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Review: Abdalla on Larsen: 66-67

Haley Larsen. "'The Spirit of Electricity': Henry James's *In the Cage* and Electric Female Imagination at the Turn of the Century." *Configurations* 26, 4 (2018): 357-387.

In Haley Larsen's article, "'The Spirit of Electricity': Henry James's *In the Cage* and Electric Female Imagination at the Turn of the Century," she argues that James's 1898 novella showcases the emancipatory potential for gender inherent in the developing technologies of electricity. Larsen reads the novella alongside medical and scientific texts to demonstrate the ways in which "electricity might hold the potential to profoundly expand physical and psychological horizons for women" (365). According to Larsen, the telegraphist of the story effectively "becomes a successful telegraphic medium who fleetingly conjures a subversive intimate connection across great psychic distances" (368). Key to the formulation is the way that telegraphic potential can be considered a horizon for telepathic potential, allowing new conceptions of inter- and intrapersonal communication.

Larsen provides a welcome perspective on an author whose aesthetic formulations have long obscured his embeddedness within his historical surroundings, even if critical discussions of James's interest and representations of the telegraph have been an exception to this rule. Offering a different perspective from, for example, Richard Menke's "Telegraphic Realism: Henry James's *In the Cage*" (2000), (whom Larsen cites), Larsen's article treats the telegraph not in the vein of technological revolution but uses it to track James's interest in the advent of electric power. Larsen's argument is strongest when it considers the ways that James's telegraphist challenges "the movement toward empiricism" as she "prefer[s] undefinable electric intimacy to clear scientific definitions" (382). This emphasis means that Larsen is able to read James's sustained references to the telegraphist's "vivid mental pictures and active imagination" as a type of personal and possibly political resistance, rendered in a specific idea of female consciousness. The analysis puts particular emphasis on the final scene of the novella, in which the "telegraphist's 'sightless' gaze out onto the horizon and her innumerable thoughts curiously haunt the end of the story" (385). Larsen reads this as an opening up that "articulates those haunting strains of clairvoyant, telepathic impossibilities that electricity might make possible," thereby differentiating her argument from those other critics who have read the novella as a "closed narrative circuit" (367).

Although Larsen does not make the connection, her discussion of the potential inhered in this "electric" conception of female consciousness might be used to link James's work, which is sometimes considered a proto-modernist novella, to more popular forms of late-Victorian fiction. Particularly, one thinks of Anne Stiles's discussion of the works of the novelist Marie Corelli in her *Popular Fiction and Brain Science in the Late Nineteenth Century* (2012), which emphasizes the ways in which Corelli productively adapted the latest research in neuroscience to fit spiritualist interests of her female readership. Like James, these potentials for new communicative possibilities were based on an understanding and conception of electrical signals. Additionally, Larsen's emphasis on the pleasures that the telegraphist takes in her personal fantasies might possibly be related to the treatment of the now-defunct technology of the "pleasure telephone." As recently discussed by Amelia Bonea (et al) in *Anxious Times: Medicine & Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2019), the short-lived pleasure telephone was used across Europe in the

1890s to broadcast entertainment to subscribers. In the same vein as James's conception of the telegraph, which might allow for new sites of resistance, the recovery of the pleasure telephone serves as a reminder that the history of technological advancement was not always smoothly progressive or impersonally utilitarian.

It is surprising that despite Larsen's discussion of psychical research, she does not consider the influence of James's brother, the noted philosopher and psychologist William James who was one-time president of the Society for Psychical Research. Similarly to Larsen's reading of the telegraphist, Clare Pettitt has argued in her 2016 article, "Henry James Tethered and Stretched: The Materiality of Metaphor," that another James protagonist, Lambert Strether from *The Ambassadors*, enacts the telegraph's "'queer extension of experience' by electric messaging" (150). Pettit brings William into her argument in order to trace the similarities of what might be called interdisciplinary interests in the limits of materialism. A discussion of the intellectual relationship between the two brothers may have helped to better situate Larsen's argument in its historical context: indeed, this historical context can feel a bit tethered and stretched itself given that Larsen repeatedly emphasizes the American context despite the firm placement of James and his characters in England.

Despite these omissions, Larsen's article is a timely intervention into studies of James's works particularly and the field of Literature and Science more generally. Larsen concludes that "scholars might discover ever-expanding horizons of curiosity left to explore between literature, electrical sciences, and female consciousness," and the analysis of *In the Cage* reveals it as a fine place to begin that journey (387).

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