



# Baroque and Female Body: From Ecstasy to Madness in Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*

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RESEARCH

 ubiquity press

## ABSTRACT

Henry James's critics suggest numerous form-conscious reasons for his serpentine meaning-making aesthetics. Seeing the undecidability of James's proto-modernist narrative on a par with that of the baroque aesthetics, this paper cites the inscribable essence of the female body in James's materialism as one undiscussed reason. In the theories of écriture feminine or feminine writing, the female writer's integrity with her body serves as the source of logic for the writing practice that revolts against phallogocentric conventions. In search of a concrete example for this assertion, I celebrate the content-conscious contemporaneity between James's *What Maisie Knew* and New Woman writing in light of four common motifs: the psycho-ethical analysis of (1) the protagonist's melancholic mother-daughter relationship and (2) her quest for truth paves the way for the essentialist insight into (3) the privilege of feminine aesthetics and (4) the emancipated motion of the New Woman's body. The secondary objective of this paper is to celebrate the ideological return of the baroque in James's proto-modernism through such topoi as imperfect beauty, motion, and madness so as to introduce the meaning-making role of the body in his impressionistic integrity of subject and object.

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## KEYWORDS:

Baroque; Écriture Feminine;  
Female Body; Henry James;  
New Woman Writing

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Mosavat, Mohamad.  
"Baroque and Female Body:  
From Ecstasy to Madness in  
Henry James's *What Maisie  
Knew*". *Anglo Saxonica*,  
No. 21, issue 1, art. 3, 2023,  
pp. 1–14. DOI: [https://doi.  
org/10.5334/as.111](https://doi.org/10.5334/as.111)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Henry James's meaning-making aesthetics is uneasy and baffling. In the labyrinth of his fiction, the reader comes to the same conclusion that his brother William once reached about his "curliness," that is, his authorial intention "to avoid naming it [his meaning] straight" (277). For James's convoluted aesthetics, his critics list such form-conscious reasons as his explicit and implicit "use of foreign words and phrases" (McIntyre 359), the resistance of his syntax "against explicit reference" (Mary Cross 3), and the "[c]ontradictions, inconsistencies, [and] obstructive irrelevancies" existing between his sentences (Bell 8). However, James's corporeal materialism is an overlooked reason, which can be defined as the meaning-making role the female body plays as an integrated sign in his fictional world of objects. This definition stems from the analogy Jean-Christophe Agnew draws between the painting of James's era and his writing strategy in that they both present the union of "self and object" (147). This article proposes the (feminine) aesthetics of the baroque as James's source of inspiration for this union on the assumption that the undecidability of his proto-modernist narrative can be illustrated by an analogy with the female body which, due to its multiple erogenous zones, resists a self-contained composition. Unlike Marie-Odile Salati and Julian Cowley, who explore the modernist manifestations of baroque art, respectively, in the Venetian setting of James's *The Wings of the Dove* and the philosophical thoughts of James's *The Sacred Fount*, this essay associates baroque aesthetics with the theories of such post-structural feminists as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva to suggest New Woman writing, the feminist literature contemporaneous with James's late fiction, as a transgressive feminine writing practice.

James's contribution to the emancipatory ideas of the 'New Woman' manifests itself in his realistic portrayals of the unmarried and independent women who have the freedom to not only dress in a tailor-made and masculine style, walk alone, and ride a bicycle in London's streets but also renegotiate the Victorian conventions of marriage and sexuality. However, this paper is not limited to the character analyses of his New-Womanish heroines, but the point of departure is the New Woman's craze for novelty and experimentation in writing that even such a voice of dissent as Hugh Stutfield admits to; Stutfield introduces New Woman as "the woman of to-day striving to shake off old shackles" (115), "discontent[ed] with the existing order of things," and "consumed with a desire for new experiences, new sensations, new objects in life" (105). Based on the four motifs I found similar between James's *What Maisie Knew* and New Woman short fiction, I lift the veil on the transgressive aspects of this feminine writing on account of the "flexibility and freedom [it exercises] from the traditional plots of the (...) Victorian novel, (...) which invariably ended in the heroine's marriage or her death" (Showalter, *Daughters of Decadence* viii–xi). Quite like the New Woman writer who creates an uncertain future for her heroine to perplex the reader with the prospect of her quest for emancipation, James in *What Maisie Knew* creates a cloud of ambiguity for the social future of his young protagonist, Maisie Farange. In what follows, I first analyze Maisie's disrupted relationship with her irresponsibly absent mother in light of Julia Kristeva's critique of melancholia. Then, Maisie's evolutionary path to the ultimate truth of New Woman fiction is reassessed drawing on Michel Foucault's notions of madness and confinement. Finally, Luce Irigaray's and Hélène Cixous's essentialist critiques of feminine jouissance are employed to prove the supremacy of feminine aesthetics in Maisie's materialistic vision and to explore restlessness and fluidity—two distinguished features of feminine jouissance manifested in the emancipated motion of the New Woman's body—in James's kinesthetic imagery.

