

*Kathleen Lawrence*

“TRAGEDIES UPON TRAGEDIES”:  
HENRY JAMES AND THE DOWNFALL  
OF WILLIAM WETMORE STORY AND HIS FAMILY

I was 3 or 4 months in Italy in the spring & early summer of 2 years ago. Venice was as adorable as ever (I was at the Barbaro, with dear old Dan still working the gondoliers like 60) but Rome and Florence all ghosts & ruins. Maud Story tragic, pathetic, in utter poverty; the Peruzzi house (in Florence) dishonored, desolate, & sinister, & Edith now all but on the straw: I never want to see either place again. (Henry James to Isabella Stewart Gardner, May 11th, 1909)

What tragedies upon tragedies, and what a dark vision of poor Edith (Story) alone and embittered and uncomforted in her dark, black, corner of Florence today—with only the ghosts of the Medici to console her! (Henry James to Maud Broadwood Story, April 5, 1914)

Two years after the death of their father in 1895, the three children of American expatriate neoclassical sculptor William Wetmore Story approached Henry James to write a biography of their father. For Edith Story Peruzzi and her brothers Waldo and Julian, James was not only a logical but also an inspired choice to venerate this illustrious former leader of the Anglo-American expatriate community in Rome. James had been a friend of the family since his second foray to Rome in 1872 when as a young aspiring writer of twenty-eight he was admitted to the legendary Sunday night salon in the Storys' fifty-room apartment in the Palazzo Barberini. Subsequent years only strengthened the intricate web by which James was connected to the Storys, for as James deepened his own attachment to Europe, he inevitably found himself sharing the Storys' circle of English and American elites abroad. Then, too, James was the same age as Edith Story Peruzzi and just slightly older than her brothers, and Waldo's wife Maud Broadwood was especially fond of James. What the Story heirs did not realize, however, was that James had a

profound and visceral dislike of their father that had grown over the years, provoked by Story's too easy achievements in art and society and, for James, inherently false position as a former Boston Unitarian holding court in a palazzo. With her marriage to Simone Peruzzi, Florentine nobleman and equerry to King Umberto, Story's daughter Edith inherited James's aversion and came to represent even more than her father the embodiment of social-climbing New Englanders seen so often as the villains and fools of his fiction. James's two volumes *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* (1903) thus became an artistic and moral critique, James's own manifesto and autobiography couched as tribute and biography. What James could not have foreseen, however, was the disturbing *denouement* to his betrayal of old friends: his assessment of Story as a decadent dilettante was strangely borne out by the ensuing dissolution of the heirs, entangling James in an aftermath of guilt and self-reproach that haunted him until his death and illustrated the perils of prophetic insight for a great novelist.

Henry James's dislike of the Storys began with aesthetic disapproval and deepened to jealousy as he began to comprehend the extent of their social, economic, and professional success on the same field that he hoped to commandeer. In an early letter home to his father, for example, James wrote that Story's "inspiration is very unequal: though his cleverness is always great. His things, on the whole though, are fatally un-simple" (James to Henry James, Sr., Rome, March 4, 1873, Edel, *Henry James Letters*, I, 347). To Grace Norton, sister of Harvard art historian Charles Eliot Norton, James related that he "went lately to Story's studio and found him in the midst of an army of marble heroines, which were not altogether unsuggestive of Mrs. Jarley's waxworks" (James to Grace Norton, March 5, 1873, Edel, I, 351). James came to Story's studio with strong ideas about sculpture, formed during his first visit to Rome in 1869 when he was deeply moved by the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius, "so large and monumental and yet so full of a sweet human dignity, " as well as the statues of the Capitol, "all of them unspeakably simple and noble and eloquent of the breadth of human genius" (Edel, I, 167). James's ultimate model was Michelangelo who "retains something, after all experience, which belongs only to himself. This transcendent 'something' invested the

*Moses* this morning with a more melting, exalting power than I have ever perceived in a work of art" (James to William James, Rome, Dec. 27, 1869, Edel, I, 180).

