by being in love with Nanda he proves his "purity," Mrs. Brook answers,

'I see. I might, by the same law, arrange somehow that Lady Fanny Cashmore's wife should find herself in love with Edward. That would 'prove' her purity. And you could be quite at ease... he wouldn't make her any presents!'"(p.138)

Mrs. Brook implies that her husband is as inactive as her unmarried daughter, and stingy, as well. Her frustration on these accounts is surely one reason for her usurpation of Van. no

Nanda, like all victims who avoid becoming mother usurpers themselves, renounces self-interest and withdraws from the world. With exemplary generosity, she urges Van not to neglect her mother. Then she retreats

to the seclusion of Mr. Longdon's country house.

Two character types, then, are combined in the person of Mrs. Brook. The traits of the confidence woman and the mother usurper intensify each other and compound each other's influence. The mother usurper, with her status as fullfledged participant in the plot, removes the confidence woman, with her manipulative abilities, from the sidelines. And the confidence woman's manipulative abilities increase the powers of the mother usurper as ringleader and representative of a confederation.

Because she is a mother usurper, Mrs. Brook is the only confidence woman who is a central character ²⁴ in a Jamesian novel. At the same time, she is still a ficelle. She is a structural aid on which James depends to manoeuvre Nanda away from Van and into the arms of Mr. Longdon, so that these three characters may undergo the appropriate moral dilemmas. But Mrs. Brook is not just a structural tool. As a mother usurper, she suffers needs and pressures unknown to the average confidence woman. So she puts her confidence woman's social powers, and imagination to the task of satisfying them. She is not merely an aspect--the problem solving element--of a Christopher Newman's or a Lambert Strether's life. By acting in her own self interest, she makes herself central.

9/12

Other characters comment frequently on Mrs. Brook's centrality. When the Duchess, noticing Lady Fanny's beauty, asks, "'What can a woman do...with such beauty as that?'" Mitchy completes her idea: "'Except come desperately to advise with Mrs. Brook...as to the highest use to make of it?'"(p.96). Mitchy uses the wording of the Duchess's question to suggest that Mrs. Brook is a center to which a member of her circle inevitable returns whenever faced with a problem. Mitchy in fact characterizes

Mrs. Brook as a planetary influence which draws people into its orbit. He tells Nanda that Mrs. Brook will "attract" Aggie, to whom he is now unhappily married, because "'She's Mrs. Brook's wonderful with wives.'"

10

Mrs. Brook will "'help as she has helped so many before and will so many still to come,'" so that Aggie will become a "'satellite and a frequenter'" (p.367). In Mrs. Brook, the confidence woman's functions have taken on not only centrality, but also the mother usurper's mysterious, supernatural aura. Over and over, Mitchy and Van describe her functions in celestial terms. Mitchy tells Mr. Longdon that "'we're simply a collection of natural affinities meeting perhaps principally in Mrs. Brook's drawing-room.'" In other words, Mrs. Brook is a ficelle who provides the occasion for other characters to come together. But Mitchy immediately endows Mrs. Brook's ficelle-like traits with the mystery of the mother usurper, saying that he and the rest of Mrs. Brook's circle are "'governed...everywhere by Mrs. Brook in our mysterious ebbs and flows, very much as the tides are governed by the moon'"(p.107). Van, too, compares Mrs. Brook to the moon: "'There she is, like the moon or the Marble Arch,'" he tells Nanda. He promises that he can never "'give her up,'" because "'nobody ever did such a thing in his life,'" and because "'she's a fixed star'"(p.357). Van speaks as if Mrs. Brook is a given, eternal and unavoidable. Like Mme Merle, she is not old, but ancient. At the same time, Van considers her to be youth embodied. She has lived forever, yet by some sorcery, is always young. Thus, centrality, and mystery and magic become aspects of the confidence woman's activities which she is crossed with the mother usurper.