## 2. MATERNAL ABSENCE

### 2.1. KRISTEVIAN MELANCHOLIA

Maternal absence is one of the recurrent motifs of New Woman writing. Grace in Ada Radford's "Lot 99" complains of her inadequate knowledge about her maternal ancestors—her Aunt Lizzie avoids calling the name of Grace's dead mother and instead uses the phrase "your poor dear mother" (Radford, "Lot 99" 268). The protagonist of Egerton's "A Cross Line" is sorrowful for her mother who is dead twenty years ago, but her "faint memory" obsesses her daughter through "a daguerreotype" (32). The way these heroines search for the reminiscences of their absent/dead mothers proves Cixous's claim that the mother's name is an inseparable part of the woman's psyche. While Cixous postulates maternal love is always "alive in every

woman” and “stands up against separation” (“The Laugh of the Medusa” 881), Kristeva cites this separation as a “vital necessity” for the subject’s “autonomy” to exercise the privilege of language (*Black Sun* 27). However, it is never easy for a woman to sever her maternal bond—she wonders whether “I am She [the mother] (sexually and narcissistically), [or] She is I” (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 29). The subject’s resistance to separation generates a suicidal impulse in her unconscious, ending up in a love-hate relationship between mother and daughter. This contention is based on the classical account of melancholia that narrates the mourning tale of an infant girl losing her mother before having passed her pre-Oedipal or pre-linguistic stage to recognize her lost object. Melanie Klein believes the ambivalent love-hate feeling of the girl is the result of her internalization of the loving object in the fear of not losing it; Klein’s hypothesis is that this love gives way to hatred as the subject finds herself undermined by the object’s loss. According to Kristeva, this hatred “is not oriented toward the outside but is locked up within” the subject (*Black Sun* 29). Based on this introjected hostility, Kristeva proposes her conception of melancholia as a “narcissistic wound” (*Black Sun* 12).<sup>1</sup> Since the infant has not yet gained the linguistic competence to name what she has lost, the reason for her melancholia shall not be called an object, distinguished from her subjectivity, but a nameless ‘Thing’.

To find a reconciling representation of this Thing, the subject embarks on numerous adventures of love, but she soon learns her Thing cannot be replaced by any “erotic object” (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 13). According to Kristeva, reconciliation is possible through identification with the father because only then is the subject allowed to enter the symbolic realm to “recover her [mother] in language” (*Black Sun* 43). The melancholic subject, however, resists language and employs such non-verbal expressions as “gestures, spasms, or shouts” to express her sorrow, for she prefers to regress to her pre-symbolic state which lets her exert sadness as a shield against the attacks of the symbolic realm on her integrity of subject and object (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 15). Therefore, as Kristeva concludes, the subject chooses between ecstatic and melancholic archetypes (*About Chinese Women* 27). For the latter, Kristeva refers to a feminine fluid: tears, which are the results of the “punishment, pain, and suffering inflicted upon the [woman’s] heterogeneous body” (Kristeva, *About Chinese Women* 28). The alternative, Kristeva suggests, is the ecstatic embrace of a symbolic father who harbors the childbearing and nursing characteristics of a mother. Kristeva’s example is St. Teresa of Ávila’s Lord, whom this nun praises as both her husband and father—“when this Immortal Husband wants (...) to enrich a soul (...), he binds it so tightly to himself that (...) the soul falls into his arms (...) receive[s] [his] delicious milk” (qtd. in *About Chinese Women* 27, emphasis in original).

