Constance Fenimore Woolson’s Roman stories do not celebrate domesticity. Unlike Stowe and Sophia Hawthorne, Woolson finds no comfort in the nineteenth-century’s established woman’s sphere. Moreover, unlike Sedgwick and Fuller, she finds no cause for celebrating her nation’s promise. In Woolson’s stories, domesticity signifies most insistently as a tamed or limited state, constraining the female characters in her stories who struggle to break out of home and nation and into artistic independence. Indeed, her stories expose the cultural mythology at work behind the separate spheres imperative, demonstrating how thoroughly implicated the masculine sphere is in every aspect of a woman’s life. Gender roles are clearly distinct in Woolson’s work, but the spheres are fundamentally interconnected, with the patriarchy determining the limits of both. In her fiction the male marketplace enforces the limitations placed on women, while Italy—idealized in Stowe’s and Hawthorne’s texts—comes to signify a similar “business” of oppression. No longer a nurturing mother, the Rome of Woolson’s stories embodies the patriarchy itself, a formidable state to which women artists are compelled to migrate but from which no successful escape can be made.

The speaker in my epigraph, the male critic who narrates Woolson’s “‘Miss Grief,’” articulates the central conflict plaguing the artist-heroines
of Woolson’s Roman stories; under a cultural logic of gendered spheres, women’s professional decisions consign them either to the male or to the female domain. To seek independent expression is to be masculine; to accept a more dependent role as a domestic partner is consistent with social constructions of femininity. The heroines of Woolson’s Roman stories are women who desire the freedom to express themselves artistically, possessors of a transgressive ambition criticized by male authorities as wild, unpredictable, unruly, and uncivilized. The conservative choice for women is represented by Isabel, associated with the home and the controlled garden, the interior and ordered spaces of late-nineteenth-century domesticity. Despite attempts to negotiate an existence between the two extremes, the main characters of Woolson’s stories are ultimately unable to occupy both sides of the binary, to be women and to be productive, free artists.

Two short stories by Woolson, “Miss Grief” (1880) and “The Street of the Hyacinth” (1882), take as their subject the woman artist whose pilgrimage to Rome results in a tragic confrontation with male aesthetic standards. As a woman confronting the patriarchal artistic standards that marginalized or silenced her, Woolson constructed stories that expose the conflict and violence that inhabit three significations of “domestic.” One applies to the home, specifically to the sphere accorded to nineteenth-century American women; a second is “pertaining to one’s own country” in contrast to “foreign”; and the third and most important relates to a wild creature that has been tamed. Hardly the locus of warmth and salvation championed in nineteenth-century “separate spheres” rhetoric, the dark and ugly house in “The Street of the Hyacinth” is symbolically demolished at the end of the story as a “modern accretion” that “disfigure[s]” the nearby Pantheon (208). Similarly, Aaronna struggles throughout “Miss Grief” to conceal her humble lodgings from the wealthy narrator, only to have him ultimately track her down to “the most wretched quarters of the city, the abode of poverty, crowded and unclean” (266). As the stories make clear, the elitism of the male-dominated marketplace in art and literature relegates women artists to squalid conditions. The stories reveal economic class as an underpinning of gendered separatism.

Similarly, the Italian setting is deromanticized in these stories, exposed as a site whose meaning is determined by class and circumstance. For nineteenth-century America, Italy had become overdetermined, a nexus of artistic distinction and a golden land offering an idyllic life. As Raymond Noel observes tellingly in “The Street of the Hyacinth,” “He had once said himself that the air was so soft and historic that nothing broke [in Rome]—not even hearts” (193). Noel speaks from a position of privilege—based on gender and economic status—and misinformation. As the story demonstrates,
hearts do break in Rome, and especially in Rome (insofar as Rome embodies patriarchal power); the heroine's artistic passion is destroyed when classical, patriarchal standards, identified with Roman art, exclude her from the creative world. In their examination of the experiences of women artists, the stories expose the ties among travel, gender, class, and art.

Third, Woolson's short stories set in Rome explicitly critique the "domestic" harness that obliterates wildness or freedom, thereby destroying women's artistic expression. For her main characters, domestication cripples self-actualization and creative voice. In "The Street of the Hyacinth," Ettie Macks suffers for her creative independence, compelled by the story's end to give up her dream and perform the jobs her culture has deemed suitable for a woman. In "Miss Grief," Aaronna Moncrief, like her manuscripts, dies and is buried. The tragic consequences of her female characters' confrontations with the men they seek out as guides suggest Woolson's conflicted feelings about mentorship. The stories critique male standards of artistic excellence by asking, what does it mean to have talent? And who decides? Indeed, Woolson's stories suggest that patriarchal artistic standards and the domestication of women are inseparable, that male success depends to a certain extent on the silencing of the "wild," "unrestrained" woman's voice. Such subjugation cripples her artist characters, who cannot be whole when denied their creative selves. Although Woolson indicts both the prescribed feminine sensibility and the rigid artistic standards that grew out of the nineteenth-century's construction of gender roles, ultimately, like her artistic heroines, she finds no way to synthesize her desires, no "home."

A Woman's Place

There are houses in Woolson's stories, structures that shelter her women artists as they struggle to navigate a world hostile to their ambitions. But the stories do not give us homes, in the nineteenth-century's idealized sense. According to Nancy Cott, the nineteenth-century home "was 'an oasis in the desert,' a 'sanctuary' where 'sympathy, honor, virtue are assembled,' where 'disinterested love is ready to sacrifice everything at the altar of affection'" (64). In Cott's argument, the sanctuary offered by the home depends upon its separation from "the cunning, treachery, and competition of the marketplace" (69). Aaronna Moncrief, the heroine of "Miss Grief," and Ethelinda Faith Macks, in "The Street of the Hyacinth," inhabit austere domestic spaces that oppose the typical, sentimental conceptions of the home as a nurturing haven whose maintenance dominates a woman's time. Woolson's
women have other constructions on their minds: artworks that can compete in the male-dominated art world. Their creative endeavors occupy them totally, leaving them little time to notice or bemoan squalid living conditions. Yet, as the stories make clear, the austerity within which Aaronna and Ettie live does not result from their inattention to domestic details; rather it arises from a gendered system that relegates women to a financially subordinate status. Once the fiction of the home’s distinctness from the competitive marketplace is exposed, the houses lose their idealized status.

