

What James Knew about Children: A Consideration
of *What Maisie Knew*

Keiko Beppu

My mother groan'd! My father wept.
Into the dangerous world I leapt:
Helpless, naked, piping loud:
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my father's hands,
Striving against my swaddling bands,
Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.

—William Blake, "Infant Sorrow"—

What Henry James, that perennial bachelor, knew about children? What in the world has he got to say about them? One might ask. He has, indeed, such an awful lot to say about children and their "fates" in this "dangerous world." One is impressed by the number and variety of children portrayed in his novels and stories. In her penultimate study on children and adolescents in Henry James, *The Fictional Children of Henry James* (1968), Mrs. Shine presents a comprehensive overall view of the terrain and justly observes that "twentieth-century novelists owe a debt of gratitude to Henry James for his active role in the movement to sweep away outmoded convention and prejudice and to establish the child in literature as a worthy object of complete and honest investigation."¹

Child in literature as a worthy object of exploration for "the observer of manners and the painter of life"² is a somewhat recent phenomenon; similarly, in the field of social sciences systematic researches on the child's growth process and child psychology are products pre-eminently of the twentieth-century. It is not until the latter half of the eighteenth-century that children came to be treated in ballads, books for children, or in tracts,³ and notably in the poems of romantic poets such as Blake or Wordsworth, which prepared the way to Victorian novelists who found for *Oliver Twists* and *David Copperfields* a distinct place in literature. Until that time, child in literature is non-existent. Hence, young Prince Mamillius is regarded merely as "a gentleman of the greatest promise," and one has to live on crutches yet to "see him *a man*."⁴ Since he has no autonomy (either in life or in art) he can easily be whisked away: Prince Mamillius dies abruptly of heartbreak, victim to his father King Leontes' jealousy of his friend, King of Bohemia, and his own irreplaceable Queen Hermione. Mamillius cannot tolerate such violence in his father and injustice done to his mother—the charge is unwarranted, and he is not even informed why his mother is imprisoned. Something similar happens in James's fictional world: "The Author of *Beltraffio*" (1884), "The Pupil" (1891), or in "The Turn of the Screw" (1898). Dolcino is used as a ploy and

is murdered, as Mark Ambient foretells, between the conflicting views of his parents; Morgan Moreen dies, like Mamillius, of heartbreak, because his tutor fails to respond to his trust. Likewise, at the end of "The Turn of the Screw," Miles's little heart, dispossessed, stops; he is deprived of his freedom, a sign of maturity, by a well-meaning but all too protective governess.

In these stories James insists, so it seems, that the annihilation of the children results from the ignorance on the part of the adults who do not see them as children, but as *little* men and women. This "observer of manners and the painter of life," as James called himself in the "Preface" to *What Maisie Knew*, believed that children are the consummate art one creates in life; that parents and guardians therefore are held responsible for seeing them men and women in life, as artists for their finished works of art. Such conviction is acutely felt in the stories and novels James wrote in the 1890's—the decade of decadence when "the gross immoralities" in the form of parental dereliction and permissive mothers were rampant. It challenged the novelist to do away with "the outmoded convention and prejudice" and "[to mix] up a child with anything unpleasant," even if that meant an "aggravation of the unpleasantness" (XI, xiii). Even a greater challenge it was for James who monopolized in "the art of relationships"⁵ to dramatize the most exploitative relationship of all—exploitation of a child by its parents.

Despite her valuable pioneer work on James's fictional children, Mrs. Shine hastily concludes in the aforementioned book that "in his rendering of younger children, theme invariably takes precedence over characterization. Dolcino, Maisie, Flora and Miles are all, . . . tactically engaged in giving formal expression to their creator's philosophy of childhood."⁶ Her contention is mostly judicious, to be sure; yet just the same some reservation should be made for Maisie and for Flora and Miles. This brief consideration of *What Maisie Knew* (1897) focuses on that inimitably exquisite Maisie—who is aptly so designated, a Scot diminutive for Margaret which means "Pearl" in Greek—and presents Maisie as a child as she lived in the rich and vulgar world of reality. To put it plainly, for all the knowledge and high level of consciousness showered over Maisie by her eager and devoted critics, Maisie is still a child who needs "a mother."