In the following, the irresponsible absence of Maisie’s mother is reviewed to prove that this young girl is a Kristevian example of melancholia. As the melancholic girl in a pre-Oedipal status, unable to realize the mother’s loss, Maisie is once warned that “one of these days (...) [she will] know what it is to have lost a mother” (*WMK* 219). If the remedy for this melancholic case is to identify with the father’s name, it would not be easy for Maisie, whose father is irresponsibly absent and passive in her life. Since “to incur a second parent of the same sex you had usually to lose the first,” Maisie will have a long history of making up for her parents’ irresponsibility (*WMK* 48).

## 2.2. MAISIE’S ECSTATIC EMBRACE

Only once in Kensington Gardens does Maisie hear her mother addressing her as her “own child” (*WMK* 145). In this dramatic scene, Ida’s subsequent embrace appears so odd and frigid for Maisie that she quite indifferently observes the “wilderness of trinkets” on her mother’s breast (*WMK* 145). What serves as a bar to Maisie’s reception of the mother’s breast is the serious gap existing in her nurturance as the result of her mother’s failure to fulfill her desire for maternal integration. This failure arises from the grotesque picture Beale presents before Maisie’s eyes of Ida as an emotionless and off-duty mother, whose absence in Maisie’s life can be equated with her death. For example, Beale burns Ida’s letters and makes Maisie—who cannot recognize her mother’s “monograms”—accompany him to experience “the charm of

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<sup>1</sup> “I live a living death,” the melancholic subject sighs (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 4). This oxymoron is similarly used by Richard Crashaw, the baroque poet: “Still live in me this loving strife/Of living death and dying life” (123). By employing this oxymoron, Kristeva implies the paradoxical association of life and death in shaping melancholia: melancholic life is “unlivable” in the shadow of imminent death that is either “avenging” or “liberating” (*Black Sun* 3).

the violence with which the stiff unopened envelopes” of her mother’s words are on fire (WMK 10). Beale’s deprecation of women’s writing is not limited to the burning of his ex-wife’s “wild letters” (WMK 9), nor does he “care” for Maisie’s correspondence with Mrs. Wix (WMK 41). Letter writing harbors great significance in the feminist context of James’s story, which coincides with the New Woman movement. Egerton’s protagonist in “Now Spring Has Come” regards her burnt letters as her amputated “finger” and “toe”; her miserable feeling after consenting to have her letters burnt offers a clue to explain the ellipsis in James’s story regarding Ida’s feelings about her ex-husband’s hostile act (Egerton 65). To Maisie’s unblinking eyes, the injudicious enmity of her father with women’s writing, which is quite emblematic of their freedom of speech, makes her realize “how disproportionate” her identification “with her father” would be (WMK 37). Their first failed father-daughter interaction is evident in the scene Maisie sits uncomfortably on his knee in his so-called “private” carriage; his “horrid” speech in disregard of Maisie’s probing questions makes this abandoned girl realize the need for an alternative father figure, through whom she can make her liberated voice heard (WMK 31).

Sir Claude is indeed the one who appears in Maisie’s eyes “more of a gentleman than papa,” and the way he “suppress[es] his consciousness of the stamp of his company”—which implies the respect he shows toward women—is “a heroism that” Maisie’s mother, “though a blood relation,” is not “capable of” displaying (WMK 72–73). These two clues urge Maisie to see him as a Kristevian father figure; the procreative and caregiving qualities of a mother are also traceable in Sir Claude, as he once admits to his love for “babies” and the “nurs[ing]” profession and introduces himself as “an old grandmother” (WMK 63). Maisie “take[s] in” his promise to “stick to [her] through everything” “with a long tremor of all her little being”; holding him in her passionate embrace, she feels his “agitated” “breast” penetrating her heart (WMK 107–108). This momental embrace evokes St. Teresa of Ávila’s ecstasy, for Sir Claude has now transcended his supposed role as a caregiver and won Maisie’s heart as her “precious man” (WMK 187). Among the erotic details of St. Teresa’s ecstatic visitation, the burning phallic spear of the angel is similar to the cigarette Maisie smokes with Sir Claude. Further, the pleasurable moans of ecstasy that Teresa emits during her ecstatic encounter are similarly uttered by Maisie in Sir Claude’s embrace. Before meeting him in person, Maisie sees his photograph; her first ecstatic experience takes place in this scene, as “the force of her own perception” of Sir Claude’s picture makes her release “a small soft sigh” and gain a “particular pleasure,” in a similar way as Teresa enjoys her Lord’s phantasmagorical presence (WMK 48–49).

