Lions, Christians, and Gladiators: 
Colosseum Imagery in Henry James's *Daisy Miller* 
and Edith Wharton's "Roman Fever"1

Dorothea Barrett          May 2014

I

In the first years of the twentieth century, Henry James and Edith Wharton formed a friendship that lasted for the rest of James's life.2 In 1934, eighteen years after his death, Wharton wrote "Roman Fever," a short story that is on one level a reaction to and interaction with his 1878 novella *Daisy Miller*. Various critics have noticed this and commented on it;3 what has not been noticed is a witty reworking of James's Colosseum imagery at the end of Wharton's story, a private joke with her long-dead friend.

*Daisy Miller* is a deeply ambiguous text. The eponymous heroine, viewed through the distorting lens of Winterbourne's perception, seems at times an innocent fool, and at other times a manipulative flirt, but for brief moments we glimpse third possibility: Daisy as an honest, brave, intelligent rebel, making a valiant one-woman stand against the hypocrisy and snobbery of the American expatriate community in Rome. In this reading, she represents the freshness, freedom, and inventiveness of America in contrast to the ossified, stratified, traditional society of Europe, which is represented, interestingly, not by Europeans themselves, but by upper-class Americans who have spent too much time abroad.4 What interest me here are the subtle strategies by which the implied author enables the reader to glimpse his own view of Daisy, despite the fact that the entire story is seen, if not told, from Winterbourne's viewpoint.5

One of these is the naming of characters: "Daisy" suggests commonness, lack of cultivation, springtime, and innocence, but we hear from her brother Randolph that she has given herself that name and that her real name is Annie P. Miller; the positive associations of "Daisy" are immediately undercut and put into question by the idea that she chose to represent herself as fresh, natural, and innocent (a far-from-innocent thing to do). The simple unpretentiousness of her real name, in contrast to "Randolph," implies that the family (humbly named "Miller") grew wealthy in the eight years between the birth of their daughter and that of their son: the post-Civil-War

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1 My thanks to New York University at La Pietra, Florence, for providing a research grant for this paper, and to Beth Vermeer, for inviting me to present it at the Remember Henry James conference in Florence, March 2014.

2 For an account of their friendship, see Millicent Bell, 1966; for their correspondence, see Powers.

3 For example, Koprince, 1995.

4 For detailed explication of the arguments summed up here, see, for example, James himself on Daisy as innocent fool (in his letter to Eliza Lynn Linton, James, appendix I, p. 71), Ian Bell on Daisy as manipulative flirt, and Coffin on Daisy as America. Deakin's argument that James's heroine was inspired by various European literary predecessors is an interesting contrast to the reading of Daisy as America. F. R. Leavis's view of Daisy could have been voiced by either of the novella's main exponents of ossified conservatism, Mrs. Walker or Mrs. Costello: "Daisy Miller's freedom in the face of European social conventions is of a kind that would make her insufferable in any civilized society" (Leavis, p. 166). Millicent Bell combines the first and third views of Daisy in her phrase “naïve rebel” (Bell, 1991, p. 49).

5 See, for example, Tintner, 1994, and Monteiro on naming, Orlich on the lions and Christians imagery, and Page and Wardley on other kinds of symbolism.
industrial boom in the northeastern United States. Winterbourne's name, meanwhile, seems thoroughly to support Daisy's assertion that he is "stiff as an umbrella" (p. 57). Though psychoanalytic critics may be tempted to give Daisy's diagnosis a phallic reading, the less interesting but more convincing interpretation is that he himself—like the European society in which he has lived so long—is ossified, inflexible, and bound to tradition.

Another crucial means by which the implied author conveys his view is the symbolism of the Colosseum.

Then [Winterbourne] passed in, among the cavernous shadows of the great structure, and emerged upon the clear and silent arena. The place had never seemed to him more impressive. One-half of the gigantic circus was in deep shade, the other was sleeping in the luminous dusk. As he stood there he began to murmur Byron's famous lines, out of "Manfred," but before he had finished his quotation he remembered that if nocturnal meditations in the Colosseum are recommended by the poets, they are deprecated by the doctors. (p. 59)

Here the light and dark imagery mirrors Winterbourne's mental landscape. His love of the picturesque and fondness for Byron stand in contrast to his caution about malaria; his romantic pretensions are at odds with his careful pragmatism, just as his attraction to Daisy is at odds with his conservative concern for appearances. The passage continues:

The historic atmosphere was there, certainly; but the historic atmosphere, scientifically considered, was no better than a villainous miasma. Winterbourne walked to the middle of the arena, to take a more general glance, intending thereafter to make a hasty retreat. The great cross in the center was covered with shadow; it was only as he drew near it that he made it out distinctly. Then he saw that two persons were stationed upon the low steps which formed its base. One of these was a woman, seated; her companion was standing in front of her.