I

What Maisie Knew is a high comedy of manners in which a child plays the leading role, dancing a minuet, awkwardly at first, but to the end of the music, as it were; she thereby establishes a certain order amidst the "unpleasantness" and "the gross immoralities surrounding her." And what James knew about children? That is to be illuminated for the reader as Maisie learns, gradually, to read the meanings of strange images and shadows dancing "across the wall in the slide of a magic-lantern." So the world and its people appear to the child, grotesque—elongated and enlarged.

. . . It was to be the fate of this patient little girl to see much more than she at first understood, but also even at first to understand much more than any little girl, however patient, had perhaps ever under-

stood before. Only a drummer-boy in a ballad or a story could have been so in the thick of the fight. She was taken into the confidence of passions on which she fixed just the stare she might have had for images bounding across the wall in the slide of a magic-lantern. Her little world was phantasmagoric—strange shadows dancing on a sheet. It was as if the whole performance had been given for her—a mite of a half-scared infant in a great dim theatre. She was in short introduced to life with a liberality in which the selfishness of others found its account, and there was nothing to avert the sacrifice but the modesty of her youth (XI, 9).

At the outset, James makes it explicit that it is into “the dangerous world” that his little charge is placed, helpless and naked, sacrifice on the altar of adult frustrations. If James shared the romantic view of innocent childhood sanctified in Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality” ode, he was simultaneously well-informed that Maisie is no prodigy, but “a mite of a half-scared infant” who, like Blake’s, may “sulk upon [her] mother’s breast”—if only she had such.

Another important fact James knew about childhood is that growing up itself is a terrifying experience such as Alice undergoes in her “Wonderland.” In the above-quoted passage, James compares Maisie’s plight to that of “a drummer-boy in a ballad or a story” engaged “in the thick of the fight,” which shows that Maisie (and her creator) is not spaced out of the real ordinary world of her time, but of it. Growing up involves “struggling in [one’s] father’s hands,” and “striving against [one’s] swaddling bands.” And if nothing prevails, the child might “sulk upon [its] mother’s breast,” even though Maisie has no such mother’s breast to sulk upon, but a mother who teaches her “to make the most of it” (XI, 220). (That is Ida Farange’s—or her ladyship’s—parting words to her daughter.)

Indeed, Maisie has to make the most of life “in which the selfishness of others found its account,” and where nothing is held back from the little girl. So Maisie sees much more than she at first understands, and makes “a wonderful assortment” of images and echoes—pictures she sees and tones of voice she hears—for which she finds meanings later on, and plays the games according to their rules. All of which requires a tremendous “patience” of the little girl: “. . . [Maisie] found in her mind a collection of images and echoes to which meanings were attachable—images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, the dim closet, the high drawers, like games she was n’t yet big enough to play” (XI, 12). At the same time, Maisie tries to understand, as a child will, what she sees and hears; hence she is in constant wonderment. She translates the gestures and facial expressions—how crimson Moddle’s face turns at what her father says, or how certain things make her otherwise poised governess, Miss Overmore, jittery—into meanings and makes assessments of the people and facts around her, because these will necessarily have effects on her, either good or bad. Thus, children are sensitive to their environments and respond to what is done to them. Furthermore, they give “an independent, genuine verdict,” as Emerson writes on the nonchalance of boys: “. . . looking out of his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and

sentences them on their merits, in the swift summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. . . .”⁸ Maisie comes to know of the vulnerability of the adults that none in life is exempt from it.