Maisie’s childhood is permeated with such erotic attractions: in her father’s house, she is “handled, pulled (...) kissed (...) nipped (...) jolted, [and] pinched [by his visitors] (...) till she shriek[s]” (WMK 10). Her first contact with cigarettes is as a six-year-old girl who offers these gentlemen the erotic service of “strik[ing] matches and light[ing] their cigarettes” (WMK 10). In New Woman writing, the cigarette is adopted as a symbol of freedom, especially when the writer offers an enchanting portrayal of the smoking woman. For example, Kate Chopin’s “An Egyptian Cigarette” illustrates the heroine’s disturbing vision after smoking a couple of hallucinogenic cigarettes.<sup>2</sup> Maisie’s constant contact with the smoking gentlemen of her father’s house, wherein she seldom witnesses a female guest, results in her negative attitude toward women (WMK 37); she thus readily accepts Sir Claude as a tutor from “the other sex” (WMK 40). The rapid growth of their relationship is due to Maisie’s voluntary retreat to “the soft method[s] of silence” (WMK 262) and “sightless[ness],” which let Sir Claude “lead[] her blindfold” (WMK 342); these methods signify the mystical vision “granted [to] her (...) to arrive at divinations so ample” (WMK 202). She divines that Sir Claude is distinguished from all gentlemen she has hitherto seen, addressing him with “the monosyllable ‘he’” (WMK 161–162). Yet, Sir Claude expresses “fear” for Maisie’s coming-of-age when their relationship starts to acquire sensual attributes (WMK 115). In the concluding chapters, he finally dares to admit their relationship is “extraordinary”; this time he tells Maisie, “[o]ne would think you were about sixty” (WMK 334). His reason for seeing Maisie as either much younger or much older than himself is to hide his romantic dream of being her lover under the pretense of being a gallant caregiver.

Nevertheless, Maisie’s red line is her quest for truth, which he crosses by concealing his affair with Mrs. Beale. He fails to uphold his loyalty oath to Maisie, and this secrecy or “untruth” is

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2 Another example is the protagonist of Egerton’s “A Cross Line” who freely “holds her own up with a cigarette poised between the first and second fingers, idly pleased” (13). In James’s *The Awkward Age*, Nanda feels no shame in admitting that she “[i]mmensely” “smoke[s]” with Mr. Longdon (173).

inexcusable for her (WMK 118). Lifting the veil on his two-faced intimacy with Maisie, Mrs. Wix is presented as the only character sharing Maisie's truth-seeking vision: she once tells Maisie, "I know when people lie—and that's what I've loved in you, that you never do" (WMK 117, emphasis in original). Maisie thus seeks refuge in her embrace to fulfill her own corporeal desire for maternal integrity—now that Ida, Maisie's mother, has "washed [her] hands of" her daughter (WMK 87), Maisie and Mrs. Wix's "hands remain[] linked in unutterable sign of their union" (WMK 289). In this regard, Maisie's retreat from an erotic relationship with her father figure illustrates the split between Kristeva and Cixous regarding the remedy of the melancholic subject.

Instead of acquiring the "intended meaning" of the father's symbolic realm as Kristeva postulates, Cixous suggests the subject's retreat to her inherent bisexuality ("Sorties" 149). By bisexuality, Cixous means neither bodily androgyny nor non-heteronormative sexual practice, but "the possibility of extending into the other" ("Castration and Decapitation" 55). According to Cixous, the woman restrains from the "monosexuality" that the man struggles to retain for the glory of his phallus ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 884); as the woman's nature never resists change and variety, she moves towards masculinity to make her sexuality "much richer, more various, stronger" ("Sorties" 155). A good illustration of bisexuality in New Woman writing is Victoria Cross's *Six Chapters of a Man's Life*, which features a cross-dressing heroine with an epicene appearance who harbors a bipolar characterization: "at one moment she seemed will-less, deliciously weak, a thing only made to be taken in one's arms and kissed; the next, she was full of independent, uncontrollable determination and opinion" (78). The eponymous New-Womanish heroine of James's *Daisy Miller* is also "an inscrutable combination of audacity and innocence" (74). Similarly, James portrays Maisie's social future in a dilemma to act as either an ardent disciple of Mrs. Wix's moral truth or a rebellious daughter of divorce modeling after her autonomous mother.