In “‘Miss Grief,’” the story that was published first but seems to push the theme of the woman artist further, domestic spaces are alluded to tangentially. The central narrative action concerns Aaronna’s efforts to solicit the unnamed narrator’s help with her writing career. Referring to a drama she has written, Aaronna tells the narrator, a successful literary critic, “You will read it. Look at this room; look at yourself; look at all you have” (254). As the plot develops, the comforts of the narrator’s living quarters—which include a fireplace, rich foods, fine wines, and a manservant who attends to all—are offered in striking contrast to Aaronna’s poverty. Dubbed “Miss Grief” by the insensitive and flippant narrator, who judges the artist by her threadbare clothes, Aaronna attempts to keep her abode a secret, insisting on coming to him whenever they meet, but is found out when she becomes too ill to leave her bed. The narrator encounters Aaronna’s companion in the street, discovers Aaronna’s sickly condition, and offers to take the distraught old woman home: “Her shabby skirt was soon beside me, and, following her directions, the driver turned toward one of the most wretched quarters of the city, the abode of poverty, crowded and unclean. Here, in a large bare chamber up many flights of stairs, I found Miss Grief” (266).

In a belated effort to save her life, the narrator uses his financial resources to embellish Aaronna’s apartment. Although “the wine, fruit, flowers and candles I had ordered made the bare place for the time being bright and fragrant,” the gesture is not enough to cure the stricken artist, who confesses on her deathbed her reasons for seeking the narrator’s assistance: “‘Did you wonder why I came to you? It was the contrast. You were young—strong—rich—praised—loved—successful: all that I was not. I wanted to look at you—and, imagine how it would feel. You had success—but I had the greater power’” (267, 268). The fruit and flowers cannot sustain Aaronna because they cannot compensate for the greater nourishment she has lacked as an artist. The narrator’s complicity in this artistic starvation is both acknowledged and perpetuated after Aaronna’s death, when he locks up her manuscripts and reads them occasionally “as a memento of my good fortune, for which I should continually give thanks. The want of one grain made all her work void, and that one grain was given to me. She, with
the greater power, failed—I, with the less, succeeded” (269). The story leaves
the reader to ponder the nature of the “one grain,” a nourishment that may
signify wealth or masculinity, two forces that are indistinguishable in the
story.

A similar pattern gets worked out in “The Street of the Hyacinth,” as
Woolson again constructs a male critic, Raymond Noel, and a young female
apprentice, Ettie Macks, who travels to Rome specifically to seek his guid-
ance. The house in this story is a more prominent symbol, likened explicitly
to the main character herself. Indeed, the successive transformations of
the house mirror the stages of Ettie’s professional development (or regres-
sion) until at the end of the story their fates are inextricable. The house’s
location on the street of the Hyacinth, which traverses a Roman quarter
whose description opens the story, is of central importance. The street
reflects its working-class residents as well as the expanding commerce that
has infiltrated even this “narrow, winding, not overclean” corner of “the
sacred city of the soul” (170). The sun, obstructed by buildings on either
side of the lane, cannot reach the street, so that “looking up from the pave-
ment was like looking up from the bottom of a well”; the well is not only
dark but dirty, “owing to the easy custom of throwing from the windows a
few ashes or other light trifles for the city refuse-carts, instead of carrying
them down the long stairs to the door below” (ibid.).3 Even the interior of
Ettie’s residence disappoints the art critic, Noel, who disapproves of a card
reading “Miss Ettie F. Macks,” which hangs on the front door. Ettie’s unself-
conscious proclamation of her identity flouts the conventions of Noel’s
aristocratic social circle: “‘Why in the world doesn’t she put her mother’s
card here instead of her own?’ he said to himself. ‘Or, if her own, why not
simply “Miss Macks,” without that nickname?’” (171). Cheryl Torsney has
usefully pointed out that “Ettie’s environment serves to suggest her con-
sciousness in the way women’s habitations normally serve as metaphors for
states of mind in their writing” (The Grief of Artistry 122), yet it may be
equally important to see Ettie’s environment, both the street she lives on
and her own decorative touches, as a very practical manifestation of her
class and to recognize this financial status as both a condition determined
by cultural forces and a fault held against her by Noel. Caught in a self-per-
petuating cycle, Ettie is consigned to poverty because she is a woman and
then blamed for a subordinate status beyond her control.

It is noteworthy that the narrator softens his criticism of Ettie’s abode
when he finds it remodeled into a school—a more appropriate and less
threatening space than the studio of a young, female artist. Noel observes,
“Even as a school-room it was more attractive than it had been before” (193–94). As Ettie takes on the culturally sanctioned role of schoolteacher,
Noel can comfortably inhabit her space. Ettie’s final step toward domestic femininity, her acceptance of Noel’s marriage proposal at the end of the story, reflects the fate of the entire street on which she lives. Noel tells her, “They are going to tear down your street of the Hyacinth. The Government has at last awakened to the shame of allowing all those modern accretions to disfigure the magnificent old Pagan temple. All the streets in the rear, up to a certain point, are to be destroyed. And the street of the Hyacinth goes first. You will be driven out” (208). When Ettie agrees to marry Noel soon thereafter, the street’s doom resonates not only as a motivating force for Ettie’s decision—clearly she is driven to choose Noel as a consequence of being “driven out” of the only home she can afford—but also as a symbol of Ettie’s own fate. Her acceptance of Noel is described as “a great downfall,” echoing the passage that follows, in which “The street of the Hyacinth experienced a great downfall, also. During the summer it was demolished” (209).

Thus the mythology of “separate spheres” breaks down in Woolson’s stories, as the conditions of the home cannot be separated from the commercial and public affairs of men. The confinement of women to feminine roles (schoolteacher, wife) has very real, economic effects on their lives and determines, to a large extent, the kind of home they can inhabit. Taking the implications of this argument further, Aaronna’s aunt in “‘Miss Grief’” articulates the predatory power by which the narrator maintains his economic superiority: “And as to who has racked and stabbed her, I say you, you—YOU literary men!” (265-66). Blaming the narrator for Aaronna’s impending death, the aunt makes the accusation both explicit and ghastly: “Vampires! you take her ideas and fatten on them, and leave her to starve” (266). Woolson proves the truth of this analogy in the Roman stories, both of which depict women artists whose careers must be stifled and who cannot attain economic independence. Ettie must marry in order to survive. Aaronna, whose story comes to a more extreme conclusion, dies so that the narrator may live. His “separate” sphere depends upon her submission. In a figurative sense, he needs her pitiful existence as a reminder of his “good fortune.” More practically, he keeps her play in a “locked case” and claims, “When I die ‘Armor’ is to be destroyed unread” (269). Recognizing that Aaronna has a greater talent, the narrator’s literary dominance—and the financial success it brings—can only be maintained if Aaronna Moncrief’s brilliance is buried.