Presently the sound of the woman's voice came to him distinctly in the warm night air. "Well, he looks at us as one of the old lions or tigers may have looked at the Christian martyrs!" These were the words he heard, in the familiar accent of Miss Daisy Miller.

"Let us hope he is not very hungry," responded the ingenious Giovanelli. "He will have to take me first; you will serve for dessert!"

Winterbourne stopped, with a sort of horror, and, it must be added, with a sort of relief. It was as if a sudden illumination had been flashed upon the ambiguity of Daisy's behavior, and the riddle had become easy to read. She was a young lady whom a gentleman need no longer be at pains to respect. (p. 59-60)

As Winterbourne arrives at his false epiphany, James slips us the image of lions and Christians: Daisy is represented as a Christian, a martyr, an innocent victim about to be savaged by Winterbourne's erroneous conclusions. One could of course argue that the representation of Daisy as a Christian martyr is voiced by Daisy herself, and therefore, as with her name, its symbolic value

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6 This leads us to see the conflict as not so much between Europe and America as between old and new money, metropolitan and provincial origins, in the State of New York, as David Lodge has noted in his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition (Lodge, 2007), p. xvi. See also Poole, p. 26, and Ian Bell, p. 22.

7 For a fascinating discussion of sexual double entendres in *Daisy Miller*, see Davidson.

8 For discussion of James's use of Byron in *Daisy Miller*, see Koprince, 1986, and Meyers.
is put into doubt. Nevertheless, its suggestion of her innocence, and that of her assumed name, is reinforced by James's use of daisy imagery in the funeral scene.

But, as Winterbourne had said, it mattered very little. A week after this, the poor girl died; it had been a terrible case of the fever. Daisy's grave was in the little Protestant cemetery, in an angle of the wall of imperial Rome, beneath the cypresses and the thick spring flowers. (p. 63)

And, after his supremely ambiguous conversation with Giovanelli, "Winterbourne listened to him; he stood staring at the raw protuberance among the April daisies" (p. 63).

The conversation that separates these two allusions to daisies is a virtuoso performance of ambiguity; even in these closing pages (or especially in them), James is interested in provoking thought rather than in telling us what to think.

Winterbourne felt sore and angry. "Why the devil," he asked, "did you take her to that fatal place?"

Mr. Giovanelli's urbanity was apparently imperturbable. He looked on the ground for a moment, and then he said, "For myself I had no fear; and she wanted to go."

"That was no reason!" Winterbourne declared. (p. 63)

The first available interpretation of this exchange, especially in 1878, is that Winterbourne is a chivalrous man who cared about and wished to protect Daisy, whereas Giovanelli is a worthless cad who cares only for himself. 9 A feminist reading, however, changes the lights: Winterbourne speaks of Daisy as if she were an object to be toted from place to place; her own opinion about where she wanted to go was, to him, irrelevant, whereas Giovanelli deferred to her opinion as that of an equal with the right to decide for herself. 10

Daisy's repeated request, on her deathbed, "Tell Mr. Winterbourne I was not engaged" (p. 62-63), suggests that she was in love with him. If she, the embodiment of freedom, honesty, and independent thought, was in love with the embodiment of tradition, duplicity, and obedience to convention, Daisy's unconventional behavior can be interpreted as a challenge to Winterbourne: she wanted him, but she would not accept him until he stopped being "stiff as an umbrella." 11

The novella then emerges not as Daisy's story but as Winterbourne's: 12 it is the story of a man who missed the boat. Having had the opportunity to break out of his hypocritical conventional

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9 For the contemporary reviews, see Hayes.

10 For discussions of feminism and James's women characters, see Allen, Coulson, Fowler, Habegger, Izzo, Moore, Wagenknecht, and Walton. For feminist discussions of Daisy Miller see Barnet and Johnson. Habegger sees Daisy’s death as proof that James is not feminist: “Why is Daisy Miller the one who dies of malaria, even though Giovanelli and Winterbourne are also exposed? Behind James’s narratives there is found the ancient theory that women are weaker than men” (Habegger, p. 26). But surely this ignores the symbolic role of Roman fever: if physical death from malaria is a metaphor for the death of one’s reputation, on the symbolic level the double standard keeps the male characters safe despite exposure.