As we know, Maisie’s verdicts are generally positive and kind; otherwise Maisie judges her elders in her *silence*—the art of concealment she accomplishes at the age of eight. And Maisie knows that concealment is different from deception. This James records as Maisie’s “moral revolution” (XI, 15), which gives her mother no end of irritation. He demonstrates this significant event in Maisie’s small still life as if performed in the slide in a magic-lantern so that Maisie might puzzle out with “imperfect signs” that she has been “a centre of hatred and a messenger of insult”:

The stiff dolls on the dusky shelves began to move their arms and legs; old forms and phrases began to have a sense that frightened her. She had a new feeling, the feeling of danger; on which a new remedy rose to meet it, the idea of an inner self or in other words, of concealment. She puzzled out with imperfect signs, but with a prodigious spirit, that she had been a centre of hatred and a messenger of insult, and that everything was bad because she had been employed to make it so. Her parted lips locked themselves with the determination to be employed no longer (XI, 15).

As the stiff dolls begin to move their arms and legs, so does Maisie begin to have a life of her own. Adamant is her determination not to be exploited as an evil messenger. Maisie is often labeled too good to be a child, because she neither shrieks nor sulks. (Then it follows that her creator is incapable of realistic rendering of children as they live in life.) Rather, Maisie’s inveterate instinct to keep peace in the households where she resides by turns comes from sheer necessity as in the case of Huck Finn who wants, above everything else, harmony among the “family” on the raft. Which, to be sure, makes neither of these innocent dissemblers less of a child. Maisie’s strategy of concealment is the only effective means to keep her idea of inner self intact. It must also be noted that James could make his children nasty and fiend-like, if he would, as he did with Flora and Miles in “The Turn of the Screw.” They are quite believable Victorian children of high society, who use their knowledge (hence their power) to belittle their inferiors—the servants and the un-named governess.

More crucial is the change Maisie’s “accomplishment” makes in Maisie’s relation to her parents who “wanted her not for any good they could do her, but for the harm they could, with *her unconscious* aid, do each other” (XI, 5. My italics). When Maisie refuses to serve their purpose, she becomes useless. Ida and Beale Farange feel no obligation whatsoever to keep their daughter who “spoiled their fun.” This evaluation of the family—father and mother—in itself is sufficient to indicate the range of James’s anger and condemnation expressed against “the gross immoralities surrounding” the little patient girl. Beale Farange has no desire to see his daughter and let his new mistress (the Countess) send her off in the carriage with “a cluster of sovereigns” (XI, 197). Then James adds with a grotesque finality that Maisie tastes “a pleasure new and keen”: “She spoiled their fun, but she practically added to her own” (XI, 15).

Thus, the patient little girl is given *her* share of “larks”, as it were, in watching the slide show and later participating in the performance herself.

The episode illustrates also that Maisie measures whatever love and caring the grown-ups offer her by the degree of their “needs” of her. Sir Claude (her stepfather) asks whether she thinks Mrs. Beale loves her as much as she used to: “‘But, I mean, does she love you for yourself, now, as Mrs. Wix?’ The child turned it over. ‘Oh! I’m not every bit Mrs. Beale has!’” (XI, 77–78). Maisie knows that nobody loves anybody for his/herself; and that one’s need of another (his/her usability) varies from time to time. Her former governess, Miss Overmore, may not care for her as before now that she *is* Mrs. Beale (her stepmother). For Maisie, needing a person is part of loving that person, which is more often than not transferable in terms of money.