During his 1872-73 sojourn in Rome when James began really to break into society, not only his aesthetic but also his moral compass also began to sense something not quite right among the expatriate Americans. James wrote to his father, "These shoals of American fellow-residents with their endless requisitions and unremunerative contact, are the dark side of life in Rome" (James to Henry James, Sr., March 4, 1873, Edel, I, 347). James's potent early impressions of Rome were to fuel his fiction for the rest of his life, including not only specific works about sculptors and sculpture such as the early novel *Roderick Hudson* (1876) and early tale "The Last of the Valerii" (1874), but also his works of the major phase such as *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) where sterile aesthete Gilbert Osmond ensconced in his ornate palazzo has no small contribution from Story. The primacy of art and sculpture surfaced again in his late phase novel *The Ambassadors* (1903) where meretricious sculptor Gloriani from *Roderick Hudson* reappears as the slick and glib leader of a fashionable Paris salon.

While James's initial private appraisal of Story both aesthetic and moral could be transmogrified harmlessly into fiction, its reappearance in non-fiction thirty years later in *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* was not benign. In fact, the disappearance of Story's sculptures from American museums for over half a century is in part attributable to James's condemnation. His biography of Story helped to establish modern critical bias against Victorian sentimentality that persisted until post-World War II American art historians began to take an interest in 19<sup>th</sup> century American art and to reevaluate our first school of sculpture. James wrote in the biography that Story's "unsimple" works merited "the seeds of a critical objection that was to express itself, freely enough, later on—the restrictive view of the artist's fondness for the draped body and his too liberal use of drapery" (WWS, II, 81). James added concerning the Victorian case "against the nude," that unfortunately "Story visibly was preoccupied with this supposed interdict..." (WWS, II, 81). James finally concluded that this was "proof, one must hasten to recognize, that he was not with the last intensity a sculptor" (WWS, p.

83). As a modernist intent on advancing the form and prestige of American literary and visual art, James denigrated Story's *retardataire* and overly-embellished narrative statues whose sentimental and dramatic qualities not only relied on borrowed European art traditions but imposed predetermined moral messages limiting the nuances and possible meanings of the works. James's biography exposed the essential incongruity of a descendant of New England Puritans and son of famous American Supreme Court justice choosing to be a sculptor. Boston Puritan tradition not only precluded proper art training but also deemed sculpture to be a form of idolatry. Story's upbringing, James suggested, accounted for his prudish inability to reveal the naked human form. Worst of all for an artist like James, Story was a dilettante, for he undertook to work in two fields, both sculpture and literature, producing not only masses of "marble effigies" but also poetry, novels, and travel books, including the popular *Roba di Roma* (1863) that went into eight editions and became required reading for Americans venturing abroad on the bourgeois American version of the Grand Tour. Finally, James held Story accountable for choosing to live amid the "golden air" of Rome where Story drank from the "Borgia cup" while he, James, withstood the rigors of cold and sooty London so as not to be distracted from his work. Key for James was the idea of sacrifice in life, a necessary requirement for attaining greatness in art, and Story it would seem got everything without penalty. James embedded his central belief in the biography, "This moral seems to be that somehow, in the long run, Story *paid*," a dictum that came to apply even more insidiously to his heirs (James, WWS, II, 223). James not only gave his opinion on the quality of Story's art, but inadvertently predicted the future outcome of the lives of his children and grandchildren.

One thing Story would not get, James insured, was a breezily congratulatory biography. James cleverly configured his language in the Story volumes to falsely age Story and his wife, emphasizing their connection to deceased former denizens of pre-Risorgimento Rome, rather than still-living sophisticates who were their current friends. James had explained to the family the addendum to his title "And His Friends" because this extension of the subject, while still focusing on William Wetmore Story and his wife Emelyn, would

