

*Felony* by Emma Tennant (Jonathan Cape, R260)

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In 1887, Henry James was told the intriguing story of one Claire Clairmont, step-sister-in-law of the poet Shelley, and one-time mistress of Lord Byron who, having outlived all her Romantic contemporaries, lived in Florence till 1879, cherishing her memories and, more interestingly to the outside world, a collection of letters and documents pertaining to Shelley. Living with her was her great-niece, a spinster of fifty, and one Edward Silsbee, a sea-captain from Boston, who had established himself as lodger in the house in the hopes of gaining access to the Shelley papers. When Claire died, her niece proposed marriage to Silsbee as a condition for giving him the papers. The man fled.

The story so intrigued James that he turned it into a novella, *The Aspern Papers*, which he wrote largely while staying in Florence with an old friend, the American writer Constance Fenimore Woolson -- a talented and successful but unhappy woman who committed suicide in Venice in 1894.

From this fascinating material Emma Tennant has fashioned her latest novel, using as her main source Lyndall Gordon's engrossing but contentious study, *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and his Art*. Her two main centres of consciousness are Henry James and Georgina, the young daughter of Claire Clairmont's niece, and the story alternates between the magisterial novelist pursuing his subject, mainly in Venice, and the noisy, crowded, tempestuous house in Florence in which the three women are besieged by any number of Shelley enthusiasts scavenging for mementoes. This is interspersed with episodes dealing with Constance (whom James always referred to as 'Fenimore') and her unrequited love for James.

Tennant's aim is to establish a parallel between the 'publishing scoundrel' in *The Aspern Papers*, who makes overtures to the spinster niece in order to gain access to the papers, and James himself in his friendship with Constance, about which more later.

Tennant deploys her unruly cast with some skill, keeping track of their contradictory and competing wants and desires; developing the daily details of domestic life in Florence, contrasting the awakening sexuality of Georgina with the decadent couplings of her mother and the sea-captain, and the erotic-romantic memories of Claire. Throughout, the women are seen as victims of male selfishness: Clairmont deprived by Byron of their illegitimate daughter, then courted by other men for her memories of Byron and Shelley; Georgina, surrounded by adult sexuality, falling in love with another associate of her great-aunt's, the lecherous old Edward Trelawny, who would have been eighty five at the time.

But above all, Tennant labours the exploitation of Constance Woolson by Henry James. She takes from her source the implication that James was jealous of Woolson's commercial success as a novelist at a time when his own novels were not selling, and rides it for all it is worth. She has opted for the view of James as the selfish and manipulative partner in an unequal relationship, and interprets all her facts in the light of that.

James's main villainy, according to Tennant, was that wanting, perhaps, to hide from the world or himself his own homosexuality (Tennant does not make his motive very clear) he leads Woolson on into expecting him to propose marriage, and then, fastidiously

disgusted by an inelegant phrase she uses, abandons her to loneliness and eventually suicide. This is after he has pointedly presented her with a copy of *The Aspern Papers* in which she is cruelly "travestied" as the spinster, Miss Tina: ". . . Constance Woolson has been made ill with alarm and horror. . . In . . . his new work. . . , her dear friend Henry -- her 'intimate' friend indeed -- has travestied her for all times and for all the world to see. . . [T]he gifted author has shown his Fenimore as -- in his words . . . -- a 'ridiculous and pathetic old woman'."

Here Tennant departs sharply from her source. For all her critical view of James, Gordon sees the equation of him with the villain of *The Aspern Papers* as based on "a biographic premise for which there is no evidence, that Fenimore hunted a husband. Certainly, she wanted James in her own way, but not marriage. Miss Tina is unintellectual, lean, dingy, naïve, and domestically incompetent; Fenimore was the opposite."

Of course, Tennant's book is a novel, not a biography, and she is free to take such liberties with her material as suits her purpose. But in the present instance her distortion of the facts does not serve her tale well: Turning James into a vindictive manipulator (and a bit of a flouncing old queen), she impoverishes her subject. James, as depicted by Tennant, lacks all nuance: he is obsessively concerned with his own reputation, when he is not making eyes at young men. Indeed, the whole intrigue of James's treatment of Fenimore, his alleged anxiety about salvaging some compromising letters he had written her, his cruelty in mocking her in his novella, his identification with his own villain, ring totally false in the absence of any convincing motivation. Henry James as recreated by Emma Tennant is a thin and superficial excuse for an idea that fails to animate her fiction.

Fenimore, too, in Tennant's version, becomes a pathetic victim rather than the resourceful and courageous woman she was: "Constance Fenimore Woolson is, to put it bluntly, a fat old sow. How could she have imagined herself as the future Mrs Henry James?"

Elaine Showalter is quoted on the book jacket as calling this "a welcome tribute to a little-known American woman writer". Since the book in fact suggests that Woolson recognised herself in James's portrait as a ridiculous and pathetic old woman, it is hardly a tribute to a woman who was not only a successful novelist, but an independent and unconventional spirit.

The point of turning biography into fiction is presumably to use the imagination to fill out the bare bones of fact. In this instance, the really quite sufficiently subtle and complex relationships that scholarship has made available to us are cheapened and vulgarised by their fictional treatment. Readers interested in the documentary evidence would be better advised to read Lyndall Gordon; readers interested in its fictional transmutation should opt for *The Aspern Papers*.