The narrator’s vampiric power also casts him as the monstrous instigator of a perverse heterosexual union. Not surprisingly, during the story it is the narrator who maps heterosexuality onto his relationship with Aaronna, noting after a particularly humble reply on her part, “My chivalry was touched by this: after all, she was a woman” (260). Moved by his own
“chivalry” to invite Aaronna to dinner, the narrator makes an offer that Aaronna reads accurately and to which she responds with a warning: “Yes, I will come. I am forty-three: I might have been your mother” (ibid.). Unlike the narrator, Aaronna maintains her professional focus and never conceptualizes their relationship in sexualized terms. Thus the depiction of the narrator as a vampire demonizes his personal relationship to Aaronna by suggesting the predatory implications of heterosexuality and his professional relationship to her as a critic/mentor. Significantly, he stands accused of fattening on her work, deriving his sustenance—blood—from the manuscripts she gives him. This symbolism becomes more gruesome when read against a later passage in which Aaronna asks that her manuscripts be buried with her, telling the narrator, “Don’t look at them—my poor dead children!” (268). If Aaronna’s offspring have nourished the bloodthirsty narrator, then his hunger has killed them, and the perversity by which he maintains his power and status is compounded.

Woolson’s exposure of gender roles as culturally demarcated and separate spheres as economically enforced arises at a historical moment when the dominant culture was busy seeking a physiological basis for the gender hierarchy. Faced with a growing suffrage movement that contested women’s subordination and relegation to the “private world,” men like paleontologist Edward D. Cope were attempting to establish evidence of a physical weakness that would bar women from effective participation in politics. His 1888 essay, “The Relation of the Sexes to Government,” included in Why Women Do Not Want the Ballot, asserts, “In women we find that the deficiency of endurance of the rational faculty is associated with a general incapacity for mental strain, and, as her emotional nature is stronger, that strain is more severe than it is in man under similar circumstances. Hence the easy breakdown under stress, which is probably the most distinctive feature of the female mind” (Women’s Rights 167).

In opposition to Cope’s insistence that “we find in man a greater capacity for rational processes” (ibid.), Woolson’s stories depict women with rational capabilities exceeding those of the men they seek as mentors. Both Ettie and Aaronna are intellectual exemplars with astounding powers of memory and insight. When Aaronna recites a favorite passage from one of the narrator’s stories, he remarks,

Her very voice changed, and took, though always sweetly, the different tones required, while no point of meaning, however small, no breath of delicate emphasis which I had meant, but which the dull types could not give, escaped an appreciative and full, almost overfull, recognition which startled me. For she had understood me—understood me almost better than I had
understood myself. It seemed to me that while I had labored to interpret, partially, a psychological riddle, she, coming after, had comprehended its bearings better than I had, though confining herself strictly to my own words and emphasis. (252–53)

Aaronna’s powers of perception seem all the more remarkable because she has recognized the worth of a passage that, though the public “had never noticed the higher purpose of this little shaft,” was “secretly [the narrator’s] favorite among all the sketches from [his] pen” (252). Not only does Aaronna demonstrate an acute critical eye with regard to the narrator’s work, which she knows by heart, but she can also recite her own play in its entirety. To the narrator’s surprise, her voice makes the drama perfect: “And she carried me along with her: all the strong passages were doubly strong when spoken, and the faults, which seemed nothing to her, were made by her earnestness to seem nothing to me” (259). Aaronna’s ability to emote surpasses more conventional portrayals of feminine “feeling” by successfully convincing a male critic, who is by his own admission conceited and cynical, of her work’s value.

Similarly, Ettie can remember and reproduce Noel’s discourse on the paintings they visit at a Roman gallery: “There he beheld, written out in her clear handwriting, all he had said of the Doria pictures, page after page of it; she had actually reproduced from memory his entire discourse of an hour” (186). As Noel accompanies Ettie to other galleries, he notes her persistence, dedication, and unwillingness to engage in personal conversation: “It was always very businesslike—they talked of nothing but the pictures; in truth her systematic industry kept him strictly down to the subject in hand. He learned that she made the same manuscript copies of all he said, and, when he was not with her, she went alone, armed with these documents, and worked hard. Her memory was remarkable” (188). Unlike Noel, who often lapses into personal, flirtatious observations about his protégée and her appearance, Ettie never strays from her industrious study of paintings and the critic’s analysis of them. Her relentless ambition and integrity contrast with Noel’s often flighty attitude toward work.

Critics have not made enough of Woolson’s idealized speakers with their superior memories and miraculous voices. Sharon Dean observes that “the most predominant overtone is that Faith is not naive but rather is actively pursuing Noel. Time and again, outsiders acknowledge Faith to be clever or intelligent. She is, at least, smart enough to remember everything Noel has said to her about art” (“The Literary Relationship” 3). In this reading, Ettie’s phenomenal memory indicates a cleverness that can only be interpreted as a strategy for catching a husband. The assumption that the
intense attention Ettie pays to Noel is a form of romantic pursuit may not be surprising, given the way Woolson utilizes a similar series of events in her 1880 story “A Florentine Experiment.” In that story the main character, Margaret Stowe, asks her male companion, Trafford Morgan, to instruct her in art. During the ensuing “lessons,” Margaret seeks his opinion of various works of art and never lets his responses veer into the realm of explicit flirtation. As the story eventually makes clear, however, the true motivation for Margaret’s “experiment” is to see whether she can form an attachment to Morgan and thereby cure herself of a previous, failed love. In the case of “A Florentine Experiment,” the main character’s interest in art—and corresponding ability to remain devoted to its contemplation—is a strategy with an ulterior, romantic motive.

The case with Ettie is quite different, as the details of Woolson’s story attest. In “The Street of the Hyacinth,” Ettie’s artistic goals and accomplishments are clearly established, and her intellectual ability to absorb and remember Noel’s critiques is underscored. Almost miraculously, she can remember details about the vast collections of art that the two visit in the many galleries of Rome: “[S]he soon knew the names and order of all the pictures in all the galleries, and had made herself acquainted with an outline, at least, of the lives of all the artists who had painted them” (188). Indeed the intellectual capabilities of Ettie and Aaronna constitute an important subversion, by which Woolson suggests the power these characters have over their mentors. Recognized by Joan Myers Weimer as a “spokeswoman for the first generation of American women writers, who saw themselves as artists” (ix–x), Woolson has also been discussed quite usefully as a writer whose work depicts “women made silly because no one has shown them how not to be silly: women whose choice is to dote on men or become men because they have not yet found another way” (Dean, “Homeward Bound” 26). Her women artists do suffer for their attempts to usurp male creative power, but, in these stories, they come across as anything but silly. Their ability to be dedicated both intellectually and emotionally to their work and to surpass in this respect male mentors who are more interested in chasing women and flirting with high society disputes the rhetoric of men like Cope and indicates the power and potential Woolson saw in the woman artist, even as she recognized an entrenched, patriarchal elitism within the literary and artistic worlds.

