

“The virtues of inclusiveness”: An Interview with Professor Susan M. Griffin

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Mirosława Buchholtz: *The Henry James Review* was established in 1979 as the official journal of the Henry James Society. What were the origins of both the society and the journal? What were their aims at that time? Who was the *spiritus movens* of the society and the journal at that stage?

Professor Susan M. Griffin: We have Daniel Mark Fogel to thank for the simultaneous founding of the society and the journal. In the Fall 1996 issue of the journal, Dan, who had by then passed the editorship on to me, reflected on those beginnings: “I wanted the *HJR* to function not merely as an archive but as a center of activity within which the totality of knowledge in Henry James studies would be visible, so that any regular and thorough reader of the journal would be able to make out where his or her own work and thinking fit into the broad, continuously evolving field of knowledge. This aim in turn entailed another, which was to make the *HJR* a continual demonstration of the virtues of inclusiveness.” These are ideals and practices that, as the second editor of the *HJR*, I have tried to continue.

How did the journal change over the decades? What makes it one of the very best single-author journals in the marketplace?

My biggest concern about editing a single-author journal (besides the inevitable fear that editing would consume all of my time and keep me from “my own work”) was precisely that it was a single-author journal. Too often, such publications seemed to be spaces where a small group of older (at that time, white, male) scholars published pieces that praised the author—a kind of booster society. I had no interest in heading up such a publication. But with Henry James, the situation is different: lots of very smart people in many fields (Philosophy, American, Victorian, and Modernist Studies, Art History, etc.) write on James, and many of these scholars and critics are not “Jamesians,” that is they do not work exclusively or even primarily on James. So, the first two innovations I introduced as Editor were the practice of publishing special “forum” issues once a year and institution of the Leon Edel prize. The former meant that I could open issues to those who might not normally think to publish in the *HJR*. The latter encouraged beginning scholar-critics to submit to the journal. “My” first issue was on “James and Race.”

What is it like to be the Editor-in-Chief of a very respected literary journal? What are the joys and the sorrows of the Editor-in-Chief?

Mostly joys. For one thing, it turns out that I really like working with other people's prose to make it better. I've had great luck with those Henry James Fellows who have worked with me on the journal and, especially, with my long-time Managing Editor, Joanne Webb. It's rewarding to see how much these graduate students learn from working on the *HJR*, and the journal has been all the better for their contributions. Then, too, I have gotten to meet, sometimes in person, but always through our exchanges on their contributions, countless smart, interesting authors. And being a journal editor makes you brave enough to write to Arthur Danto or Fredric Jameson to see if they would be willing to publish with you. Finally, but importantly, journal issues (at least in our case) come out promptly. We all know how long it takes to get closure on a scholarly project. With a journal issue, you have a finished product in your hand in a reasonable amount of time. Very satisfying.

Sorrows are few and far between. Certainly any mistakes that make it into the *HJR* are embarrassing. It's always depressing to read bad work, especially when it is clearly the result of laziness. And occasionally, but only very occasionally, authors are rude to journal staff whom they perceive as underlings. It's frustrating to have non-responsive authors or referees—but these are the exceptions and, as I am sure that family and colleagues will attest, nagging is an area in which I excel.

One of the valuable new initiatives of the journal under your editorship was The Leon Edel Prize awarded for the best essay on Henry James by a beginning scholar. When did it begin and what is your experience with it so far?

The Edel Prize essay contest was introduced my first year as Editor. I wanted to signal that publication in the *HJR* was not to be confined to the work of a settled group of senior scholars (as, indeed, it had not been under Dan Fogel's editorship). Submissions for the contest give us a cross-section of what new work on James is being done by graduate students and beginning faculty. This is important for the health of the journal. Typically, we end up publishing several submissions in addition to the prize-winning essay. I tend to work closely with these authors, some of whom are just starting to move from dissertation chapters to articles, to revise and refine their essays. Not only is all of this good for the *HJR*, but I also think that part of the work of the journal to bring junior people along, as it were. And, of course, it's great to be able to list a prize-winning essay on one's c.v.—especially at the beginning of one's career. (There is also a small cash prize of \$150.)

What advice would you give to young Jamesians? Facing the Master's massive oeuvre, where do they usually begin? Where could or should they begin? Are there any "definitive editions" of James's works that scholars should be encouraged to use?

