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The (Meme) Master: James's Afterlives in Viral Satire

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This article explores the many uses to which Henry James has been put by online satire, cataloging James's apparitions in online media since 2000 to discover what it is that strikes contemporary digital writers and artists as ideal raw material for meme construction. Ultimately, I relate these cultural productions to Jack Halberstam's "low theory," defined as "a mode of accessibility" used by scholarship that deliberately tries "aiming low in order to hit a broader target" (16). By "meme," I refer to viral Internet content: digital texts or images that are meant to be consumed for entertainment and passed on to other users as quickly and frequently as possible. The term originates in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), in which Richard Dawkins, arguing in favor of the gene-centered view of evolution, defines a "meme" as a unit of cultural information that possesses the characteristics of a gene. Each meme, which may come in the form of a symbol, idea, style, or cultural product, is not simply inherited (shared from person to person): it also replicates and mutates, and it responds to evolutionary pressures, including selection, competition, and extinction. In *Virus of the Mind*, Richard Brodie stipulates further that these memes are viral: they spread from person to person according to spatial and temporal patterns similar to those exhibited by physiological contagions. A meme, Brodie explains, "is a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that more copies of itself get created in other minds" (11). Internet memes are simply memes shared through digital means, such as blogs, message boards, and social media. Image macros—shared, captioned images that are meant to be re-captioned and re-shared—constitute the most well-known genre of memes, but an Internet meme might alternatively consist of a piece of text, an uncaptioned image, a video, or any other type of digital content, so long as it "goes viral" by being widely shared.

Mememes that invoke Henry James follow other characteristics of memes as well. As danah boyd explains, eminently sharable memes must be *replicable* (accurately

reproduced an infinite number of times), *searchable* (accessed through a search engine), and *persistent* (saved and accessed later) (126). Moreover, they are created for an “invisible” audience because the creator is not sure who ultimately will view, share, or mutate the meme. This means that originary authorship of memes is often difficult to determine, as the viral material that renders the meme sharable, not the meme’s provenance, is what persists over a meme’s many instances—that is, each version or example of the meme. Though memes often mutate as new instances are created, a recognizable core or central idea will persist. Sean Rintel explains that this persistence arises from memes’ *templatability*:

Templatability lies at the heart of online memes. . . . The memetic process is a product of the human capability to separate ideas into two levels—content and structure—and then contextually manipulate that relationship. Templating is the practical, methodical and material process by which this contextual manipulation is expressed. (256)

Templatability refers to the fact that a meme’s content, its structure, or both are retained in a future version of the meme. James-based memes might invoke James’s characteristic themes, his stylistic habits, or both. Others add Jamesian content, structure, or both to a preexisting meme (or other viral digital genre) that did not originally feature James or his texts. This flexibility has yielded a rich, diverse field of James-related viral content, suggesting not only that meme culture has fostered new ways of reading and representing James but also that *Jamesianness* itself is a meme.

The Jamesian core idea that repeats in viral media is not, of course, quite the same James featured in contemporary literary criticism, but it *does* deliberately invoke and transform—into a source of entertainment—the norms of scholarly argument and communication. Rintel uses the term “frivolity” to characterize this work of transformation by memification, but he emphasizes that this frivolity is generally used to transmit important, often quite serious, cultural information (255). In the case of James memes, I argue that the memes’ combination of frivolity and scholarship both renders Jamesian texts amenable to the signifying structures and affective registers of fandom and allows them to transmit trenchant commentaries on contemporary academia. At the same time, their invocation of James paradoxically relies on the very cultural capital it lampoons or critiques. By invoking, *cultural capital*, I follow Michael Anesko’s method in his *Monopolizing the Master*, in which he traces many generations of appropriations of James’s reputation by figures or venues overcoming a perceived or real intellectual respectability. Web publications such as the *Onion*, *McSweeney’s*, *Bustle*, the *Toast* and *Hark! A Vagrant*, all proudly radiating an aura of amateur intellectualism, choose James for reasons similar to those nineteenth-century publishing houses described by Anesko:

James’s *unpopularity* by the end of the nineteenth century was calculated to make him all the more attractive to publishers, since having his name on one’s list automatically would give it an indisputably aesthetic imprimatur, an added touch of exclusivity. . . . Commercial publishers . . . who still wanted very much to think of themselves as genteel (even selfless) patrons of literary art, could sometimes demonstrate a rare indifference to the bottom line. (7–8)

For each of these web publications, this pecuniary indifference takes on its own form and entails different consequences for the content, style, and purposes of its own particular set of viral texts and images. What is important to remember for now is that these particular memetic adoptions of James's cultural capital use satire to comment on the changing socioeconomic circumstances of higher education in the twenty-first century.

The mere existence of James satire is, of course, not new. Anesko observes that "James had never been difficult to spoof" (120), singling out for mention the James caricature in H. G. Wells's *Boon* and the *New Yorker's* 1945 printing of "two satiric little stanzas announcing 'The Henry James Boom'" (154). Like Wells's rejection of the late style and the *New Yorker's* ungenerous account of the postwar James renaissance, general-interest satire sites like the *Onion* often reflect a vein of what literary critics might call anti-intellectualism. James offers digital satirists an ideal prelude to something unexpectedly dim, crass, puerile, or (worst of all) horrifyingly blunt. A horoscope advises, "Though you believe otherwise, it is not healthy to prefer the novels of Henry James to actual human contact" ("Horoscope," par. 7). One of its technology hype pieces, "Stunning E3 Announcement Reveals New Video Game Consoles to Phase Out Graphics Entirely," concludes by pronouncing that "the most highly anticipated graphics-free game of 2014 is undoubtedly Bethesda Studios' text-based adaptation of Henry James' 1881 novel *The Portrait Of A Lady*" (par. 1). In both examples, the *Onion* defines Jamesianness negatively by identifying what qualities his texts seem to lack, such as human contact or graphics, making it appear inhuman or perverse to enjoy James.

The perversion implied by the *Onion* becomes explicit in the tongue-in-cheek digital literary magazine *McSweeney's*. In Daniel Borzutzky's contribution to the magazine's series of satirical sestinas, James becomes a rhetorical pretext for enacting the speaker's own perverse rejection of his cultural heritage. What the sestina writer "most desired, or so he thought, was to defecate on Baudelaire and Keats, a desire / to be realized by abandoning the ideals of truth and beauty, and asserting instead that love / is like vomiting on Goethe and Henry James in the same sestina" (lines 25–27). The author's ability to write allusion-heavy sestinas belies his stated desires, showing the futility of attempts to escape intellectualism through satire. In another *McSweeney's* column, "Dispatches from Adjunct Faculty at a Large State University: On Confessions," Oronte Churm invokes James when recounting an uncomfortable reunion with an ex-girlfriend now married and pregnant: "Henry James knew that if people believe they suffer, they do. It's good news for Henry James, who can then focus his stories on psychological nuance instead of on big actions, like, say, Bruce Willis running across broken glass in his bare feet" (par. 16). Those who read James rather than watch adventure films are presumed to empathize with adjuncts, thus commenting on the changing nature of university employment, whose intellectual joys cannot compensate for the disruptions of personal life so often coincident with adjunct positions. The sarcasm in the repetition of "Henry James" (rather than "James" or simply "him") emphasizes both the adjunct's lack of access to the advantages and freedoms that James putatively enjoyed and the relative rigidity of James as memetic material (see Borzutzky above). From the perspective of Churm's adjunct, James was secure in believing his worldview to be correct and then was rewarded for having freely chosen to apply it to aesthetic production. This interpretation of James's

career underlines the bitter irony of the adjunct's choice of disciplinary specialization, as the more he interprets James, the more the latter is emptied out into a signifier of vanishing privilege.