Indeed, Maisie sees (and understands) more and more; as she grows older, the images and echoes in her collection necessarily undergo vicissitudes. However, Maisie’s impression of her other governess suffers no alteration. Here the impression is fatal and it remains the same, the full implication of which is revealed in the choice Maisie makes at the end of the novel. After the gracious Miss Overmore, Mrs. Wix strikes Maisie at first as terrible; the elderly woman with her “straighteners” and in her old brown dress looks like a witch in a fairy tale. Just the same “something in her voice at the end of an hour touched the little girl in a spot that had never even yet been touched” (XI, 23–24). It takes her some time yet to conceptualize that something: “What Maisie felt was that she [Mrs. Wix] had been, with passion and anguish, *a mother*, and that this was something Miss Overmore was not, something (strangely, confusingly) that mamma was even less (XI, 24. My italics.) Maisie apprehends what Mrs. Wix *is*, by comparison, by what either her governess or mamma is *not*. What does this signifier—a mother traditionally represented in the image of Virgin Mary—mean? It is not a biological being who gives birth to a child, but one who loves as well as needs the child. The relationship is reciprocal, as C. S. Lewis defines it: if the child, helpless and naked, needs its mother, therefore loves her, the mother naturally needs the child as well as loves the child.⁹ James has this to say through Sir Claude, the only adult in the novel depicted with sympathy, and whom Maisie likes so much, because for a while he fits the image of a mother better than mamma or her stepmother: “*You know who one marries, I think. Besides, there are no family-women—hanged if there are! None of them want any children—hanged if they do!*” (XI, 61). To be sure, the woman he marries is Ida Farange, and the woman he is about to marry at the end of the novel is Mrs. Beale, neither of whom is a “family-woman”; neither of them is a “mother.” Here James has given us veritable precursors of our contemporary women who choose not to have children, a credit to this “observer of manners and the painter of life.”

II

Now we need to examine closely the incidents of the couple of days during which period Maisie achieves “a crossing of more spaces than the Channel” (XI, 202), which

leads to the *dénouement* of what Maisie knew and of the novel. As has been mentioned above, Maisie sees too much, and knows too much, but never so much as she is to know during her sojourn at the Folkestone hotel and in the little village in Boulogne. The images and echoes of earlier days accumulated in her dusky closet and high drawers are finally brought out in broad daylight; they reveal their meanings for the little girl. The revelation is so stunning that James blurts out as if he made the discovery himself: “Oh decidedly *I* shall never get you to believe the number of things she saw and the number of secrets she discovered!” (XI, 205. My italics.)

Posterior to the muted dismissal of her old governess from the household, Maisie often thinks of Mrs. Wix; in her absence her presence is strongly felt. As she starts for Folkestone with Sir Claude, “it popped again somehow into her dizzy head the long-lost image of Mrs. Wix” (XI, 202). Maisie feels intuitively that if she is neither at Charing Cross nor at the Folkestone hotel, “[Mrs. Wix] was at least everywhere else” (XI, 202). Naturally, Maisie expects her to follow them. Instead, it is Ida (her ladyship) that appears at the Folkestone hotel; this, however, is right—not to say its dramatic irony—because before Maisie goes with Mrs. Wix, first she must disburden her natural mother, who comes to get “rid of *her* burden with a finality” (XI, 209. My italics). Destitute of an excuse, Ida offers her child a false pretext that she is ill and must go to South Africa for climate. (Often sickness in children is another form of self-assertion and protest; here the roles are reversed.) On the other hand, Maisie is superb as ever. “Ill, mamma—really ill?” Maisie asks and regrets her “really” as soon as she has spoken (XI, 213). Furthermore, she even tries to see some good in her mother and wishes that it is with the Captain that she is going, wherever she may go for change of air, as she remembers well the promise the Captain has given her that he would love Ida *always*; Maisie expects order and constancy in love. Her ladyship has forgotten even who the Captain is. There is a cynical touch in the picture of “the three grouped themselves like a *family party*” (XI, 210. My italics), that is for the first and the last time. The similar tone continues: “[Maisie] had never been so irrevocably parted with as in the pressure of possession now supremely exerted by Ida’s long-gloved and much-bangled arm” (XI, 209). Maisie is never so mothered as at the time of their separation. This is James at his bitterest on motherhood, which makes *What Maisie Knew* a high social comedy done in a hilarious manner and simultaneously a severe indictment of the society it portrays.