Woolson’s characters are frustrated by this elitism; having journeyed to Rome, they discover that the artistic criteria held sacred by Rome and their male mentors will not accommodate their work. Noel believes that “Miss Macks, as an artist, would never do anything worth the materials she used” (192). Standing for patriarchal tradition, Noel praises technique; Ettie, on
the other hand, insists, “Of course, the subject, the idea is the important thing; the execution is secondary” (190). The narrator of “‘Miss Grief’” echoes Noel’s aesthetics: “[W]riters are as apt to make much of the ‘how,’ rather than the ‘what,’ as painters, who, it is well known, prefer an exquisitely rendered representation of a commonplace theme to an imperfectly executed picture of even the most striking subject” (256). The implication that men stand for form (despite a “commonplace theme”) while women endorse (“the most striking”) content offers the possibility of a counter-aesthetics that would value art produced by women—or anyone forbidden access to training and prestige. Further, it reveals how economics influences art, as men possess the financial means—as well as the cultural sanction—to study the “execution” they prize and to demonstrate their initiation into a privileged tradition, while women are systematically refused this training. Woolson’s investigation of Rome’s art culture exposes a closed system that dooms women to exclusion and subordination; at the same time she suggests the inadequacy of this system to gauge a woman’s abilities. Thus, although “‘Miss Grief’” appears to be the story of a woman artist with “talent” and “The Street of the Hyacinth” the same narrative repeated with a character who lacks talent, the distinction is specious. What matters, what cannot be denied, is the desire of these women to create.

In Woolson’s stories, the opinion of the male mentors is unreliable, as a suggestive metaphor in “‘Miss Grief’” illustrates. Frustrated when she refuses his editorial suggestions, the narrator claims that Aaronna “simply could not see the faults of her own work, any more than a blind man can see the smoke that dims a patch of blue sky” (259). The metaphor reveals the narrator’s own lack of vision. The blind man in the analogy, of course, cannot see the sky any more than he can see the smoke. While the outside observer might criticize this lack of discernment, to the blind man himself the distinction would have no use value. As both sky and smoke are denied him, he has no reason to discriminate between the gray and the blue. He finds other ways to negotiate the world. The distinction between colors matters only to the critic and, in this metaphor, appears idle and ridiculous. In “The Street of the Hyacinth,” we are similarly confronted with evidence that undermines the definitiveness of the male critic’s perspective. Although Noel emphatically points out that Ettie’s art is “extremely and essentially bad,” he is also forced to acknowledge, to his surprise, that “the most incorruptibly honest teacher in Rome” actually “seemed to think that Miss Macks had talent” (181, 183).

Thus the question of whether Ettie has “talent” becomes a useless inquiry. As “talent” is determined by a closed group in the story and dependent upon access to a particular form of training, the answer is predetermined. The
pivotal question that concerned Woolson in her fiction, as Cheryl Torsney has pointed out, is “Where does art lead?” (The Grief of Artistry 61). The energy of the stories lies in the drive of Woolson’s women to establish artistic careers for themselves, against all odds. Ettie and Aaronna do not want a separate or subordinate artistic domain—domestic arts or crafts—but seek full acceptance into the public (and commercial) art world. This goal necessitates the pilgrimage they make and determines the impressions they receive once there. Art leads them, in a practical sense, to Rome.

“IT IS ONLY THE RICH WHO GO AWAY”

The Economics of Travel

Like the women artists in her stories, Woolson never returned to the United States after her pilgrimage to Rome in 1879. For her, as for artist-heroines, the journey and its duration were matters of artistic necessity. In the case of Aaronna and Ettie, not only are they required to go to Rome to confront male critics (and criticism) where they live, they are also confined to Rome after they arrive, as they cannot afford to return home. Their lack of mobility makes them, as Joan Myers Weimer has pointed out, exiles rather than travelers. The difference is crucial. The freedom associated with travel is denied the exile, who is compelled for philosophical, political, or practical reasons to remain abroad. More important for my argument are the ways gender and class enforce a state of exile, reserving the status of traveler for the wealthy and privileged. A secondary definition of the term “exile” as “waste or devastation of property; ruin, utter impoverishment” reinforces this reading, as Woolson’s characters are ruined and impoverished by patriarchal power. If, as Torsney has pointed out, “Woolson lived abroad to economize” (ibid., 33), then her journey would seem to be, at least in part, a forced relocation rather than purely a pleasure trip. Furthermore, if “her hope of meeting Henry James was one factor that impelled her to travel to Europe” (Weimer xxi), Italy became her destination more as a matter of professional and artistic necessity than choice. It is hardly surprising that Rome is depicted in her stories as a hostile city that traps exiled, working-class women. Woolson’s Roman scenes seem far removed from the golden idylls of Arcadia invoked in so many American texts of the early- and middle-nineteenth century.

Ettie Macks and Aaronna Moncrief travel to a Rome defined by its affinity with the Western artistic tradition and its hospitality to the male authorities they seek as mentors. Rather than the home of Catholicism and the pope, or of ancient Roman republicanism, Woolson’s Rome functions primarily as
an embodiment of male artistic values that her characters must negotiate in order to succeed as artists. As a female apprentice, Ettie’s relationship to Rome is entirely different from Raymond Noel’s. She accepts an impoverished existence there in the service of her larger goal, to become an artist, while Noel emphasizes the more typical, romanticized aspects of travel: “[H]e was very fond of the old streets, and was curious to see whether she would notice the colors and outlines that made their picturesqueness. She noticed nothing but the vegetable stalls, and talked of nothing but her pictures” (180). As a woman responsible for bringing food home to her ailing mother, Ettie must attend to the quality of the produce rather than the city’s aesthetics. Yet she shows equal concern for her career, which makes William Vance’s observation about this passage surprising: “Neither Rome nor Italy is strange to Woolson, but rather people like Miss Macks who go there wholly blind to its special character (the art critic cannot make Ettie see the beauty of the vegetable markets; all she thinks of are the prices)” (America’s Rome II:255). The apparent misreading, the substitution of “prices” for “pictures,” is striking in light of the story’s central conflict. Ettie’s sole purpose in coming to Rome is to break the chains that bind her to domesticity and attempt to be taken seriously as an artist, but once there she is read in terms of a typically “feminine” role and then criticized for her failure to conform to the conventions of the (masculine) tourist. She is not thinking of the prices, but of her artwork. Yet she is chastised for allowing a stereotypically feminine concern to “blind” her to what a more sensitive (male) observer would notice.