Churm's students, though, to judge by student-created viral James content, are not disillusioned enough to feel alienated by the aura of cultured exclusivity. Quite the opposite, in fact, as student-created viral image macros are predicated on it and openly flaunt it. Image macros, the most well-known of which are the "lolcats," are simple images that are captioned (typically using the Impact font) using the spelling and syntactical norms of mobile texting (including, for example, substituting "u" for "you" and minimizing punctuation). Replicable, persistent, searchable and templat-able, they are easily identified by their visual signature of unmitigated ugliness, which derives from the house style of the cult online community *4chan*. This new aesthetic rejects an airbrushed, corporate-branded smoothness in favor of a barely formatted, cut-and-paste simplicity that is as pointedly incompetent as its LOLspeak, that is, its captions' deliberate misspellings and solecisms. Many do-it-yourself websites for generating memes have appeared, allowing any user to create such memes quickly and easily. Student-produced Henry James memes made on this site include anonymous instances of the popular Y U NO Guy and the English Major Armadillo image macros. Intriguingly, many of these appear to have been created specifically as a response to reading James texts for college courses, showing memes' ability to serve as a study aide, a necessary break, or even a stealthy book report.

Y U NO Guy, which expresses frustration and anger at someone else's behavior, consists of a simple, black-and-white drawing of an angry man, centered against a dark blue background. A large, round white face with bloodshot eyes and menacing teeth dominates the image, while two absurdly undersized, stick-figure hands are splayed below. The empty spaces on top of and below the round image of the angry face provide room for users to contribute two lines of text. The line on the top designates a person or phenomenon that is the object of the user's anger, and the one on bottom always begins with "Y U NO" and then is finished by the user identifying the offensive behavior. As user Actual Agnes Oblige explains, there are two primary characteristics always associated with Y U NO Guy: first, the use of "carefree grammar as a way to bring someone's attention on a particular subject or issue" (par. 1) and second, the adoption of an illustration from Hiroya Oku's *Gantz*, an image in which the "character's facial expression [is] full of frustration and rage" (par. 2). The particular instance of Y U NO Guy reproduced here (see Fig. 1) reads, "Henry James" in the top line, followed by "Y U SO AMBIGUOUS." This anonymous meme instance appears particularly angry, as one of the standards for these image macros is to keep the text minimal so it remains clear of the image. Here, the bottom line covers much of the anime illustration meant to be the image macro's visual focal point, providing a glimpse into the mind of a twenty-first-century college student reading James for class and using memes as both an outlet for frustration and as testimony to the student's rarified interpretive labors. It provides a visual equivalent of the pop culture humblebrag: a statement that uses self-deprecation as a pretext for self-promotion.

The English Major Armadillo is similarly frustrated but speaks for a very different kind of student, for it recreates familiar tensions between liberal arts majors and their peers in STEM disciplines. The English Major Armadillo image macro consists of a high-contrast, pinwheel-shaped black-and-gray background. In its center sits a

Figure 1. Anonymous, "HENRY JAMES y u SO ambiguous." N.d. Public domain.

photograph of an armadillo that appears to be turning its head to look at the camera. Like Y U NO Guy, the user supplies two lines of text, one at the top of the image and another at the bottom. For the English Major Armadillo, the top line sets up a joke whose punch line appears on the bottom line. Each one passes a judgment on classmates who do not meet the academic standards of the ideal English major for whom the armadillo serves as a mouthpiece. The "armadillo" thus might correct a peer's grammar, deprecate an impressive scholarly achievement, or share a particularly apt allusion, pun, or literary joke. As user Calliope Muse explains for the explanatory website *Know Your Meme*, the purpose of this meme is always to "discuss the quirks of being an English major" (par. 2). As announced in the Tumblr that collects this meme's instances, "We are English majors. This is our meme" (Tori and Olivia).