### 3. NEW (MAD)WOMAN: "SHE'S TRUE"

#### 3.1. FOUCAULDIAN MADNESS

Materialized in a rebellious female character representing the pent-up rage of the isolated female writer, madness gained a feminine attribute in Victorian literature (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 4)—the diagnosis of madness in a male patient was even treated as an effeminate disorder.<sup>3</sup> This sexist attribution was justified on the grounds of women's vulnerability to mental disorders after experiences such as puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, and parturition. Irrespective of the ungendered symptoms of madness, a justifiable conception was defined for men in nineteenth-century psychiatry as the result of their "intellectual and economic pressures" in contrast to the derogatory one that was "associated with the sexuality and essential nature of women" (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 7). Michel Foucault regards sexuality as one of the four areas of human activity that the mad subject is marginalized from (*Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* 336). Although the mad subject is an inoffensive and harmless wanderer in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, a condemnatory attitude is shaped toward madness in the baroque era. In baroque theatre, wherein the restraints of classicism on presenting violence onstage are removed, there is a witty Fool, resistant to the standards of conventional morality, whose blunt words on the dejected ambiance of the era introduce him as mad. This Fool is, in fact, "the guardian of truth" (Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* 14); he discloses the central theme the spectator waits to figure out by the end of the play. According to Foucault, such disclosure is done through a subplot offering a "more dream-like, more fantastical" play within the main plot; this subplot is a "mad microcosm" which, though "interior and delusional," unravels "the invisible truth" of "the macrocosm of the theatre" ("Literature and Madness" 8). To explain how this microcosm works, Foucault brings an example from one of the rare areligious performances of the Middle Ages; the significance of this "counterholiday"—as Foucault calls it—lies in the role reversal whereby the lower-class character is enabled to criticize the Church or monarchy (*Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* 340). This anti-authoritarian criticism is made possible only with the help of "a mask of feigned madness" (Foucault, "Literature and Madness" 7).

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3 Henry James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James: What Maisie Knew. In the Cage. The Pupil* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922) 151.

Among the different conceptions of madness in Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, I singled out the baroque conception to study the truth-seeking madman of the baroque theatre on a par with the freedom-fighter heroine of New Woman writing. For, the same truth-seeking vision can be perceived in New Woman writing to subvert such chauvinistic conceptions that falsely suggest "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" as the "four cardinal virtues" of women (Welter 152). In "Now Spring has Come," Egerton advises the late-Victorian woman to retreat from the "untrue feminine [that] is of man's making" to the original and true one that is divine, "of God's making" (42). This retreat has "advantages" that, as James suggests, are no longer "for others," but for the woman herself (AA 451). Although the truth is "the elusive spirit" of woman's nature, as Egerton asserts in "A Cross Line," the New Woman pursues a long evolutionary path from confinement to emancipation to redefine womanhood (29).

Confinement is the regulatory framework that the baroque society proposes for mad subjects based on the role of religion in defining a "moral" context to keep them "in a perpetual anxiety" and in a challenge with themselves and their "surroundings" (Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* 245). One example is St. Teresa's suggestion for the treatment of melancholic nuns: "[i]f words do not suffice, use punishment" (qtd. in Radden 110). This punishment is an "image," or a "pretense" linked "to the illusion of a death," that disillusiones the mad subject to lift the veil on truth (Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* 32). Indeed, death, as a baroque motif manifested in the images of human corpses and skulls, causes epiphanic madness in the hero of the baroque theatre. In *What Maisie Knew*, death is an inseparable part of Maisie's relationship with Mrs. Wix: although Maisie succeeds in stepping out from the dark shadow of Mrs. Wix's dead daughter, Mrs. Wix's regulative framework presents Maisie with a dilemma over the question of truth.