After Ida forsakes Maisie and Sir Claude, Mrs. Wix appears with Ida’s warrant, as it were, as she explains, “Her ladyship’s kind! She did what I didn’t expect” (XI, 240)—that is Ida gives her a ten-pound note. While they wait for Sir Claude who goes in turn to attend to, or as they say, “to settle” Mrs. Beale (the deserted woman) Maisie and Mrs. Wix have much confidence to make, walking around the little village of Boulogne. Especially significant is their visit (which is repeated) to the little church where “the high gilt Virgin” is worshipped. In the context of the novel as presented in this discussion, here the “gold” Virgin assumes poignancy. At the moment, to be sure, neither Maisie nor Mrs. Wix has yet completely embraced the burden of what the

image signifies to them, and to the world which has severed the meaning from its signifier.

They sat together on the old grey bastion; they looked down on the little new town which seemed to them quite as old, and across at the great dome and *the high gilt Virgin of the church* that, as they gathered, was *famous* and that pleased them by *its unlikeness to any place in which they had worshipped*. (XI, 267. My italics.)

The “high gilt Virgin” strikes the pair as different from any statue of the holy mother they hitherto have seen. Furthermore, the whole place makes the girl feel as if she were in “the middle ages,” when the icon had its potency as a sentiment, and as a force. James underscores the experience that “they went back to the rampart on the second morning—the spot on which they appeared to have come furthest in the journey that was to separate them from everything objectionable in the past” (XI, 267–68), which includes Maisie’s recent interview with her mother who deprives Maisie of last vestige of “her filial hope” (XI, 225). Practically, they are in France, where the Virgin (and Venus), to quote Henry Adams, “still seemed potent, not merely as a sentiment, but as a force.”¹⁰

In the scene in question, James seems to resuscitate the meaning of the icon in the dramatic context of his novel. As Maisie and her old governess wander in the church, Mrs. Wix confesses that she regrets not being a Catholic, to whom the holy mother is the symbol of ideal womanhood. The implication is: on the one hand, Mrs. Wix, who is so much of a mother, wants just that image to guarantee her *raison d’être*; on the other hand, Maisie attaches the meaning to that something she has felt in her governess’s voice in her “childish dusk.” Now twice-orphaned, Maisie must “make the most of it,” as Ida tells her in their last interview; Maisie finds in Mrs. Wix what she has been in search of so far in vain. The “great gold Madonna” is the meaning Maisie attaches to the images and echoes accumulated in her collection. Thus the symbol becomes the thing it signifies. Maisie’s rejoinder to Sir Claude that she’d go up to the old rampart and sit on the old bench where one sees the gold Virgin (XI, 348) is even more revelational.

Sir Claude looked almost foolish. “Is she [Mrs. Wix] going in that boat?”

“I suppose so. I won’t even bid her good-bye,” Maisie continued. “I’ll stay out till the boat has gone. I’ll go up to the old rampart.”

. . .

“The gold Virgin?” he vaguely echoed. But it brought his eyes back to her as if after an instant he could see the place and the thing she named—could see her sitting there alone. “While I break with Mrs. Beale?” (XI, 348)

Maisie is telling Sir Claude, once for all, that what she would wait for is “a mother” and not a substitute—a lover or a guardian. James accentuates the natural divergence Maisie is conscious of between little girls and lovers (XI, 204) and the fact that Maisie belongs to the first category. To argue that Maisie offers herself to replace Mrs. Beale is, therefore, a critical near-sightedness. To be sure, Maisie acquires the knowledge

of sexuality, that is to acknowledge the *natural* difference between little girls and lovers, and act accordingly. Maisie is well aware that there is no danger of Sir Claude's giving up Mrs. Beale for the still young Maisie. Besides, it would be breach of manners on Maisie's part to let her old governess go without leave-taking—Maisie who makes so much of Ida's coming to bid her farewell at the Folkestone hotel. Maisie knows by instinct that Mrs. Wix will rejoin her; she won't break with Maisie, because of all the people she alone needs the little girl for herself *and* for her money. The realization makes no difference, as Maisie already knows what good (and harm) money could do to people; the knowledge along with that of sexuality is a prerequisite for survival, and Maisie is meant to survive to be Maggie Verver—their names are identical—in *The Golden Bowl* (1904). The sense that she is of some consequence to Mrs. Wix is indispensable to Maisie's idea of her identity.