The instance reproduced here (see Fig. 2), submitted by the Tumblr user HarleenLikes to the English Major Armadillo Tumblr on March 14, 2012, at 12:41 a.m., reads, "CLASSMATE CALLS HENRY JAMES PRETENTIOUS / VERBAL BITCH-SLAP." Underneath the image macro proper, the user comments, "Ugh, and in a Henry James seminar, no less." Reblogged eleven times and liked fourteen times for a total of thirty-four documented digital interactions, this instance bespeaks an intimate community of students with similar interests who support one another via various digital and social media platforms. One reblogger, the user Thedaysmyfriends, reblogs it a mere fifteen minutes later (at 12:56 a.m.) and similarly laments, "My Am Lit professor called Henry James pretentious . . . lol." Another user, Ricksanchezbbqing, reblogs it at 3:26 p.m. and comments, using the same rather unimaginative but nonetheless effective vulgarity used in the *McSweeney's* pieces, "Fuck anyone who shits on any of the James family." The majority of comments and interactions with this instance all occurred within twelve hours of the original posting on the English Major Armadillo Tumblr. The final documented interaction with it on the Armadillo Tumblr was HarleenLikes's reblog to her personal Tumblr, "Peace, Love, Lace," on March 19, 2012 at 12:39 a.m., just five days later. Yet such ephemerality is inherent in all such image macros, which are designed to gather attention quickly and then disappear to make room for the next trending meme. In the crowded world of would-be viral phenomena, this particular instance is therefore a decidedly successful one.

What the comments reveal is that this English Major Armadillo instance, like the James Y U NO Guy, is successful because it reflects, or even polices, boundaries between "real" English majors and their apparently less-serious peers. Furthermore, I argue, both image macros, with their eclectic collections of cultural references, sat-

Figure 2. Anonymous, "Classmate Calls Henry James 'PREtentious' verbal bitch-slap." N.d. Public domain.

isfy the demands of Halberstam's description of low theory as "a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to conform to hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory" (16). But the Armadillo instance—unlike the instance of the Y U SO AMBIGUOUS meme, whose anger was directed at James or the creator's inability to interpret a James text—instead aims its frustration at a fellow classmate in defense of James, successfully engages a community, and prompts a digital conversation. For English Major Armadillo, taking James seriously becomes a token of one's superior learnedness; the modern English major must, first, understand and enjoy James, and, second, know how to express this enjoyment humorously in viral form—suggesting that many James memes, far from merely iterating tired clichés, engage in practices of self-referentiality and symbolic play that are present in James texts themselves. For instance, a few months later, on June 6, 2012, HarleenLikes reblogged, from the Tumblr user transparent vignettes, the famous 1860 Newport photo of James in a thick coat toying with a glove and looking thoughtfully to the left. As Leon Edel notes, this portrait, deliberately "posed in imitation of Titian's *Man with Glove* in the Louvre" (178), is commonly reproduced in James biographies, suggesting that our scholarship participates in memetic processes such as persistence and templatability.

Unlike (most) scholarship, however, the same intentionally shocking vulgarity of the *McSweeney's* pieces is evident in these memes as well. "I appreciate Henry James," this visual rhetoric suggests, "but I am also cool." The distance between the winking vulgarity of these digital productions and James's reputation for indirection and discretion indicates that liking James does not necessarily entail inheriting his putative conservatism and prudery. Meming your love of James may thus seem akin to putting on a leather jacket before breaking out your rare first edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* at a café patio, but—when linked to the real process of interpreting James texts, as is true of these students producing memes while reading texts for class—it is also a creative act of literary criticism. Linking James to sex, violence, and insouciance is a testament not of rejection of James but of the Tumblr user's superior interpretation of his texts, of having been readers on whom nothing is lost. Frivolity and scholarship combine in these memes, making fandom not simply pleasurable but indeed culturally productive by resisting reductive contemporary narratives of education that emphasize vocational training and skills acquisition.