enable James to "look at the picture, as it were, given me by all your material, as a picture—the image or evocation charming, heterogeneous, and a little ghostly, of a great cluster of people, a society practically extinct, with Mr. and Mrs. Story, naturally, all along, the centre, the pretext, so to speak, and the point d'appui" (James to Maud Story, Sept. 1903, Ransom Research Center, University of Texas). In other words, James proposed to write a work of cultural history in a tone of condescending nostalgia rather than a biography. But James's characterization of the Storys' world as "ghostly" with "a society practically extinct" betrayed his intention both to dilute Story's presence and push him back in time. The "friends" that James highlighted in the volumes included American writer Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), Italian revolutionary Princess Belgiojoso (1808-1871), and English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), superannuated figures whose histories seemed tied to a distant past. For American readers, these figures would have set Story not only in pre-Risorgimento Italy but also in pre-Civil War America, the great divide between modernity and the past for Americans. James's idea to age Story was premeditated, for in taking on the commission in 1897, James commented to publisher William Blackwood that in writing it he would be living "among many old friends and old ghosts" (Edel, *Henry James Letters*, vol. IV, 59). James's book, rather than immortalizing Story, in a sense buried him; indeed, James called his volumes a "re-burial" (WWS, 15) and spoke of Story and his friends as "the company of those—some of them here buried," leaving ambiguous whether the figurative place of interment was the "boxful of old papers" James examined or the book itself (WWS, 7). As Henry Adams wrote to his brother Brooks, James "leaves mighty little of William Story. In biography we are taking life" (Levenson et al. eds., *Letters of Henry Adams*, VI, 227).

In truth, Story's "friends" were actually very much alive and part of James's own circle, a sophisticated group that included, in particular, Daniel and Ariana Curtis of Palazzo Barbaro, as well as their frequent summer tenant Isabella Stewart Gardner, and Katharine Bronson of Ca' Alvisi in Venice, Mrs. Humphrey Ward and the Luther Terrys and Francis Marion Crawfords in Rome, Francis Boott, the Huntingtons, and Violet Paget in Florence, and the Russell Sturgises, Fanny Kemble, James Russell Lowell, and Robert

Browning in England, among many others. James was no doubt irked by the fact that these mutual friends were predisposed to revere Story not only for his artistic prowess but also for his status as an independently wealthy Boston Brahmin with a Harvard pedigree while James had gained access to this exclusive circle based mainly on the merit of his writing and the charm of his company. For example, Daniel Curtis's unpublished letters to his sister Mary in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana are replete with references to Story's revered opinion on topics ranging from art to politics to life in Italy: "Story defends the Caesars and rest as bad as Tacitus says—especially Nero who (Suetonius says) killed Poppaea by a kick in stomach. Britannicus was an adopted brother—Story likes him" (Daniel Sargent Curtis to Mary Curtis, July 7, 1879, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana). He wrote a bit later, "We had RSG & Story to dine, very agreeably. They find Hunt's horses very "queer". The horses' body impossible, the legs coarse, & the man of no decided action or intent" (Daniel Sargent Curtis to Mary Curtis, Feb. 4<sup>th</sup>, 1881, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana).

Realizing that his own credibility and social status would potentially be endangered by his negative assessment of Story in the projected biography, James began to lobby for his views with Story's cohort of potential defenders months ahead of his actual composition of the two-volume work. For example, he wrote to Frank Boott early on after accepting the commission that the Story biography would require that he deal with "the statues, and the 'artistic problem' of getting round the question of the endowment of their author!" (James to Francis Boott, Houghton Library, Harvard, July 9, 1897) James complained to Ariana Curtis, "The world, just now, is full of nightmares & I may confide to you that one of them is, precisely, the fruit of my good nature in having yielded, in that matter of the book, to the renewed unexpected assault of the Waldos (Mrs. W. in particular,) a year after I supposed I had given it its quietus. The months go on, & circumstances make the sacrifice of time & other conveniences impossible to me, & I fear I must, still, bravely back out" (James to Ariana Wormeley Curtis, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1898, Curtis Papers, Dartmouth College, Rauner Special Collections). In the thick of the book's composition, James intensified his assault on Story, writing again to Mrs. Curtis, "The damnable difficulty does-

n't spring from the complexity but from (abysmally between ourselves) the Deplorable thinness of the subject & (likeable, loveable if you will, but) immitigable flimsiness of the hero! However, I am doing my best to make an artfully readable & beguiling volume" (James to Ariana Wormeley Curtis, Dec. 14, 1902, Curtis Papers, Dartmouth College, Rauner Special Collections).