Likewise, it must be remembered that it is her ladyship who visits and asks the old governess to look after Maisie; the ten pound note Mrs. Wix receives is a warrant, as has been already suggested, of that authorization. Ironically, when Ida forfeits (that is legally) her motherhood, she recognizes the need for the girl, while treating the girl on equal terms that she should "make the most of it." From our vantage point of hindsight, the mother-child relationship James delineates in *What Maisie Knew* is, however irregular, thought-provoking. James was quite preoccupied, during the 1890's in particular, with the problem of parental dereliction and of irresponsible parents who exploit their children for their own selfish ends, as Ida and Beale Farange employ Maisie for an evil purpose. James condemned such as exploitation of worst kind, because the child is unconscious of the role she fulfills. Also Mrs. Beale mothers Maisie mainly to keep the appearance and to hide her illicit liaison with Beal Farange and later with Sir Claude. Here again we notice the observant eyes of James "the painter of life," who shrewdly penetrates through the genteel façade of Victorian society and boldly exposes the promiscuous sex life of late Victorian ladies and gentlemen. If the world of *What Maisie Knew* is preposterous, it is so rendered that Maisie (and the reader) might have periods of "larks" gazing at the phantasmagoric world of a magic-lantern. In his story of this patient little girl, James provides a plausible picture of the rich vulgar reality; and through such representation, paradoxically, he seems to reinstate the "divine commission" of maternity.

The ideal of sacred motherhood entertained among the Catholics finds a curious correspondence in James's endearing portrait given in the eulogy of his own mother, Mary James, who the writer says "held us all together, and without whom we are scattered reeds." "She was patience, she was wisdom, she was exquisite maternity," James continues in the same journal (9 February 1882) and defines "the divine commission" as follows:

To bring her children into the world—to expend herself, for years, for their happiness and welfare—then, when they had reached a full maturity and were absorbed in the world and in their own interests—to lay herself down in her ebbing strength and yield up

her pure soul to the celestial power that had given her this divine commission. Thank God one knows this loss but once.¹¹

Reservation should be made for the impassioned tone of the peroration; yet what James calls “the divine commission” is what the image of the holy mother used to signify for many generations in the Occident, where Catholicism held its sway. This may not be true of the Anglo-Saxon world, to quote Henry Adams again, especially of the puritans in the new world: “Why was she [the Virgin and Venus] unknown in America? For evidently America was ashamed of her, and she was ashamed of herself, otherwise they would not have strewn fig-leaves so profusely all over her. When she was a true force, she was ignorant of fig-leaves, but the monthly-magazine made American female had not a feature that would have been recognized by Adam.”¹² Singularly enough, American literature suffers from missing mothers and orphaned children. Ishmaels, Huck Finns, Isabel Archers—the list is endless and deserves separate speculation. Huck Finn has no mother, even though he has Pap Finn, and later he finds a surrogate father in Nigger Jim. As has been observed in the foregoing discussion of James’s novel, *Maisie* is worse off. She has no father, whom she can dispense with: “Her father had vanished and there was even yet nothing in that to reawaken the pang of loss” (XI, 197). There is nothing to lose to begin with; Beale Farange is simply a monster. *Maisie* can dispense with a father, whose function archetypally is to provide. *Maisie* is amply provided for, we are told, which in Jamesian world is an *apriori* factor for one’s independence. Thus, *Maisie* is somebody, unlike Mrs. Wix who is “nobody.” On this ground alone, if nothing else, it is appropriate that *Maisie* pairs off with Mrs. Wix. The old governess questions *Maisie* whether she would stay with her, to which *Maisie* pertly returns:

“Him [Sir Claude] alone or nobody.”