Noel’s gender and class enable a certain indulgence in the way he perceives his surroundings: “Noel was . . . an artist—that is, a literary one. But he had been highly successful in his own field, and it was understood, also, that he had an income of his own by inheritance, which, if not opulence, was yet sufficiently large to lift him quite above the res angusta of his brethren in the craft” (183). As a man with inherited wealth, Noel would neither have to attend to practical matters nor be obligated to earn his living, leaving him free to browse the city for picturesqueness. A young woman from farm country, Ettie has a different relationship to European travel and to mobility: “It took a good deal to get here in the first place,” she tells Noel, “for we are poor” (179). With her twice-widowed mother, Ettie explains, she came from the West: “Tuscolee Falls is the name of our town. We had a farm there, but we did not do well with it after Mr. Spurr’s [her stepfather’s] death, so we rented it out” (173). Financial pressures follow Ettie throughout the story, constantly informing her decisions and determining her relationship to Rome.6

Ettie has struggled to fund her trip to Rome because she sees it as compulsory to her artistic training. In fact, Raymond Noel serves as both the
catalyst for the journey and the reward Ettie expects on arrival. As she tells him, she received the imperative to leave America while reading his critical work: “As you seemed to think, Mr. Noel, that no one could do well in painting who had not seen and studied the old pictures over here, I made up my mind to come over at any cost” (174). She underscores this point several times, insisting “it was your writings that brought me here” and declaring emphatically, “Why, Mr. Noel, I came to Europe to see you!” (174, 178). When Noel tries to disentangle himself from her with a stereotypical, tourist’s platitude, “I hope you will find Rome all you expected, and I am sure you will; all people of imagination like Rome,” she does not let him off so easily: “Rome will not be at all what I expected if you desert me” (178). Rome’s sole value to Ettie is that it houses Noel; his value is inestimable to her, for he can initiate her into the elite ranks of the art world.

Ettie’s dedication to her work allows her to overlook the reality of the Rome she can afford to inhabit: “We get along with it because we must; there seems to be no other way to live in Rome. The idea of having only a story of a house, and not a whole house to ourselves, is dreadful to mother; she cannot get used to it. And with so many families below us—we have a clock-mender, a dress-maker, an engraver, a print-seller, and a cobbler—and only one pair of stairs, it does seem to me dreadfully public” (176). Ettie’s Rome is both pragmatic and crowded. She devotes herself to her work even as she is surrounded by residents who must live with theirs. There is no doubt about Ettie’s working-class status; she is no tourist. Thus when Noel asserts, “Threads do not break in Rome. He had once said himself that the air was so soft and historic that nothing broke there—not even hearts,” it is not Ettie’s “air” that he is describing, but the air breathed by the upper classes. Rome is not soft or historic for her; quite the contrary, Rome requires so much work that Ettie’s daily cares eclipse the symbolic value of the landmarks around her: “One afternoon in March Miss Macks was coming home from the broad, new, tiresome piazza Indipendenza; the distance was long, and she walked with weariness” (208). The new piazza is notable more for the tedious crossing of it than for the republican promise or historical event it commemorates.

Ettie’s heart breaks in Rome under the strain of a twin burden: her obligation to support her sick mother and the discouragement of art teachers whose help she vainly solicits. After her art career collapses, financial obligations again determine her course. The traveler’s prerogative—to return home—is unavailable to her: “I doubt if my mother could bear the voyage now. We have no one to call us back but my brother, and he has not been with us for years, and would not be if we should return; he lives in California. We sold the farm, too, before we came. No; for the present, at
least, it is better for us to remain here” (197). She remains in Rome to open her school and eventually to marry Noel when the school itself, her home and livelihood, is destroyed. The Pantheon, representative of classical aesthetics and ancient pagan worship, wins the battle against the encroaching streets around it, despite their commercial and residential vitality. The street of the Hyacinth is destroyed so that it will no longer “disfigure” the traditional simplicity of the monument, much as Ettie’s artistic flame must be extinguished so that Noel’s can continue to blaze.7

Rome has a much less obvious presence in “‘Miss Grief,’” where it is invoked in name more than in detail or imagery. For the narrator, the city is appealing primarily for the active social life it offers. “I had a large number of acquaintances there,” the narrator boasts, “both American and English, and no day passed without its invitation” (248). His wealth essentially isolates him from the country he inhabits, so that he associates with his own compatriots and has little interaction with Italian life and culture.8 Aaronna, immersed in a “crowded and unclean” Roman neighborhood, experiences no such isolation. Moreover, like Ettie, Aaronna has no option of leaving town, so on her deathbed she must beg the narrator on behalf of her elderly aunt, “Help her to return home—to America: the drama will pay for it. I ought never to have brought her away” (268). The tragic truth is that the drama cannot fund the aunt’s travel, for the narrator has lied about having sold it to a publisher. However, the deathbed scene serves Woolson as an opportunity to express a rarely seen and cynical nationalism. Referring to his lie about the drama’s supposed publication, the narrator pointedly asks the reader, “What was I to answer? Pray, what would you have answered, puritan?” (266). The context and the label, “puritan,” seem to undermine patriotic sentiment by foregrounding a particularly austere tradition in American culture. Such references are few in these two Roman stories, which do not concern themselves much with America’s national traits. Here, the question and the cynical form of address underscore the narrator’s insecurity about his own behavior. His eagerness to justify his dishonesty by lashing out at the (American, judgmental) reader may suggest his guilt for not having worked harder to see the drama published.

As Torsney points out, “‘Miss Grief’” is “the first story [Woolson] published after her mother’s death and her own removal abroad” (The Grief of Artistry 72), which perhaps explains Rome’s minor role in the action. By the time she published “The Street of the Hyacinth” two years later, she had had more opportunity to ponder the city’s importance to her narrative themes.9 As I have argued, the city ultimately represents patriarchal tradition, which complicates Torsney’s assertion that for Woolson, as for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Italy came to be ‘the nurturing matria of a
“woman of genius” (ibid., 107). Torsney borrows the phrase “nurturing matria” from Sandra Gilbert’s essay, “From Patria to Matria: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Risorgimento,” which explores the construction of Italy as a “woman country” by nineteenth-century women writers. Referring to Italy’s “special status as the home, even the womb, of European art,” Gilbert contrasts the “natural emotiveness of this mother country” with “the icy artifice of Victorian culture” and refers to “the qualities women writers have sought in Italy—a land that feels, that feeds, that makes art, and that unmakes hierarchies” (197, 207). Motherly though it may be to other nineteenth-century women writers, Italy has none of these characteristics in Woolson’s Roman stories, where artist-heroines seek warmth and nurturing but find only the rigid walls of patriarchy manifested in stern mentors and impoverished neighborhoods.

In representing the artistic world of Rome as male, Woolson’s work revises the gendered relationship between Italy and the United States as it has traditionally been conceptualized. Nathalia Wright paraphrases Henry James’s gendering of nations thus: “In contrast to the ‘good married matron’ England and the ‘magnificent man’ Switzerland, Italy was, he promptly reported, ‘a beautiful, dishevelled nymph’” (200). With Italy comfortably coded female, literature of the encounter between Italy and the United States could assert American masculinity, a paradigm that informs much nineteenth-century travel writing and also provides Gilbert with a maternal Italy to serve as a nurturing force for women writers. In Woolson’s reconceptualization, however, the masculine power structure of both countries ostracizes those women who are dissatisfied with the domesticity prescribed for them. The Rome Ettie flees to is as much a masculine haven as the America she left behind, a city where critics like Noel “lived up with a good deal of determination to [their] own standard of what was manly” (198).