Furthermore, the crossing makes the mother usurper in Mrs. Brook as much more formidable as it does the confidence woman. The cycle of mother usurpers of which Mrs. Brook is a phase now potentially reproduces mother usurpers who are also clever, articulate, imaginative manipulators. In this context, the fact that Nanda begins to acquire some of her mother's skills for meddling is alarming. Mitchy and the Duchess comment on this phenomenon:

'Do I understand that Nanda was her mother's authority--?' Mitchy asks .
 For the exact shade of the intimacy of the two friends and the state of Mrs. Brook's information? Precisely--it was "the latest before going to the press!" "Our own correspondent!" Her mother quoted her.' (p.99)

Mrs. Brook has put Nanda to work in her confidence woman's business--and by doing so, exploits her in true mother usurper fashion. When she involves Nanda in intrigue, she compromises the latter's innocence and begins to form her into a replica of the confidence woman. In other words, the mother usurper cycle threatens to generate not just mother usurpers, but confidence women as well.

The powers of Mrs. Brook as ringleader of a confederation seem more awesomed than those of most mother usurpers, because she is also an articulate, wily confidence woman. Mrs. Brook provides her enclave, as well as the strange, unheard of values she represents in opposition to the central consciousness of the novel more vividly and persuasively than any other mother usurper does. Because she is clever enough to make herself appear wholesome and sane, she is more likely than other mother usurpers to capture the reader's sympathies away from the novel's central consciousness.

If we were allowed to feel the pity that mother usurpers usually claim from us for a character who can advocate her values so skillfully, we might well be converted to her point of view. Suddenly, a confidence woman, on whom James is still structurally dependent, would be a main character, would wield mysterious powers of attraction for the other characters, and would control the central consciousness of the novel. Furthermore, we would be obliged to look with rather than at the foreign, subversive world view of the cabal represented by a mother usurper.

James's preface, his notebooks, and the eloquent speeches he occasionally attributes to Mrs. Brook indicate that he was sensitive to the plight of a mother of the "awkward age." Since a mother who finds any dilemma in

a key fault in your reasoning; it would follow that all mothers are, then, usurpers. If so, why the elaborate definition and use of terms?

the awkward age (i.e., who does not follow the clear-cut path of self-sacrifice) inevitable will fit the type of the mother usurper, one can say that James was sensitive to the plight of the mother usurper. But finally, he cannot commit himself to this perspective, and so spoils his study of "the desperation of mothers" by making Mrs. Brook's "affliction" both fake and unmotivated.

meaning

The question naturally arises: why? Why should a confidence woman not command both centrality and point of view? Why does James skirt the mother usurper's perspective? As Darilyn Bock writes:

The coloring medium on which James focused usually is...the mind of one of his characters: either a central character, 'deeply involved' and immersed, 'bewildered,' and 'more or less bleeding,' or a person whose primary function is to observe.²⁵

Mrs. Brook is both "a central character" and "a person whose primary function is to observe." Why, then, is she not the "coloring medium" of The Awkward Age?

It is possible that both the confidence woman and the mother usurper, as women with sources of experience unknown to men represent what Elaine Showalter, (drawing on Edwin Ardener), calls the "wild zone." Showalter explains:

We can think of the "wild zone" of women's culture spatially, experientially, or metaphysically. Spatially it stands for an area which is literally no-man's-land, a place forbidden to men, which corresponds to the male zone...which is off limits to women. Experientially it stands for the aspects of the female life-style which are outside of and unlike those of men; again, there is a corresponding zone of male experience alien to women. But if we think of the "wild zone" metaphysically, or in terms of consciousness, it has no corresponding male space since all of male consciousness is within the circle of the dominant structure and thus, accessible to or structured by language.²⁶

Showalter writes in the context of the search for a feminine language which will accurately reflect female experience. But her ideas may provide an explanation for James's treatment of Mrs. Brook. Perhaps,

especially with some of Mrs. Brook's speeches, he was groping his way towards a "zone," the expression of which is elusive even for women. Perhaps he recoiled into ironic treatment because the "wild" zone was so very alien, was such a "no-man's-land." The problem with Mrs. Brook may simply be that James was a man.