“Not even *me*?” cried Mrs. Wix.

Maisie looked at her a moment, then began to undress.

“Oh you’re nobody!” (XI, 309)

Indeed, Mrs. Wix is “nobody,” if not a mother. Or syntactically, “Him alone or nobody” may read: I will live with him alone or with “nobody”, which *is* Mrs. Wix. More importantly, as Edward Wagenknecht contends, *Maisie* must needs to make her mother-governess “nobody,” to be free of her “straighteners” (her infamous moral sense),¹³ so that “her sacred range of wonderment” might be preserved intact. At the same time, nothing shows *Maisie*’s confidence in her governess more eloquently than the nonchalant manner *Maisie* looks at her a moment, while she begins to undress before Mrs. Wix. Thus, James’s patient little girl brings a modern perspective on to “the exquisite maternity” extolled in the author’s eulogy of his mother: that it is two-edged, embracing both loving and needing. To repeat: Mrs. Wix loves *Maisie*, but she needs her more than she loves the child. And on *Maisie*’s part, she treasures, not as a sentiment, but as a necessity, the sense that she is of some consequence to someone. *Maisie* is inimitable, because unlike Miles and Flora in “The Turn of the Screw,” she controls the world around her without deception, implementing her knowledge to

create a certain order and beauty out of the base materials she finds in *that* world.

Many critics have justly argued that the *dénouement* of *What Maisie Knew* is effected by the girl's aesthetic principle of form and of symmetry in human relationship,¹⁴ and not by her acquisition of what Mrs. Wix calls "moral sense." If Maisie has learned that parents are not seen simultaneously, but singly in order, she has also observed that the society she knows is composed of twosomes, not of a triangle. She does not want to be a third party in Sir Claude-Mrs. Beale household; for that is to repeat the fate she starts her life with. Like Huch Finn at the end of Twain's novel, Maisie might say, "I been there before. I won't have none of it." Paradoxically, staying with Mrs. Wix, Maisie is able to shed her "swaddling bands"; she thereby proves that she is capable of making a moral choice, just as Huck achieves his identity by lighting out "for the Territory ahead of the rest." Therefore, it is misleading to contend (as Joyce Carol Oates does) that Maisie is left on "the edge of a precipice, on the brink of nothing at all."¹⁵

Irony in *What Maisie Knew* is often created by the reversal of roles, as in the last interview between the mother and daughter examined earlier in this discussion. There is another such reversal at the end of the novel. Throughout the book, Maisie is seen staring and wondering at the passions the adults exhibit before her eyes; now it is Mrs. Wix who "still [has] room for wonder at what Maisie knew" (XI, 363), which concludes the novel. The apparent inversion of function between Mrs. Wix and Maisie might have confused such insightful critic as Tony Tanner to declare: ". . . the threatened end of Maisie's 'wonder' is to be lamented."¹⁶ Edward Wagenknecht's refutation of Tanner's reading of the *dénouement* of James's novel is judicious, because there is no fear of "a contraction of her sacred range of wonderment," at least for a while yet. Maisie is still young enough to need a mother, which in turn implies that she will keep on wondering. And Mrs. Wix will *share* Maisie's wonderment in future as well: "Mrs. Wix has given her, and can be trusted to continue to give her, the only mothering she has ever known."¹⁷ This essay has attempted to illustrate how Maisie is first presented with vague echoes and images of a mother in Mrs. Wix, and how the little girl comes to associate the images and echoes with the poignant meaning, which is graphically achieved in the dramatic exposé of *What Maisie Knew*, where much confiding takes place between Maisie and her governess under (the influence of) "the high gilt Virgin." That Maisie goes with Mrs. Wix is valid yet in another way. If Maisie has learned a sense of form and symmetry that the twosomes are composed of different sexes, she should detect an anomaly in the twosome they constitute. The fact that she does not is a good enough testimony that Maisie is still a child, and that there is still time before Maisie is "absorbed in the world and in [her] own interests."