### 3.2. MAISIE'S DILEMMA BETWEEN MORALITY AND FREEDOM

Mrs. Wix's controlling gaze on Maisie's intellectual nourishment implies that she is less a governess than a warden employed to prevent Maisie's entry into the hideous world of her immoral parents. She once restrains Maisie from reading her father's letter because it is not written "in pretty language" (WMK 254). She accommodates Maisie in her schoolroom like a zoo animal in "a cage at a menagerie" (WMK 93) or like "an Indian captive" resistant to interrogation (WMK 68). Her preferred educational system is to educate Maisie under a rigid discipline that deprives her of having "idle hours" (WMK 66). Her syllabus is so limited and unvaried that lacks "the spirit of adventure" she requires to dig into the new subjects matching Maisie's adventurous spirit (WMK 27). Though aware of Mrs. Wix's incompetence in pedagogy, Maisie agrees to live in "such a tight place" (WMK 335) under Mrs. Wix's supervisory gaze only because Mrs. Wix's standing "on the firm ground of fiction" acquaints her with "the blue river of truth" (WMK 27). Indeed, Mrs. Wix's expertise as a retentive raconteur satisfies Maisie's thirst for truth, in a similar way that the baroque theatre of madness "plays on the surface of things (...) over the ambiguity of reality and illusion (...) [to] unite[] and separate[] truth and appearance" (Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* 36). Such a blurred line between fiction and reality is evident in Mrs. Wix's self-referential approach to narrating her stories: "Her conversation was practically an endless narrative (...) with sudden vistas into her own life" (WMK 27). Tessa Hadley contends this "extraordinary" educational system trains Maisie to be "a fiction reader" who "at the end of her novel (...) begin[s] to find out in *books* the truth she is starting (...) to make out for herself" (231, *emphasis added*)—Hadley alludes to the two pink-covered books Sir Claude buys Maisie. Having limited Maisie's truth-seeking vision to such indoor activities as flipping through her books, Hadley neglects the other side of Maisie's cognitive development, that is, her urban adventures.

Maisie's training system recalls that of Morgan in James's "The Pupil" in that these precocious pupils prefer a leisurely stroll in the city over taking lessons in a claustrophobic schoolroom. Precocity is the innate feature of James's children; their infantile appearances do not deceive their tutors into disregarding the gleams of maturity in their truth-seeking visions. Holding his tutor to this promise that "[w]e must be frank," Morgan admits his reason for avoiding his parents is their dishonesty, as they once falsely accused his former governess of "lying and cheating" (P 50–51). Morgan's quest for truth makes him an outcast in the purportedly secure environment of his family; Maisie is similarly alienated from the deceitful company of her parents and their companions. Once she notices her mother's "forfeit[ure]" of "such a loyalty as that"

(*WMK* 19) the Captain—whom Maisie regards as Ida’s true lover—has offered, Maisie realizes that her parents have “come to seem vague” and “evidently [not] to be trusted” (*WMK* 41). This sense of alienation urges Maisie to develop a homosocial relationship with her truth-seeking governess, Mrs. Wix. Although this relationship ends up confining Maisie to a limited syllabus and restrictive educational policy, Mrs. Wix is Maisie’s only safe refuge from the dishonesty she is constantly exposed to in the degenerate circle of her parents and stepparents.

This relationship stems from Maisie’s melancholic sense of loss: she identifies with Mrs. Wix’s dead girl as her sister and creates an erotic fantasy in which the images of the mourning mother and her dead daughter are merged into a hallucinatory image (*WMK* 24). As Edwin Sill Fussell contends, one of the Catholic indications of James’s fiction is “the prayerful unitive connection of the living and the dead” (89). In this story, Mrs. Wix’s pastoral role as “a prophetess (...) or (...) [an] abbess” is to regulate Maisie’s moral conduct (*WMK* 203); though not a Catholic, Mrs. Wix feels remorse for her juvenile hesitation to convert. After hearing about Mrs. Wix’s penitent feeling, Maisie “wonder[s] rather interestedly what degree of lateness it was that shut the door against an escape from such an error” (*WMK* 267). Her hesitation to believe Mrs. Wix’s story is because Maisie’s moral sentiments run before Mrs. Wix’s being recruited: when her parents exploit her as the transporter of their hostilities, Maisie develops her own moral “system” to conceal the vulgarities of their words and manners (*WMK* 15). Learned “never to ask” questions from her unresponsive parents, Maisie is grown self-reliant to “[f]ind out for [her]self” the social rules of her surrounding women (*WMK* 33–34).