James eventually transferred his resentment of Story to his daughter Edith who upon marriage to Simone Peruzzi became part of Italian court circles and assumed the pretensions of an aristocrat. James revealed his sense of Edith's new attitude to the Curtises, Francis Boott, and Howard Sturgis, and eventually to her sister-in-law Maud Broadwood, whom James took into his confidence to complain of Edith's behavior. Writing to Mrs. Curtis with advice about traveling to Vallombrosa, James warned, "The only blot is that one has to make sure of quarters a long time in advance—unless one stays with Mme. Peruzzi: a privilege that I am actually engaged in wriggling out of" (James to Ariana Wormely Curtis, July 7, 1890, Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, ed. *Letters from Palazzo Barbaro*, 119). Descending to gossip to undermine Edith Story's pretensions, James divulged to Mrs. Curtis "A person here who has been long (always) in Italy & much in Florence, tells me the Rucellai have no title at all—count or other, in their family. They are of the oldest untitled Florentine stock, like the Peruzzis" (James to Ariana Wormely Curtis, March 1st, 1895, Dartmouth College, Rauner Special Collections).

In fact the ancient patrician families of Florence, like those of Venice, Genoa, and other city-states, were surely members of the nobility, although they did not bear feudal titles, as their status was founded on their hereditary participation in sovereign bodies. Two years later the Peruzzis did get also a feudal title of nobility, bestowed upon them by the King of Italy, Umberto. Writing to Frank Boott, James reported Edith's news, quoting apparently from her own letter to him with barely couched disdain: "I got, three days since, a note from Edith of that house which brought home to me the splendour of the recent (though you haven't heard of it, and won't care if you have) Peruzzi change of name. They 'have revived at the particular request of the King an old dropped Marquisite of the family' and are now (che ve ne pare?) Marchesi Peruzzi dei

Medici. What a pity Mrs. Story sleeps with her mothers!” (Henry James to Francis Boott, June 7, 1897, Boott Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard). James’s reference here to Edith’s mother Emelyn Eldredge Story who “sleeps with her mothers” used the language of the Hebrew Bible, implicitly pointing up the incongruity for Boston Unitarians of Edith’s new nobility. As the volumes neared actual publication after six years of delay, an aspect noticed by many scholars but not properly associated with the fact of James’s wanting to “bury” Story, James was furious not to hear back from the Story siblings. Writing in consternation to Howard Sturgis, James connected Edith with her father and differentiated her from her brothers: “Edith has a fatuity of attitude about her father, which no reality can touch & no reflection illumine, but the thing surprises me in respect to Waldo & Julian, puzzles in fact & depresses me, & makes me wonder what they can have thought possible” (James to Howard Sturgis, Sturgis Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard, Sept 3, 1903).

James not only mocked but also feared Edith Story Peruzzi, for she was well-connected, especially with Frank Boott and the Curtises and Sturgises, and she could perhaps wield great social power. She had also with the years become a large and imperious woman, perhaps evoking for James atavistic fears of female dominance. Worried not only about what he had written in the biography but also what he had left out, James wrote to Maud Broadwood hoping for assistance with Edith. He had “in particular a vague sense that Mme. Peruzzi may miss expected allusions to People—of their old circle of acquaintance—whom I should have been only too glad to bring in if there had been but a scrap to make a peg to hang them to” (James to Maud Broadwood Story, June 25, 1903, Ransom Research Library, University of Texas at Austin). Years later, with World War I looming and his health much impaired, James was still anxious about Edith, writing to Maud to “send this on to Edith as a statement of how the case stands in respect to the packets etc. that I have kept. ...I really must relieve myself to the extent of saying that if she expects what comes back to her to represent anything precious or informing or interesting that I didn’t use, and that are therefore of use again, she will necessarily find her expectation unsupported” (Henry James to Maud Broadwood Story, March 28, 1914, Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin). James