James was a conservative Victorian, if you like, but he knew the most crucial fact about children and childhood of any time and of any place: that until the children declare their independence and leave their home, they need mothers, and not the other way round as so many magazine articles read these days—"Good-bye, Kids, Mother's Leaving Home."¹⁸ And James has dramatized the pain and anguish of the abandoned

child in *What Maisie Knew* with “a grotesque finality,” which has saved the novel from becoming teary and turned it into a high social comedy. So what James knew about children? Finally, it becomes identical with what Maisie knew at the end of the novel.

“The movie, too, has an astonishing authenticity, of place, of character, of emotion—without smelling musty,” thus runs a review of the recently released film version of James’s *The Bostonians* (1886). The review continues: “And though it takes place in 1876, James’s story remains fresh, arousing the same political and romantic passions that animate the 1980’s.”¹⁹ The assessment of James’s comedy of manners set in Boston is even more pertinent to *What Maisie Knew* which is concerned with decadence of the *fin de siècle*. Parental dereliction has become even more serious in the 1980’s. Compared with James’s dramatization of the problem, *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1980) appears to be too cute and tame: the divorced parents are too understanding to each other and to their child, and proves to be no panacea to the impending issue of our time. We might just as well turn to what James knew in *What Maisie Knew* if only for the fun of it. Furthermore, it is hoped that this discussion will free Maisie of many eager critics (not excepting this writer), who attempt to find a moral in the choice she makes at the end of the novel.

NOTES

1. Muriel G. Shine, *The Fictional Children of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), pp. 174–75.
2. Henry James, “Preface” to *What Maisie Knew*, *The New York Edition of Henry James* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), XI, xiii. Hereafter all quotations from the novel are from this edition; page references are given in parentheses within the text.
3. John Gay’s “Sweet William’s Farewell to Black-Ey’d Susan” (1720), Charles Dibdin’s “Tom Bowling” (1789), or “Oft, in the Stilly Night” by Thomas Moore (1779–1852) are just a few such examples.
4. Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, I, i, 11. 36–48. My italics.
5. Joyce Carol Oates, *New Heaven, New Earth* (New York: Vanguard, 1974), pp. 3–35. Oates groups James with Virginia Woolf as masters of “the art of relationships” in her chapter bearing that title.
6. Shine, p. 172.
7. Tony Tanner in his *The Reign of Wonder* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1965) makes the comparison, but the basis of my comparison is different from Tanner’s.
8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (London: Walter Scott, 1888), p. 115.
9. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Cox and Wyman, 1960), p. 43.
10. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 384.
11. Henry James, quoted in Leon Edel’s biography of Henry James. *The Conquest of London 1870–1883* (London: Rupert-Hart-Davis, 1962), p. 467. 369.
12. *The Education of Henry Adams*, p. 384.
13. Edward Wagenknecht, *Eve and Henry James: Portraits of Women and Girls in His Fiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), p. 133.
14. See Joseph Ward, *The Search for Form* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967) pp. 141–163, and Keiko Beppu, *The Educated Sensibility in Henry James and Walter Pater* (Tokyo: Shohakusha, 1979), p. 15.
15. Joyce Carol Oates, p. 23.

16. Tony Tanner, p. 297.
17. Wagenknecht, p. 133.
18. Thomas Cottle, "Good-bye, Kids, Mother's Leaving Home," *The Atlantic* (March 1980), pp. 43-48.
19. *The Boston Herald* (Friday, August 10, 1984).

This essay on the Jamesian child was originally conceived as a report at one of the study meetings for the joint research on "The Image of the Child in Victorian Literature," which received a joint research subsidy for 1982 from Research Institute of Kobe College. The same report (presented on December 18, 1982) has been revised and expanded for publication in this issue of *Kobe College Studies*.

September 10, 1984