11 This reading is at odds with James's own interpretation in a letter of 1880 to Eliza Lynn Linton, but, as David Lodge points out at the end of his introduction, "James was careful to qualify his analysis of Daisy with the parenthesis ‘(as I understand her),’ implying the possibility of understanding her differently” (Lodge, p. xxxvii). It is also possible that James is not revealing all he understands of Daisy to this particular correspondent, who, though a woman, was far less feminist in sensibility than James himself.

12 Millicent Bell sees this as common to three James texts: “But hovering over “Daisy Miller,” “The Beast in the Jungle,” and also “The Aspern Papers,” is the story that did not take place, the overlooked possibility that Winterbourne, Marcher, and the manuscript hunter might have embraced but failed to” (Bell, 1991, p. 26).
habits and find a new and very different life with Daisy, he missed it, and the wording of the final paragraph, almost identical to that of the initial description of him on p. 4, implies that he has been essentially unchanged by the whole affair:

Nevertheless, he went back to live at Geneva, whence there continue to come the most contradictory accounts of his motives of sojourn: a report that he is "studying" hard – an intimation that he is much interested in a very clever foreign lady. (p. 64)

II

When Martin Scorsese was asked why he had abandoned his usual material (bloodshed, murder, destruction) in his 1993 film of Edith Wharton's novel The Age of Innocence, he said that it was the most violent film he had ever made. This theme of psychological warfare, in which the weapons are words, judgments, and betrayal rather than fists and knives, is shared by "Roman Fever" and Daisy Miller: in both texts, Colosseum imagery is used to compare verbal violence with physical mutilation, suggesting that the former is just as effective and abusive as the latter.

"Roman Fever" is written in two parts, though there is no leap in time or change of scene to explain that separation. It tells the story of two wealthy, middle-aged, American women—Alida Slade and Grace Ansley—who have known each other since they were girls. Sitting on the terrace of a restaurant in Rome, overlooking the Forum, they begin what seems an innocuous conversation and end in devastating revelations about the past.

Part I is largely narrative, as the omniscient narrator tells us what Alida Slade and Grace Ansley think of each other and describes their daughters, Barbara Ansley and Jenny Slade. Whereas Alida ("a leader"?) has always been the dominant partner in her friendship with Grace, Barbara is the dominant partner in her friendship with Jenny, and Alida is rather jealous that Grace and her husband Horace, whom she perceives as "nullities," should have produced such a dynamic and interesting daughter (p. 141).

Part II is almost entirely dramatic: towards the end, as in a play, we can only guess the characters’ thoughts by interpreting their speech and gestures. This is one possible reason why Wharton chose to divide the story in two; another possibility is that she used the division to highlight two crucial references, one at the end of Part I, and the other at the beginning of Part II. When she has finished describing the two ladies’ views of each other, the omniscient narrator makes full use of her privileges by telling us that they were both wrong:

So these two ladies visualized each other, each through the wrong end of her little telescope.

II

For a long time they continued to sit side by side without speaking. It seemed as though, to both, there was a relief in laying down their somewhat futile activities in the presence of the vast Memento Mori which faced them.

The telescope image imports two ideas, one involving size and the other distance: a telescope is designed to make the object of gaze seem larger/closer. Looking through the wrong end of a telescope creates the opposite effect: it makes the object of gaze seem smaller/more remote. The

13 Ebert.

14 My thanks to Professor Simon Schaffer of the Department of History and Philosophy of Science, Cambridge University, for confirming this and pointing out that Wharton used the same image earlier in The Age of Innocence: "Far down the inverted telescope [Archer] saw the faint white figure of May Welland—in New York" (p. 50) (private correspondence with Simon Schaffer, 23 May 2014). Dale Bauer is one of several commentators to have made this observation about diminishment or underestimation (Bauer, p. 686).
size metaphor implies that each lady is underestimating the other—that each lady is greater than her friend believes her to be. The distance metaphor hints at what the end of the story certainly bears out: that they are much closer to each other—more intimately connected—than they think they are.

At the beginning of Part II, another striking comparison reinforces the size metaphor of the telescope image. The ruins of Ancient Rome are functioning as a *memento mori* for the two ladies, which implies that they are like the Roman Empire. At first, it seems odd metaphor for two aging widows, whose occupations are knitting and bridge, but the comparison suggests that, though the story Wharton is about to unfold is riddled with betrayal, duplicity, and aggression, it shows a certain greatness in its protagonists: like the Roman Empire, they were immoral but impressive, much more impressive than, at this point, they seem, both to each other and to the reader.