Indeed, Woolson seems to have been unable to feel at home in either country, and even her attempt to deliteralize home by telling Henry James, “Your writings are my country, my real home” (quoted in Weimer xxi), left her with the challenge of accommodating herself to a masculine space. As criticism has established, for James and his American characters, Italy is central to the process of self-realization: “In going to Italy, Anglo-Saxons in James’ fiction are thus potentially completing their experience, developing all their faculties” (Wright 219). For Woolson’s Aaronna and Ettie, the result is precisely the opposite, as both characters are denied their artistic faculties in Rome and move away from self-realization rather than toward it. If we accept Mary P Edwards Kitterman’s convincing argument that “to James it was clear that the masculine imagination was superior to the
feminine” (46), we find that Woolson was left with no sanctuary, no space that would validate both her existence as a woman and her ambition as an artist. Unfortunately, all of the homes—America, Rome, James’s texts—Woolson sought to inhabit were controlled by masculine forces, and all were implicated in the cultural imperative that sought to domesticate her.

“Bounded on All Sides”: Domesticity as Subjugation

In “Miss Grief,” the narrator's description of Isabel as “bounded on all sides” suggests the confinement fundamental to femininity. The distance between “bounded” and “bound” is short, both rhetorically and culturally. Woolson’s Roman stories describe a world in which the restrictions advocated by men, the femininity they project onto women to make themselves comfortable, translates into bondage for the woman artist, a position of extreme dis-comfort that the characters must accept when they perceive no other options. As a “violet in a garden,” the artist is denied her freedom and subjectivity, refused a central component of her identity. The creative energy that the male critic seeks to exorcise or subdue is more than a hobby or sideline for Woolson's artist characters. Art serves as the primary motivator in their lives; they construct themselves around this pivotal desire. Removing it works as a kind of dismemberment, after which, though they may survive, they can never be whole.

For Aaronna, life has no meaning if she is denied the right to be an artist. She tells the narrator, after he has praised her manuscript, “If your sentence had been against me, it would have been my end,” then continues, “I should have destroyed myself.” The narrator’s response, uttered “in a tone of disgust,” demonstrates his mainstream sensibility as well as his ignorance of Aaronna’s situation: “Then you should have been a weak as well as a wicked woman.” She counters, “Oh no, you know nothing about it. I should have destroyed only this poor worn tenement of clay. But I can well understand how you would look upon it. Regarding the desirableness of life, the prince and the beggar may have different opinions” (258).

Aaronna recognizes that the narrator’s princely rank entitles him not only to social prominence but also to literary success. As a woman artist, she has been relegated to the status of beggar; her economic class confines her to “the most wretched quarters of the city”; furthermore, she has to beg the narrator to read her drama (266). When he resists her request, she asks him, “Look at me, and have pity,” then refuses to sit down until he gives his promise. She realizes the tactics she must employ to garner his attention but asserts calmly, “I have no shame in asking. Why should I have? It is my
last endeavor; but a calm and well-considered one” (254). There is no question about Aaronna’s commitment to her work. She will (and must) risk all for the chance of its success and forfeit life altogether if her work cannot succeed. Indeed, her life is so intimately tied to her work that when the narrator praises her efforts and gives her hope, “her whole frame [is] shaken by the strength of her emotion” (257). When the manuscripts stagnate at the narrator’s apartment, she weakens and eventually dies.

Ettie also makes sacrifices toward a similar ambition, which lead Noel to observe, by way of consoling her after they have married and she has given up her artistic career, “But the heights upon which you had placed yourself, my dear, were too superhuman” (290). Ettie, like Aaronna, was empowered by the scale of her ambition to overcome obstacles and arrive in Rome but is ultimately doomed to be silenced through a process of domestication. The threat they pose to the male artists is precisely this willingness to dare, without fear, that stands in opposition to the relative conservatism of men who praise training, form, and tradition—all that gives value to the predictable, “exquisitely rendered representation.” Another story Woolson wrote from abroad, “At the Chateau of Corinne” (1886), displays in full detail the attitude of the man who fears a woman’s creative “wildness” and needs to contain it.

“At the Chateau” takes place in Switzerland rather than Italy but again explores the trap that imprisons the woman artist. In a frequently quoted passage, John Ford seeks to undermine Mrs. Winthrop’s desire to compose poetry by presenting her with a gendered construction of creativity:

We do not expect great poems from women any more than we expect great pictures; we do not expect strong logic any more than we expect brawny muscle. A woman’s poetry is subjective. But what cannot be forgiven—at least in my opinion—is that which I have called the distinguishing feature of [your] volume, a certain sort of daring. This is its essential, unpardonable sin. Not because it is in itself dangerous; it has not force enough for that; but because it comes, and can be recognized at once as coming, from the lips of a woman. For a woman should not dare in that way. (233)

Ford betrays anxiety when he moves from a “natural” order into an invective against women who seek to transgress established boundaries. If, in fact, the natural order is immutable, why must he warn off the woman who dares to do differently? Besides, if it lacks “force,” why is this “daring” so threatening? Ford’s compulsion to condemn the literary efforts of women like Mrs. Winthrop may suggest his fear that these efforts will not always self-destruct. A “daring” artistic feat that flouts convention and
demonstrates precisely what traditional creativity is not, perhaps exposes the artistic rigidity (and cowardice) that characterized the mainstream art world of Ford’s day. Equally threatening would be the suggestion that the “natural” state of gender roles is, in fact, a cultural construction, one that could be dismantled by a daring woman.

The narrator in “Miss Grief” attempts for similar reasons to domesticate Aaronna’s work and to make it conform to the masculine parameters that have permitted his success: “I would alter and improve [the drama] myself, without letting her know: the end justifies the means. Surely the sieve of my own good taste, whose mesh had been pronounced so fine and delicate, would serve for two. I began; and utterly failed.” Despite his training and insider status—his “sieve” that weeds out bad literary taste—the narrator’s powers are useless when applied to Aaronna’s work: “I could not succeed in completing anything that satisfied me, or that approached, in truth, Miss Grief’s own work just as it stood” (264). Rather than acknowledge a talent so different from his own, the narrator decides to try editing another piece of writing, with similar results. The fruitless endeavors confront the narrator with a quandary, a dichotomy in which he can choose neither option: “I was forced at last to make up my mind that either my own powers were not equal to the task, or else that her perversities were as essential a part of the work as her inspirations, and not to be separated from it” (265). The narrator’s rhetoric places on one hand his own weakness and on the other an inspiration that must be vilified as perversity.