More sustained than these ephemeral image macros, a cluster of self-consciously literary sites—many of which are explicitly satirical and/or feminist—provide digital platforms for alternative modes of scholarship. The feminist sites often agree with critics who praise James's portrayal of women, but they structure these arguments through the tropes of viral culture. *Bustle*'s "10 of the Most Stylish Literary Heroines of the 20th Century" first singles out Henry James as a fabulous dressmaker. In this listicle, Caroline Goldstein praises Milly Theale's nonconformist style. Similar to the English majors using memes to draw attention to their own superior reading tastes, Goldstein praises Milly's superiority to her peers. She argues,

this early 20th century New Yorker is a truly independent woman . . . a foremother to us modern city dwellers' penchant for monochromatic dressing. Rather than austere or stuffy, Milly's pointedly understated dress provides a grown-up foil to her pastel-clad peers. (par. 5)

Yet, unlike these boastful English majors, Goldstein admits,

I do find navigating Henry James's esoteric, academic prose a satisfying feat—but what propelled me through his novel *The Wings of the Dove* was less the dense passages on social politics than it was absorbing Milly Theale's turn-of-the-century sophistication. (par. 1)

This subversive frivolity attempts to forge new ways to appreciate and interpret James. Even when fans of James simplify their reactions to his works to amplify the memetic qualities of their own digital productions, they do not categorically reject the moral, aesthetic, and intellectual hierarchies his texts delineate. Rather, when they express frustration at the difficulties of interpretation, they also posit that solutions can be generated not solely through traditional scholarship but also through viral digital production.

In practice, these solutions look very different from one another. Kate Beaton's popular web comic, *Hark! A Vagrant*, which uses a feminist approach to rewrite scenes from literary and cultural history, features a fascinating seven-part series, "A Book by its Edward Gorey Cover." In each iteration of the series, Beaton reproduces four to six cover illustrations Gorey drew for Doubleday paperbacks in the 1950s then, for each cover, writes three further panels based on the Gorey image alone (not the book itself). *What Maisie Knew*, the very first strip in the first series, literalizes the novel's celebrated gaps and silences (see Fig. 3). *What Maisie Knew* shows Maisie sitting in a chair, clad in a white nightgown with a book open on her lap, while in the corner stand a man and woman in intense colloquy. Maisie's body faces outward, toward the readers, but her head tilts toward the interlocutors, so her face is visible only in profile. The second and third panels zoom in on the Gorey cover to add further detail without changing anything from the original illustration. But in the final panel, Beaton turns Maisie's head so that we can see her face, with its uncertain expression and grimace, full of character as opposed to the blank innocence of Gorey's Maisie.

This moment of feminist mutation of this meme isn't just replication; it is a change, and with a purpose. The thickly scribbled bars over the dialogue reproduce the sense that it is James who censors. Maisie's expression assures us that she knows

Figure 3. Kate Beaton, "A Book by its Gorey Cover."
30 Jan. 2010. Used with permission from the artist.

something sinister is going on, though the literal meaning has been shielded from her—yet Beaton also leaves open the possibility that the censorship has occurred after-the-fact, after Maisie has heard or known. If that is true, both the truth and Maisie's full knowledge of it have been censored, obliterated from *our* gaze. Presumably, Beaton has written, then scribbled out, the unexpurgated text, thereby placing readers of her comic into Maisie's position. This equivocation amounts to a fairly sophisticated understanding of *What Maisie Knew*'s complex epistemology. Unlike many other satiric digital appropriations of James's work, Beaton's comic strip preserves the text's ambiguity, placing this indecision at the heart of the meme itself, rather than generating a punch line by pretending to recover the truth. In Halberstam's terms, this low theory in meme form permits the "theorization of alternatives within an undisciplined zone of knowledge production" (17). In terms of the web comic, the visual naiveté conveyed by Beaton's scribbled pen-and-ink simplicity reiterates that interpretation is the reader's own creation and responsibility, but it also suggests that the question of interpretation, rendered through the unfettered imagination of a child—rather than a particular answer in the hands of an authorized critic—is the true point of interest. The web comic thus highlights the process of thinking, of censoring, of thinking about censoring—not the salacious meaning itself, which Beaton represents as *too* clearly known from the few words that remain legible.