The first intimation of the psychological violence to come appears in Part I:

Half guiltily [Mrs. Ansley] drew from her handsomely mounted black handbag a twist of crimson silk run through by two fine knitting needles. (p. 139)

In an ostensibly harmless and dull detail, a constellation of words ("twist," "crimson," "run through," "needles") signals that violence is in the offing. The needles make a second appearance later:

Mrs. Ansley's hands lay inert across her needles. She looked straight out at the great accumulated wreckage of passion and splendor at her feet. (p. 145)

Here the image of the needles is combined with that of the Roman ruins: the description of the Forum here could also be a description of the two ladies' lives, and the fact that the Forum is "at her feet" suggests that the ladies' position, on the terrace of the restaurant overlooking the ruins, is metaphorical of their approaching deaths; it is as if, already dead, the ladies' disembodied spirits are looking down on the "the great accumulated wreckage" of their own youthful "passion and splendor." When the revelations are well underway, the dialogue is described in metaphors of physical violence: "[Mrs. Slade] wondered why she had ever thought there would be any satisfaction in inflicting so purposeless a wound on her friend" and "[Mrs. Ansley] seemed physically reduced by the blow."

In the closing scene, we discover that, when they were young, Grace was in love with her friend's fiancé Delphin Slade. Alida—aware of the attraction and afraid of Grace's gentle charms—forged a letter, purportedly from Delphin, inviting Grace to meet him at the Colosseum after dark. Alida hoped that Grace would fall ill, waiting alone in the cold and damp, and would therefore be removed as competition for Delphin's affections, but she now discovers that her plan backfired: Grace replied to the letter, and Delphin came to meet her. Although the final revelation has been prepared by abundant foreshadowing that jumps out on second reading, the ending nevertheless comes as a powerful surprise:

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15 For a different and more detailed analysis of this image, see Alice Hall Petry. She notes at one point that Grace is using the knitting needles as "psychological weapons against a woman who is deliberately tormenting her" (Petry, p. 165).

16 This has been noted before by several critics; for example, Bauer makes a similar point (Bauer, p. 685).

17 Rachel Bowlby has pointed out the metaphors of physical violence (Bowlby, p. 39).

18 For a discussion of the effect of the surprise ending on various kinds of readers and a detailed account of instances of foreshadowing, see Mortimer, p. 191-3.
"I don't know why you should be sorry for me," [Mrs. Slade] muttered.  

Mrs. Ansley stood looking away from her toward the dusky mass of the Colosseum.  

"Well—because I didn't have to wait that night."

Mrs. Slade gave an unquiet laugh. "Yes, I was beaten there. But I oughtn't to begrudge it to you, I suppose. At the end of all these years. After all, I had everything; I had him for twenty-five years. And you had nothing but that one letter that he didn't write."

Mrs. Ansley was again silent. At length she took a step toward the door of the terrace, and turned back, facing her companion.

"I had Barbara," she said, and began to move ahead of Mrs. Slade toward the stairway.  

Reading Mrs. Ansley's gestures in the passage, her gaze away from Mrs. Slade and toward the Colosseum simply indicates that she is thinking of the past, of that night, but it also signals the final fruition of Wharton's Colosseum imagery. When Mrs. Ansley takes a step towards the door, it seems that she has decided, perhaps as an act of mercy, to refrain from telling the whole truth to Mrs. Slade, but then she changes her mind, turns back, and delivers the final revelation.19

In gladiatorial battles in the Colosseum, once the victorious gladiator had his opponent on the ground, he paused and looked at the emperor for instructions (Mrs. Ansley's step toward the door is the equivalent pause); the emperor, guided by the mood of the crowd, then signaled that the defeated gladiator should be spared or that he should be killed.20 In this witty response to James's lions and Christians, our two middle-aged ladies are the gladiators, Edith Wharton herself is the emperor, and we the readers are the crowd, cheering the death-blow.

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19 Various critics (for example, Petry, p. 166) have noted that, after having done so, Mrs. Ansley moves literally and metaphorically "ahead of Mrs. Slade" (the latter no longer "a leader").

20 Bowlby's argument all but articulates the gladiator theme I am making explicit here, to the point of using "gladiatorial" in her discussion of the violence of "Mrs. Slade/('slayed')" (Bowlby, p. 41).
WORKS CITED


RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING


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