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Notes

1. The Notebooks of Henry James, eds., F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961) p.192.
2. Henry James, The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces, ed., Richard B. Blackmur (New York: Scribner's, 1934) p.100
3. Ibid., p.104.
4. Ibid., p.105.
5. Henry James, The Awkward Age, (New York: Penguin, 1966), p.61.
All references to the novel are from this edition and will be henceforth noted in the text.
6. Joseph Wiesenfarth, Henry James and the Dramatic Analogy: Action and Situation in the Fiction of Henry James. (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1973), pp.80-81.
7. Julian B. Kaye, "The Awkward Age, The Sacred Fount, and The Ambassadors: Another Figure in the Carpet," Nineteenth Century Fiction, 17, No. 4 (Mar, 1963), p.340).
8. James uses the term "scenic" in his preface to The Ambassadors to designate the technique by which he demonstrates to the reader rather than tells him of necessary information. The Art of the Novel, p. 323.
9. Susan Kuhlmann. Knave, Fool, and Genius: The Confidence Man as He Appears in Nineteenth Century American Fiction, (Chapel Hill: Univ. of N. Carolina Press, 1973), p.96.
10. The Art of the Novel, p. 322.
11. Henry James, Roderick Hudson, (New York: Penguin, 1969). All page references will be included in the text.
12. Henry James, The American, (New York: Signet, 1980). All page references will be included in the text.
13. Henry James, The Aspern Papers, (New York: Penguin, 1976). All page references will be included in the text.
14. Henry James, The Ambassadors, (New York: Signet, 1960). All page references will be included in the text.
15. Christopher Nash, "Henry James, Puppetmaster: The Narrative Status of Maria Gostrey, Susan Stringham, and Fanny Assingham as Ficelles," Studies in the Novel, 8, No.2 (Summer, 1976), p.306.

16. Judith Fryer, The Faces of Eve: Women in the Nineteenth Century American Novel, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), has a chapter called "The Great Mother," in which she identifies types of mothers which recur in American fiction. Some of the epithets that she gives to these types are suggestive of some of the mother usurper's traits. The mother usurper, however, does not correspond exactly to Fryer's Great Mother; the latter is a category which includes such types as "the neblectors," who because of their indifference, cannot be considered usurpers. On the other hand, I would not consider the "mother-surrogates" and the "real witch-bitches," as Fryer calls them, to be distinct types. They are simply versions of the mother usurper in certain traits appear to a heightened or even symbolic degree.

17. Fryer, p.182.

18. Henry James, The Bostonians, (New York: Signet, 1980). All page references will be included in the text.

19. Fryer, pp.152 and 172.

20. Howard D. Pearce. "Witchcraft Knagery and Allusion in James's Bostonians," Studies in the Novel, 6, No.2, (Summer, 1974), p.245.

21. Ibid., p.243.

22. Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, (New York: Signet, 1963). All page references will be included in the text.

23. It is interesting to note that the daughters of mother usurpers are often princesses or at least, symbolized as such. This rarification of the daughter indirectly renders the mother usurper's fairy-tale aura more pronounced--for these are always enchanted princesses. See Fryer's chapter on "The American Princess."

24. Not to be confused with the central consciousness of the novel, which Mrs. Brook is not. But of You p.12.

25. Darilyn Bock, "From Reflective Narrator to James: The Coloring Medium of the Mind," Modern Philology, 76, No.3, (Feb., 1979), pp.262-262.

26. Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in Writing and Sexual Difference, ed., Elizabeth Abel, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), p.30.

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Reading List

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Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Innocent Erendira.

Henry James, Daisy Miller.

Henry James, The Europeans.

Henry James, The Golden Bowl.

Henry James, The Princess Casamissima.

Henry James, The Spoils of Poynton.

Henry James, Washington Square.

Henry James, What Maisie Knew.

Henry James, The Wings of the Dove.