Taking the opposite approach of *Hark! A Vagrant*, Paul La Farge's satirical piece for the *Paris Review* completes *The Ambassadors* by supplying twelve scenes that were putatively deleted for being NSFW ("not safe for work"). This very much indeed NSFW piece uncannily supplies pornographic interludes that are, like those in Beaton's comic strip, all too easily guessed. Respondents in the comments section fall into three groups: those who are disgusted, those who are highly amused (a group into which I would classify Beaton, as she parodies failed attempts at censorship), and those who protest that they are not prudes yet condemn La Farge's exercise as a travesty of James's style. It is not lechery or profanity that truly offends readers of the *Paris Review* but the implication that readers require a translator, not being able to supply the subtext themselves. James's own alleged asexuality would become the reader's inability to perform literary criticism—and both situations are intolerable to the readers of the *Paris Review* and *McSweeney's*, whose academic pride represents a post-graduation continuation of the English major identity embodied by the student-produced image macros.

Ultimately, then, it is not James's lack of appeal in the digital age that is posited when *McSweeney's* recommends adding an exclamation point to jazz up "*The Henry James Review!*" (Gibbon, par. 2). What is posited here is our own apparent seriousness—but so is the implication that we are not completely irredeemable. We are not to be insulted when *McSweeney's* winkingly demands that each finishing-school graduate "should have a stocked library consisting of mostly Henry James, Emily Post, and one copy of a book about fly fishing to relate to the common man" (Thompson, par. 6). The joke is on those who cannot identify the allusion, on the people who reduce James to a signifier of gentility that is as prescriptively classist as Emily Post and whose aura of remote authority and superiority can only be offset by the presence of banal, self-help bestsellers. Again, as in the image macros, what is at stake is the right way to read James.

This "right way" is sometimes scholarly in nature—a question of correct interpretation—but at other times is more about the affective or aesthetic experience of reading James or embodying Jamesian principles. In fact, many of these satirists express a desire to be "stuck in a James novel," including the well-read escort of *McSweeney's*, Miss Bianca, who loves Dublin because "[e]veryone speaks like they're stuck in a Henry James novel. They use the word 'grand' without irony" (par. 8). Like Churm's adjunct, Miss Bianca's vocational choices are contextualized in the ongoing casualization of the academic workforce, as she expresses dismay at the disjunction between the high cost of her degree program and her lack of job prospects. Miss Bianca is an academic demimondaine; she is Daisy Miller, reimagined as a failed doctoral candidate. Trying to manage her career as an amateur scholar, she can no longer access the undergraduate protections of the English Major Armadillo nor yet summon the disinterested rage of the *Paris Review's* readers, who contribute to the comments section after a day of salaried labor. James allusions serve her as a talisman to ward off our judgments regarding her choice of profession. In this installment of Miss Bianca's memoirs, "Column 4: Conor, The Boyfriend," she invokes James to prove that she is worthy of the titular Conor with his four university degrees and to remind us of the crisis in academic employment that so unfunnily lurks in the background.

On the beloved feminist satire site the *Toast*, Arielle Zibrak also desires to be stuck in a James novel. Her listicle, "How to Tell if You Are in a James Novel," breaks down characteristic James plots and characters, showing her skill and depth of reading by rendering his works shockingly simple. In each of the twenty-two entries, the reader's pleasure derives from the frisson of sudden recognition. "You've done something in a piazza that renders you unfit for polite company" (par. 1) and "Either your taste is impeccable and everything you touch becomes a magisterial work of art or your taste is atrocious and everyone who visits your house is horrified into a terse silence" (par. 2) are instantly recognizable. The listicle invites us to select our Jamesian fate, as we test our readerly mettle for identifying Jamesian plots. Yet, as the listicle proceeds, increasingly, it is the paralyzing indecision that so many works could fit under this umbrella ("You are driven by a single, indiscernible desire" [par. 15] or "If only someone would die, you'd get everything you've ever wanted" [par. 18]). The penultimate entry, "You may be someone else who the narrator is referring to and you may also be yourself; it is impossible to say at this juncture just who 'you' are" (par. 21), cannily and efficiently pinpoints the shading of James's psychological realism into modernism. For some of the other viral texts we've looked at, the punch