added further in his defense, "But I have it at heart to say two things—one of which is that the material in question was to me, at the time, of an extremely embarrassing scantness and futility; so that if I had had any conception in advance of what it would prove in this way—the way of quite breaking down under one—I never should have in the least committed myself to doing the book." The truth was that James did not use all the material he might have to bring out Story's central position in the expatriate community, nor his achievements in the arts, for upon reading the papers to be at last returned to Maud Story, James confessed, "On coming to look into them, as I have now had time to, I see that it will be clumsy and awkward, to say nothing of expensive, to send them to you in relays and by letter-post as I had supposed possible: they are more voluminous than I quite remembered" (James to Maud Broadwood Story, April 9, 1914, Ransom Research Center, University of Texas).

What James never suspected was the real reason that neither Edith nor her brothers responded to the proof-sheets of the biography sent to them in the summer of 1903. It was at this time that Edith's handsome and beloved first-born son Bindo was accused of homosexuality and forced to resign in disgrace from the Italian army. Set in the context of its day, this scandal was a shocking disgrace, following less than a decade Oscar Wilde's infamous trial of 1895 and echoing as well other famous court cases, such as that of William Bankes, Tory MP who was forced to flee England after being tried for homosexuality in 1841. Worse than Bindo's disgrace was his suicide that followed in 1907, when he shot himself in the heart in his lower floor rooms of the Casa Peruzzi in Florence at no. 28, via Maggio. James was apparently informed of the tragic event by Howard Sturgis, to whom he answered, "You talk of sad and fearful things—Bindo P's suicide was a horror I had yet to learn..." (James to Howard Sturgis, April 13, 1907, Edel, IV, 442). James related the incident to Clare Benedict, niece of Constance Fenimore Woolson, as part of a litany of disasters, "I spent May and part of June in Rome, a few days in Florence (sad and overdarkened for me by dismal and sinister *Story* tragedies and miseries and follies which I heeded in a manner—suicide of Bindo Peruzzi, babble of his distracted mother etc.—to be confronted with and immersed in)..." (James to Clare Benedict, Sept. 13, 1907, Edel IV, 460). But Edith's tragedies did not

stop with the disgrace of Bindo, for she soon broke with her younger son Ridolfo, a further catastrophe that betokened James's response, "I am distressed to hear of the relations between Ridolfo and his Mother. What tragedies upon tragedies, and what a dark vision of poor Edith alone and embittered and uncomforted in her dark, black, corner of Florence today—with only the ghosts of the Medici to console her!" (James to Maud Broadwood Story, April 5, 1914, Ransom Research Center, University of Texas). James's tone carried the implication of biblical retribution and judgment, in keeping with James's role all along as prophet and judge, as if the Story descendants were somehow paying for the "sins of the fathers" in an Old Testament mode. His remark to Isabella Stewart Gardner that he saw "the Peruzzi house (in Florence) dishonored, desolate, & sinister, & Edith now all but on the straw," in particular James's use of the metonymic "Peruzzi house," suggested in addition Greek punishment by the gods for hubris. But what these passages also suggested was James's own painful reaction to these events that he had to "heed in a manner" and "be confronted with and immersed in."

Unfortunately, the Story tragedies did not stop with Edith, Bindo, and Ridolfo. By coincidence, simultaneous with Edith's calamities and, most bizarrely, coinciding with the publication of *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, sculptor Waldo Story deserted Maud Broadwood Story and his two daughters for young American opera singer Bessie Abott. While James was entreating Maud for Waldo's response to his proof-sheets, Waldo was nowhere to be seen, and most probably in New York at the side of Metropolitan opera singer Abott. Maud attempted to cover her own tragedy, for ironically James wrote to her on New Year's Eve just after the book's publication, "I am very sorry for what you tell me of Waldo's infirmity. May he, with prayer and fasting, also good Roman sunshine, work it off and utterly abjure it. I wish you all a New Year light to carry and am, dear Maud Story, your very faithful old friend, Henry James" (James to Maud Broadwood, Dec. 30, 1903, Ransom Research Center, University of Texas). Although possessed of prophetic ability, James was at heart innocent himself, like any of his naïve Americans abroad, the extent of which innocence and good faith was exhibited by his wishes to Maud the previous year, "I hope peace reigns meanwhile at the Barberini; that you and