His solution is to show the work to Isabel, his “bounded violet,” which does nothing to solve the riddle but does reaffirm his masculine power and return him to a universe ordered according to gender. When the narrator tells Isabel, “They were written by a woman,” Isabel responds reassuringly, “Her mind must have been disordered, poor thing!” Although Isabel defends her lover’s value system by describing the works as “hopelessly mixed and vague,” the narrator recognizes that Aaronna’s writing is “not so much vague as vast.” The vastness is what troubles him, yet he does not share this thought with Isabel: “I knew that I could not make Isabel comprehend it, and (so complex a creature is man) I do not know that I wanted her to comprehend it” (ibid.). Rather than resolve the conflict Aaronna’s work forces him to confess, which would require accepting either the inadequacy of his own powers or the strength of Aaronna’s “perversities,” the narrator buries the whole issue by slipping into the comforting contemplation of Isabel’s likeness to a garden flower. Similarly, he buries Aaronna’s work, locking it up so that it can never be published. The only solution that allows the narrator to retain his illusions about himself and the prerequisites for “good” writing is the utter and fatal domestication of Aaronna’s art.
Ultimately, the “perversity” of her work, its “vast” ambition, is so threatening to the established order that it must be kept “in a locked case” and, after the narrator’s death, “destroyed unread” (269).

Domestication is precisely what John Ford advocates, in “At the Chateau of Corinne,” as a man’s “natural” response to a woman’s “daring”:

Thinking to soar, she invariably descends. Her mental realm is not the same as that of man; lower, on the same level, or far above, it is at least different. And to see her leave it, and come in all her white purity, which must inevitably be soiled, to the garish arena where men are contending, where the dust is rising, and the air is tainted and heavy—this is indeed a painful sight. Every honest man feels like going to her, poor mistaken sibyl that she is, closing her lips with gentle hand, and leading her away to some far spot among the quiet fields, where she can learn her error, and begin her life anew. (234)

In Ford’s fantasy, romantic love silences a woman and removes her from the sphere in which she wants to contend. Far away from the public (male) realm—where men interact, struggle, and succeed—in the “quiet fields,” a woman is safe from influences that might hurt her—or allow her to grow. Ford’s analogy serves as a blueprint for what eventually happens to Katharine Winthrop when she accepts the “error” of wanting to be a poet. To Ford’s command, “You will write no more,” she responds, “I will promise” (246). The story’s final scene depicts a chatty John Ford, an unnamed visitor, and a completely silent Katharine, who is addressed by Ford but not permitted to respond.

A similar fate befalls Ettie when the art teacher who tells her to “throw away [her] brushes and take in sewing” (196) ultimately gets his way. By the story’s end, Ettie has relinquished artistic study entirely, and the last image shows her completely caged and domesticated, substituting the illusion of freedom for the creative freedom she pursued so passionately when the story began. In the story’s final paragraphs, Ettie’s desires are completely eclipsed by those of Raymond Noel and her mother, Mrs. Spurr. Noel gets his girl without the inconvenience of her artistic aspirations; Mrs. Spurr gets to enjoy the advantages of Noel’s economic class and return (following a brief period of mourning for her son) to her outrageous manner of dress. Ettie exists now as wife and daughter, the identity “artist” erased so completely that she fades silently into the background. This final portrait seems all the more regrettable when contrasted with the talkative and assertive Ettie who arrived hopefully in Rome and struggled valiantly toward her artistic goals through much of the narrative.
In order to assume an appropriately feminine demeanor, Ettie must lose her assertiveness. Fellow travelers on her initial voyage to Europe say of Ettie, “If she was a little more womanly—that is, if she would not look at everything in such a direct, calm, impartial, impersonal sort of way—she would be almost pretty” (176). Later, when she has resigned herself to the role of schoolteacher, Noel remarks how attractive she looks: “The expression of her face had greatly altered. The old direct, wide glance was gone; gone also was what he had called her over-confidence; she looked much older. On the other hand, there was more grace in her bearing, more comprehension of life in her voice and eyes” (194). Ettie’s submission to constraining forces means, for Noel, that she becomes “pretty” to the extent that she loses what is “direct” about her character, including her art. She must abandon what Noel reads as “over-confidence” to be domesticated into a graceful, passive acceptance of her station. The irony is that Noel finds her most attractive after the combined forces of poverty and sexism have beaten her down. Ettie’s life seems a literalized example of the figurative expression “housebroken.”

Katharine Winthrop also becomes more “womanly” in her suitor’s eyes when she has been properly harnessed. Indeed, Ford can tender his marriage proposal only after Katharine has become destitute: “I am sorry on your account that your fortune is gone; but on my own, how can I help being glad? It was a barrier between us. . . . I doubt if I should ever have surmounted it. Your loss brings you nearer to me. . . . Now if you are my wife—and a tenderly loved wife you will be—you will in a measure be dependent upon your husband, and that is very sweet to a self-willed man like myself” (246). When Katherine is stripped of her free will (or self-will), she becomes the perfect woman and wife. Only Aaronna escapes incarceration in marriage, but she must sacrifice her life to gain this “freedom.” The progression of the stories chronologically, from “‘Miss Grief’” to “The Street of the Hyacinth” to “At the Chateau of Corinne” (also a marriage tale) may suggest that Woolson saw less of a way out for her women characters as time passed and she saw more of Europe. Although Aaronna dies without seeing her manuscripts published, she certainly represents the least domesticated of Woolson’s artist-heroines; she practices her art for as long as she lives, believes she has succeeded (because the narrator has lied to her), and never has to trade in her art for a husband and economic survival.

Of course, it would be counterproductive to read too much liberatory potential into a character whose success, or subversion, is death. My point is to propose a thematic progression in Woolson’s portrayals of women artists. The heroine of Woolson’s novel Anne, published serially between 1880 and 1882 and written before her European stories, seems to fare better than
Aaronna, Ettie, and Katharine. Cheryl Torsney argues that Anne’s “narrative talents grow until, at the climax of the novel, Anne demonstrates her new mastery of narrative form” (“Traditions” 178). Whereas Torsney concedes that “writing her own text of self and arriving at her own identity has not been easy for Anne” (ibid.), this resolution became all but impossible for the characters who succeeded her. From Anne’s construction of self to Aaronna’s death to the marital self-sacrifice of Ettie and Katharine seems a painful journey that probes ever more deeply into the subjugating potential of the nineteenth-century’s rigid gender roles.

Master and Disciple

It seems impossible to talk about Constance Fenimore Woolson without discussing the theme of mentorship, and impossible to talk about mentors in her work without bringing up Henry James. Yet it also seems important to resist falling into the trap of relegating Woolson to a minor status alongside the great James. Torsney points out that Woolson’s “life and writing have always been marginalized, have always been read as ancillary to James’s” and that “Woolson . . . has been remembered as the journeywoman, the protégée, who relied on James for guidance” (ibid., 170). It is equally important to me to avoid reductive biographical readings that seek only to note parallels between art and life. Critical discussions of Woolson and James as the real-life equivalents of May Bartram and John Marcher in “The Beast in the Jungle” are common enough that no more is needed on the subject. Any discussion of James seems to risk displacing Woolson, yet the thematic correspondence between their works demands attention. Between 1880 and 1888, both writers published stories that take as their central conflict the relationship between mentor and student.

