

Gianna Fusco, "Merton Densher and Heteronormative Masculinity at the Turn of the Century." *Tracing Henry James*. Ed. Melanie H. Ross and Greg W. Zacharias. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008. 110-123.

Merton Densher's heterosexual relationship with Kate Croy in *The Wings of the Dove* makes him apparently less vulnerable to the imputation of the kind of marginality which in the recent past has drawn considerable critical attention to other Jamesian male characters. At the same time, he shares some of the features that determine their exclusion from the hegemonic model of male behavior. These include his passivity, that is his predilection for being an observer rather than an actor, and his lack of interest in economic competition, which were both regarded in Victorian culture as indexes of sexual inadequacy. Both these aspects of Densher's personality are symmetrically balanced in the novel by Kate's remarkable energy, what he calls "her pure talent for life," and by her desire for money. In this context, Densher's evolution along the length of the novel represents an attempt to construct his own gender identity by consciously adhering to only some of the attributes defining hegemonic masculinity without losing the privileges traditionally accorded to men in the hierarchical gender system that, though hotly debated, still dominates the society he lives in. (111)

Merton Densher must negotiate his role as a young man in a circle of social acquaintances and personal relations dominated by strong women, the so-called "circle of petticoats" whose non-conventional gender identity is marked either by a tangible economic independence [Milly and Mrs. Lowder], or by the refusal to accept one's dependence as the female condition or norm in society [Kate Croy and Susan, a self-sufficient professional writer]. This involvement in an almost exclusively female circle of acquaintances... constitutes the first phase of Densher's structuring of his own masculinity, a phase characterized by his growing submissiveness to the maneuvers through which the women who surround him attempt to establish their power. (112)

This condition of passive acquiescence... becomes unbearable and exasperating during his sojourn in Venice. ... Densher feels like an object disposed of by Kate who has turned him over to her aunt so that she can dispose of him in her turn, with Mrs. Stringham's complicity, in order to make Milly's dream of love come true. ... As a reaction to his deeply frustrating situation, Densher resorts to the imposition of his sexual, as opposed to Kate's platonic and intellectual, desire as a test in order to assess and reaffirm his residual willpower. ... he tries to reassure himself regarding his persisting capacity for exercising a male role stereotypically defined in terms of a strong and aggressive heterosexual drive together with the wielding of authority over a clearly defined feminine sphere.

Kyoko Miyabe, "Milly Theale and the Two Paintings in *The Wings of the Dove*"

<http://mockingbird.creighton.edu/english/Miyable.htm>

Milly's concern for her self-presentation culminates in the grand party scene at Palazzo Leporelli where Susan Stringham's comment invokes the Veronese painting. Milly makes a dazzling appearance at this party in her 'wonderful white dress' instead of 'her almost monastic, her hitherto inveterate black' (WD 370), adorned with her exquisite pearls, which she holds, 'vaguely fingering and entwining a part of it' (WD 373). Everything about Milly's appearance and gesture seems to be calculated to have a certain effect, and it certainly does on Densher, who, up to this point, has not taken the slightest interest in her because his feelings 'were all for Kate, without a feather's weight to spare' (WD 363). Densher's resolute dedication toward Kate starts to dwindle as he slips out of his complete alignment with her. Densher begins to observe and compare the two women from a more

disinterested point of view. He remarks that Milly looks ‘different, younger, fairer’ (WD 372) and that ‘Kate was somehow—for Kate—wanting in lustre’ and ‘[a]s a striking young presence she was practically superseded’ (WD 372) by their friend. Milly is at her highest point when James describes how Kate and Densher look at her together:

She turned her head to where their friend was again in range, and it made him turn his, so that they watched a minute in concert. Milly, from the other side, happened at the moment to notice them, and she sent across toward them in response all the candour of her smile, the lustre of her pearls, the value of her life, the essence of her wealth (WD 382).

The image of Milly saluting her friends ‘from the other side’ registers a clear distance between Milly, who is inside the Veronese, and the couple, who stand outside it and watch her with a mixed feeling of admiration and envy and chagrin. In this Veronese scene, although Milly continues to be the object of other people’s gaze, she is no longer the passive recipient of their curious looks as she was in front of the Bronzino portrait. Because she is simultaneously the creator and the creation of this painting, Milly gains the agency to define her own position as the observed; subsequently, Kate and Densher are *forced into* the position of the observer, and are left feeling powerless at the sight of Milly who represents the object of their desire – the financial wealth that would allow them to marry each other. ...

with Milly’s Veronese, the distance between the viewer and the picture is never transgressed; it keeps Kate and Densher outside the picture frame, and by maintaining this distance, it operates as a means by which Milly asserts her personal and financial power over the two spectators. ... But whether Milly *actually* has power over the couple becomes questionable when we consider that at the Veronese scene, Kate and Densher are still on their course of successfully acquiring Milly’s money; it is in this scene that the couple makes a pledge on their scheme as they watch their friend. This sight of Milly brings the two lovers together ‘with faces made fairly grave by the reality she put into their plan’ (WD 382).

The imaginary Veronese painting, then, depicts the *illusion* of Milly in her ideal state, at the height of her life, acting as the perfect hostess adorned in a beautiful white dress and a lavish pearl necklace. Ultimately her ‘success’ in becoming integrated into the social world in which she had wished to take part remains a fantasy; it is a fantasy that lasts only while she is kept away from the reality of her predicament. ... By representing the attainment of her ideal in the form of an imaginary painting devoid of material substance, James conveys the ephemeral nature of her fantasy.