Waldo are both sound and serene, and that the young ones bloom as they should. My blessing on all of you. Yours, dear Mrs. Waldo, most faithfully, Henry James" (James to Maud Broadwood, Jan 6, 1903, Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin). James at sixty-six was still capable of shock, of pain, feeling fully the taint of his own involvement and prescient vision of ruin, thus forcefully concluding vis a vis Rome and Florence in his 1909 letter to Isabella Gardner, "I never want to see either place again."

As it turns out, James never did revisit Florence and Rome. In addition, in 1910 he burned a large cache of his personal correspondence, making a conflagration in his yard that no doubt included the letters to him from the Curtises, Howard Sturgis, Frank Boott, Isabella Gardner, and Maud Story that contained the sordid details and revelations of the Storys. It is possible that it was these terrible events so dangerously recorded for posterity that impressed upon James the urge to destroy this ghastly data, and to include as well much of his other personal manuscripts, relieving himself of the burden of this knowledge and precluding its inclusion in any later biography. This situation of James's own dismay and shock over the dissipation of the Story heirs was rife with irony, given the thematic content of James's fiction that chronicles the hidden corruption of what James called in *Portrait of a Lady* "hybrid Americans" exemplified by Madame Merle, the Countess Gemini and others. It is also possible that James's trauma over the Story events and his indirect participation in them moved him to begin his final phase of late non-fiction that included his autobiographies *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) and *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), insuring that his own story would be written by himself and no other.

Story was not so lucky. His biographer had a hidden agenda determined by deep-seated motivations not fully explicable by rational analysis, yet tied unmistakably to rivalry and the need for self-definition. Nothing on earth mattered more to Henry James than art and human kindness, two aspects of the ideal most aptly illustrated by sculpture. This image of the ideal was related to James's own New England background that, albeit brief, had introduced him to Ralph Waldo Emerson and the concept of transcendental idealism. It is thus no accident that James's first serious novel *Roderick Hudson* concerned the tale of a sculptor, as if he represent-

ed writers too, and every artist who must strive to embody transcendent beauty and truth seen so starkly in the medium of marble. Roderick's first statue in that novel is entitled "Thirst" and represents a vigorous youth drinking with head thrown back from a cup he grasps in his hands. This kind of expressive realism in form is what James strived for in his fiction and looked for in sculpture. But while James emulated the potential realism and symbolic power of sculpture, he nevertheless undertook to be a writer, the correct vocation for an American raised on Puritan soil. The theme of Roderick's statuette is likewise significant, for it symbolized the very attitude with which James came to Europe to imbibe culture and life, a rich life that ultimately bubbled below the surface, away from the gaze and superficial amusements of society. William Wetmore Story's engagement with society and elevation of position over discipline and sacrifice abrogated his New England heritage. The danger although serious to Story's art was even more hazardous for his children. What James called the "complex fate," the position of Americans who inevitably confronted the highly-evolved culture of the Old World with the inherent disadvantage of an essentially Puritan background, had disturbing implications for the second generation born abroad and unsure of their identity. James's prophetic intensity took Story to task for his vanity, but ultimately recoiled at the disturbing outcome of prophecy in real life.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS:

Curtis Papers, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice  
Curtis Papers, Rauner Special Collections, Dartmouth College  
Francis Boott Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University  
Story Papers, Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin  
Howard Sturgis Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University  
Henry James Letters, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

PRINTED SOURCES:

LEON EDEL ed., *Henry James Letters*, vols. 1-4, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1974-1984.  
HENRY JAMES, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, London, William Blackwood and Sons, 1903.  
J. C. LEVENSON et al. eds., *Letters of Henry Adams, 1892-1918*, vols. 4-6, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988.  
ROSELLA MAMOLI ZORZI ed., *Letters from the Palazzo Barbaro*, London, Pushkin Press, 1998.