line is, essentially, “Gee, whiz, isn’t it hard to read Henry James?” This banal observation is followed by a judgment either of those who understand James or those who do not. But Zibrak’s listicle is as virtuosic a reading performance as Beaton’s comic strip. Ambiguity, snobbery, materialism, and marital drama combine in each item of this listicle, adding up to what is a not terribly inaccurate summary of how in James’s works personal identities and desires are compromised yet clarified as individuals navigate particular social networks, leading to moments of profound personal crisis that are invisible to those around them.

A deep appreciation for Jamesian modes of representation is behind these digital afterlives. The glib tropes, the affectionate caricatures, the jockeyings for cultural capital: all mask how these online satirists are as desperate for knowledge as Maggie Verver, only they build humor by embedding the complexities and ambiguities of a James novel inside the obviousness and iterative complacencies of Internet culture. By doing so, the memes’ facile precocity may appear shallow, short-circuited, played for cheap laughs. But its showy knowingness matures in many of the cases we have examined into a pleasurable, though not simple, engagement in metadiscourse that productively rejects some of the methods and conclusions of late-twentieth-century literary theory. As McKenzie Wark, engaging Halberstam’s low theory, argues,

Rather than imagine theory as a policing faculty flying high as a drone over all the others, a low theory is interstitial, its labor communicative rather than controlling. . . . It refracts affects, perceptions, and concepts from one domain of labor to another using whatever apparatus is to hand. The verification of whether a concept holds, or a story applies, is specific to each labor process. Theory proposes; practice disposes. (218)

In the present context, Wark’s broaching of labor issues emphasizes the importance of the academic labor issues experienced by Churm’s adjunct and Miss Bianca for their Jamesian interpretations. Churm’s adjunct and Miss Bianca, as well as the other non-academic writers I discuss here, destabilize the collegiate labor networks of literary criticism, forging a popular critical practice within twenty-first-century viral culture.

This popular critical practice transcends the frivolity of its own individual instances. Turning again to the *Toast* will, for example, help us tease out the gender politics that underlay the mocking, tongue-in-cheek approach that—to use Hegel’s dialectical terminology—negates James but preserves him at a higher level. One *Toast* article in particular emphasizes the inseparability of James and Wharton in the minds of educated, digitally minded young women in the early twenty-first century. This article mimes Wharton as she critiques Starbucks’ refreshments for not rivaling the “phosphates I enjoyed in my motor travels with Henry James” (Zibrak, “Wharton” par. 9). James here functions simply—as a celebrity sighting, as Wharton’s own canny “name-dropping”—but profoundly, as it proleptically imagines a future when digital restaurant reviews written by the *Toast* readers will in hindsight prove an urbanity similar to Wharton’s. This name-dropping works to center Wharton by decentering James; it takes him granted as a given but refuses to discuss James *qua* James. He is invoked as a marker of quality and then quickly left behind by a memetic—a replicated, persistent, searchable, and templated—feminist act of decentering.

Such a move often appears when scholars take to public writing in these digital venues. Anne Boyd Rioux, University of New Orleans professor and biographer of Constance Fenimore Woolson, has been leveraging the *Toast*'s popularity with educated young women by using viral satire as what in the classroom we call pedagogy but outside of it call public outreach. On the *Toast*, Rioux calls the attention of readers of *Jane Eyre* and *Little Women* to "Eight Classic Female Bildungsroman You Should Know About if You Don't Already." Woolson's bestselling *Anne* is recommended in this listicle precisely for being similar to a James novel—for each being a mutation of each other, to employ meme terminology. In "Women Writers You Should Know: Constance Fenimore Woolson," another piece for the *Toast* carefully crafted to emphasize its meme-like qualities, Rioux debunks familiar James stories to educate her reader about Woolson. As scholars, we are more likely to turn first to her excellent biography, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist*, but this kind of public outreach through viral media—on sites that provide the digital infrastructures for readers to share accessible public scholarship in the same way they would cat videos—is crucial for recovery projects to go beyond the scholarly community. Rioux is contributing to such processes by producing scholarship in a continuum of genres spanning from Rioux's traditional scholarship to her quasi-academic digital newsletter, *The Bluestocking Bulletin*, and finally to her pieces for popular digital platforms.