Both James and Woolson were compelled to work out, over and over, the related concepts of apprenticeship and mastery. In the work of both, moreover, the power relationship between master and disciple intersects with the power dynamics of gender. This thematic correspondence is worth pursuing, as the work of each author sheds light upon that of the other. James published “The Lesson of the Master” in 1888, two years after Woolson’s “At the Chateau of Corinne” came out. In 1888 James also published his biographical work, Partial Portraits, a collection of sketches about selected writers—George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Robert Louis Stevenson, Guy de Maupassant—which included an essay titled “Miss Woolson.” Clearly, during the 1880s the two writers were much concerned with the mentorship theme and with each other. In
contrast to the critical tendency to subordinate Woolson as the apprentice or to offer her historical relationship with James as some magical key to understanding her work, I want to examine how Woolson’s stories foreground and develop a theme that remains conveniently uninterrogated in James’s work.

James’s “Lesson of the Master” portrays Paul Overt, a young, apprentice writer whose life is dramatically altered following a series of encounters with an influential and successful older author, Henry St. George. The master teaches his protégé two crucial lessons, one explicit and the other implied, both betraying the privileges of the male artist. The explicit and intentional lesson, alluded to in the title, is a warning to Overt about the dangers of selling out: “[T]ake my lesson to heart—for it is a lesson... Don’t become in your old age what I have in mine—the depressing, the deplorable illustration of the worship of false gods.” He defines these “false gods” as material comforts: “money and luxury and ‘the world’” (93). Notably, a young woman who also harbors literary ambitions, Marian Fancourt, is not taken so seriously by the “master.” In her case, the teacher/master St. George assumes the role of “lord and master” and, rather than warning her about the temptations of success, dismisses Miss Fancourt’s artistic ambitions and makes her instead into his wife.

This more insidious, gendered lesson underlies the plot and fuels the narrative action for much of the story. In repeated conversations, St. George conveys to Overt and to the reader that artistic prowess and rights are (and must be) transmitted along an all-male line of inheritance. As Overt becomes enamored of Miss Fancourt, St. George cautions him to steer clear of romantic love, insisting that women “interfere with perfection,” that they “haven’t a conception of such things” as literary works. Resisting his master’s argument, Overt objects, “Surely they on occasion work themselves,” to which St. George responds, “Yes, very badly indeed. Oh, of course, often they think they understand, they think they sympathize. Then it is they’re most dangerous” (116). Overt persists in his questioning: “Are there no women who really understand—who can take part in a sacrifice?” St. George’s answer crystallizes the patriarchal view of women’s role in artistic production: “How can they take part? They themselves are the sacrifice. They’re the idol and the altar and the flame” (119). Relegated to a position of illusory power, Miss Fancourt need not trouble herself about the choice between integrity and greed. Constructed as an object with value only in relation to men, she is cast either as an impediment to artistic creativity or as a harmless image that cannot participate in a man’s domain, but never as an artist. As objects rather than subjects, women can be controlled. The James story charts this lesson’s impact on
Overt, who, duly inspired by his teacher, goes on to attempt a true work of genius, leaving Miss Fancourt behind to make wedding plans and fawn over other people’s writing. In contrast, Woolson’s stories pursue the implications of this lesson on the women whom it dismisses, charting the fate of apprentice female artists after they learn the sobering truth from their masters. The implicit lesson, artistic production’s sexist underpinnings, becomes explicit in Woolson’s work.

Raymond Noel, too cowardly to teach the lesson directly in “The Street of the Hyacinth,” sends Ettie the message that she cannot succeed as an artist first by sending her to “the most incorruptibly honest teacher in Rome” (183) and then by mailing her a pointed selection of books. His dirty work is eventually done, not by the teacher, who falls in love with Ettie, but by the cumulative weight of the books and Ettie’s own experiences in Rome. “Knowing the world as I now know it,” she explains to her ineffec-
tual mentor, “I see that it was all that could have been expected” (196). The lesson Ettie learns from Noel is that she cannot defeat patriarchal power, that she has no choice but to resign herself to the second master who falls in love with her, that male teachers can conceptualize her only as an object of desire. Ettie’s role is that outlined by St. George; she shall be the altar at which Noel makes his artistic sacrifices. Similar to the “altar of affection” Nancy Cott locates in the idealized nineteenth-century home, the altar of artistic sacrifice renders women symbols rather than agents. Thus women sacrifice their individuality to become constants against which men can define and strengthen themselves. Even Aaronna, though she manages to escape marriage and the concomitant relinquishing of art, gets appropriat-
ed and objectified by her master, who keeps her work “as a memento” and who refers to her in the story’s last line as “my poor dead, ‘unavailable,’ unaccepted ‘Miss Grief’ ” (269, emphasis added). The rhetoric casts Aaronna in the same position as the other two women who become wives—as the possession of a man.

Woolson’s stories differ from James’s by acknowledging a crucial difference between the power structure that keeps women subordinated to men and the subordination of the disciple to the master. The disciple is permit-
ted, even encouraged, to grow artistically and eventually displace his master. Gender constructions, on the other hand, insist that a woman’s weakness is essential and unconquerable. Her only option is to accept her sub-
ordinate status and occupy the position of humble wife, thus garnering for herself the fictitious power romantic discourse produces. John Ford com-
mands Katharine, “You may not care for me; you may never care. But only let me see you accept for your own sake what I have said, in the right spir-
it, and I will at least ask you to care, as humbly and devotedly as man ever
asked woman. For when she is her true self she is so far above us that we can only be humble” (235). The convolutions of Ford’s logic allow him to assert that Katharine’s “true self” will appear only after she has accepted his sermon on the weaknesses of her poetry—that is, someone else’s construction of her identity. He ascribes to this true self a superiority, which upon examination turns out to be the power to submit. Placed on the altar against her will and forced to relinquish her individuality and her passions, Katharine achieves the hollow victory that exemplifies the fate of the woman artist in Woolson’s work.

The theme of the woman artist in Rome occupied Woolson’s life and fiction, its complexities both nourishing her art and overpowering her own identity. She recognized how patriarchy deployed its power, and her stories represent her attempt to expose the underside of accepted, nineteenth-century gender roles. However, gender politics were changing in the later decades of the nineteenth century, as Woolson’s work indicates. Woolson’s fiction took root and grew in the pivotal space between the separate spheres rhetoric of the mid-nineteenth century and talk of a New Woman at the turn of the century. The complexities of her stories contributed to and reflect the turmoil of the era, her struggles as a writer enabling the early phases of a shift in women’s conceptions of themselves that would develop over the years up to and after the First World War. Woolson’s artist characters argued for a new acknowledgment of women’s power and helped pave the way for the modern woman, who would appear in Edith Wharton’s short story “Roman Fever.”