I suggest below some areas in James studies that might reward attention. Other advice: This may seem obvious, but you would be surprised how often authors fail to join the critical conversation where it is. Don't pretend/assume/imagine that you are the first person to write on *The Turn of the Screw*. By this I don't mean read every single essay ever written on a given text—in most cases an impossible task—but review the relevant history of the criticism and be aware of recent work. Looking through the relevant articles published in the *HJR* (and their Works Cited) is a quick way into this literature.

One of the aims of the Cambridge University Press edition of the *Complete Fiction of Henry James* is to provide reliable, fully annotated texts and to list variations. Of course, with James, it's always vital to know whether you are dealing with an early serial or book version of a text or a later, revised New York Edition version.

What are the areas of Henry James's writing that have been relatively little explored? The study of letters and literary theory are ongoing efforts, but one would think of his plays, travel writing, or reviews.

It's hard to find an area of Henry James's writing that has not been studied, but there are certainly those that are relatively neglected and/or open to new approaches. Surprisingly (at least to me), many of James's lesser-known short stories (and there are many of them) receive little attention. The ongoing publication of the *Complete Letters of Henry James* by the University of Nebraska Press continues to open up possibilities for new work. There has, of course, been a great deal written on James and gender, but new conceptions of sex, sexuality, and gender suggest that there is more to say here. I would also note that the combination of Lyndall Gordon's and Susan Gunter's investigations into Henry James's complex relationships with women, along with new evidence from the *Complete Letters*, shows us that, post-Edel, this is a rich area for exploration. Then, too, the studies of readers and reading that have flourished with the rise of History of the Book suggest new ways we might think about James's readership.

Readers worldwide have appreciated your seminal and inspiring publications, including books *The Historical Eye: The Texture of the Visual in Late James* (1991), *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (2004) and edited volumes *The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and the Practice of Fiction* (with William Veeder, 1986), *Henry James Goes to the Movies* (2002), and *The Men Who Knew Too Much: Henry James and Alfred Hitchcock* (with Alan Nadel, 2012). Your own teaching and research interests reach beyond, sometimes far beyond, Henry James – to Toni Morrison, Alfred Hitchcock, women's studies, and film studies. How do these explorations enrich your view of James? Does a James scholar need vacation from James?

I don't know if I would say that all James scholars need a vacation from James, and I do find his work inexhaustible. Reading widely in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction does help with reading James, since it gives one a clearer sense of the genres and writing practices of the period(s). However, I don't think that that is the main reason that I write and teach in other areas. I am lucky enough to be in a Department that does not expect faculty to stick to narrowly-defined "specialties" for their entire careers. This semester, for example, I am conducting a seminar on "Victorian Jewels" in which we are looking at the way gems function as "things," commodities, gender markers, reflections of archaeological explorations, fetishes, emblems of imperialism, etc., in nineteenth-century British and American fiction. We are reading James's "Paste" (and the Maupassant story, "The Necklace," on which it is based) in the class, but James's writing is not an organizing force for the seminar. Thinking about these matters is part of a long-term (and often-deferred) book project on Nineteenth-Century Metamorphoses. But not all of my teaching is directly aimed at writing projects. Sometimes, as with the Morrison seminar (where we studied Morrison as novelist, editor, librettist, children's book author, activist, etc.), it's primarily

a matter of (my) personal interest. I like fiction and read lots of it—that’s why I got in this business in the first place.

What was the first text by Henry James you remember reading? Was it assigned reading? What kind of experience was it? (The “first book” question was posed over dinner table at the recent conference of the Henry James Society: Commemorating Henry James, June 2016, and most Americans at our table pointed to *The Portrait of a Lady*). “The Beast in the Jungle” in high school. I disliked it. The turnaround book for me was, as for so many others, *The Portrait of a Lady*. Depending upon who is asking, that is one of the two James books I suggest when someone asks me what James to “start with.” For less experienced readers, it’s *Washington Square*.

Is there a place which we can call “The Museum of Henry James”? Is it his house in Rye? Is it The Center for Henry James Studies at Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska, or *The Henry James Review*?

Lamb House may be “The Museum of Henry James” if we think of a museum as a finished collection. If a museum can be thought of more fluidly as an interactive event space, conference center, open and evolving archive, then I would hope that the *Henry James Review* would be, perhaps not “the,” but a Henry James Museum.

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