Other pieces on the *Toast* are more plainly oppositional than Rioux's patient correction of historical gaps. James's opinions are quoted as a pretext for feminist intervention. One link roundup quotes his *bon mot* that Isabella Stewart Gardner "is not a woman, she is a locomotive—with a Pullman car attached" (qtd. in Cliffe, par. 13). Another article quotes his dismissal of the circle around African-American sculptor Edmonia Lewis as "the white marmorean flock" (Lavin, par. 9). These gems provide irresistible calls-to-action for digital cultural producers who are creating a highly entertaining body of populist feminist scholarship. For a nineteenth-century female artist to have been insulted by James is the ultimate marker of unsung skill and sophistication, and for a contemporary feminist, to satirize James is to chip away at the misogyny of viral Internet culture. This "low theory" looks somewhat like our scholarship—engaging with letters, notebooks, fiction, and nonfiction; digging into the archives for neglected art and artists; analyzing James's refusals to yield simple truths. Much of this meme culture, in other words, relies on the same foundational literary values that drove us to become James scholars.

Admittedly, the *Toast* is the same website that helpfully glosses the "Modern Library's Top 100 Novels" according to whether they appeal to "jocks or nerds." Number 26 (*The Wings of the Dove*) and number 27 (*The Ambassadors*) are for nerds rather than jocks (Stern). Number 32 (*The Golden Bowl*) is as yet unglossed, although we can be fairly sure as to where this process is going. But it's important to remember that "nerd" is an honorific on such sites. This is one moment when the oppositional politics of the *Toast* shifts to enfold James into its own flock, resembling the Y U NO Guy and English Major Armadillo memes. Literary types stick together even if James was catty about female artists. Despite the caricatures embedded in these works, the authors of such viral satire are typically generous, usually sharp readers, and always insightful about James's appeal in the twenty-first century. James becomes the ultimate gadfly but in being so reduced remains not just a major touchstone: he's a *fun* touchstone, both radiating and provoking a delicious, high-brow bitchiness

that gratifies highly literate readers after work or before class. Unfortunately, the *Toast* is shuttering soon due to the impossibility of managing the finances of such a site in an era of declining ad revenues. But even if the *Toast* must close, other sites flaunt a similar relationship to James, and more image macros will continue to provide convenient templates for twenty-first century James fan communities to express themselves, just as sites like the *Onion* and *McSweeney's* will undoubtedly continue to feature Jamesian content.

During a conversation with John Carlos Rowe in April 2015, he exhorted me by way of a stirring Strether-to-Little-Bilham speech that I can't help but think he's given a few times before. Its essential message was that rising generations of scholars must take the responsibility to keep people reading James, to keep him in print. In this article, I have tried to establish that Henry James is very much alive in the visual culture and rhetorical figures through which he circulates digitally. But my secondary purpose is to emphasize that this public community interested in James needs from us our critique of the master narrative of James. It needs our queered, postmodernized, and globalized James. If we apply Brodie's definition stringently, the meme—the “unit of information”—is simply the *idea* that animates or informs the image, string of text, or video clip that is casually assumed to be meme. In this sense, it is the idea of mastery that is mimetic in James: mastery *is* what makes him viral. But each meme, as we have seen, endures transformations, and this one is ready for a mutation: a recognition that the mastery resides, fundamentally, in fostering innumerable future interpretations.

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