Although neither Ida nor Miss Overmore is a New Woman—the former is economically dependent on her lovers “to take charge of her” (*WMK* 147), and the latter, probably for the same “awfully proper reason” (*WMK* 32), clings to Maisie’s father to satisfy her social aspirations—, they both succeed in making Sir Claude “quailed” and defeated in exercising the authority he celebrates as “the particular virtue (...) [of] a gentleman” (*WMK* 249–250). Maisie observes these outspoken women, who in some respects illustrate the New Woman’s liberty, in the hope that “some day” she would also be “in the street,”<sup>4</sup> as her father once predicts (*WMK* 201). Maisie’s first encounter with the notion of women’s emancipation is provided by Miss Overmore who appears as a “martyr” in Maisie’s eyes because of her “courage” to break her promise to Ida for not seeing Maisie (*WMK* 21–22). As a self-seeking governess living gladly in the house of her pupil’s father, Miss Overmore flirts with his visitors, gossiping about him and his daughter, and does not “let another woman come near” him (*WMK* 37). Another example of her autonomous presence at Beale’s house is her correspondence with her secret lover, Sir Claude, which displays her courage to express her voice beyond the marital boundaries of her patriarchal society.

Further, divorce represents emancipation from a loveless marriage: Miss Overmore is informed of her divorce by a letter which “concerns (...) Maisie (...) so particularly that (...) the terms in which this new situation is created” “would have a lesson and a virtue for her [Maisie]” (*WMK* 255). The lesson is the post-divorce freedom, the illustration of which Maisie earlier perceives in her mother who considers the “menial position” of motherhood “as a direct insult to herself” and at odds with her emancipatory principles (*WMK* 110). Maisie is aware of Ida’s “conjugal surrender” which manifests itself in her unsuppressed and wild laughter (*WMK* 87). Laughter bears a symbolic meaning in New Woman writing to portend the heroine’s emancipation from marital distress. As Rosanne states in Netta Syrett’s “Chiffon,” “matrimony is an insidious evil,” having “robbed many a woman of her sense of humour” (72); Syrett portrays her anti-marriage protagonist as a “flippant” “trifler” (72) who “laughs too much” (74). Kathleen in Syrett’s “Thy Heart’s Desire” also breaks “into a horrible discordant laugh” after hearing about her husband’s death (247). This laughter stems from the “untameableness” of the woman’s nature that makes her resistant to men’s “reasoned codes” to restrict her “affections” (Egerton 28). Indeed, Ida revolts against any restrictive social regulation, as her multiple lovers confirm, and “go[es] through anything for anyone she likes” (*WMK* 151). Her extramarital freedom typifies what Mabel E. Wotton depicts in her “The Hour of Her Life” as an urban phenomenon: “ladies—real ladies—went out in the evening with men who were not their husbands” (136). This phenomenon, which has its roots in the non-aggression pact of the late-Victorian couples

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4 Streetwalking bears symbolic meaning for the New Woman. Daisy Miller once declares “If I didn’t walk I’d expire” (*DM* 77). Another Jamesian example is Nanda’s unchaperoned “walk[ing]” in London’s streets for an afternoon meeting with three gentlemen, which marks her social progress as a prospective New Woman (*AA* 109).

to secure each other's liberty, might be incomprehensible to Maisie at this age but certainly leaves her with a great impression to question Mrs. Wix's moral truth.

Now that the psychological and moral aspects of Maisie's character development in her relationship with others have come under scrutiny to predict her social future, it is time to embrace James's aesthetic heritage for Maisie's materialistic vision so as to bring to light some other manifestations of the baroque in this story.

## 4. THE PRIVILEGE OF FEMININE AESTHETICS

### 4.1. MYSTIC ECSTASY AND IRIGARAYIAN JOUISSANCE

In seventeenth-century Europe, the baroque was used as a propagandistic medium to exploit the image-based capacity of the visual arts to instill Catholic doctrines in illiterate masses. One of those doctrines was the saint's mystical ability to experience union with the incarnated God. Despite being proof of the saint's spiritual and divine love, this union—called transverberation or ecstasy—acquired sensual and erotic connotations in baroque art. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the baroque sculptor, famously employed this paradoxical association to materialize the ecstatic visitation of St. Teresa of Ávila. Bernini's sensuous composition of Teresa's ecstasy is the result of the artistic "sublimat[ion]" of his "libido" which renders Teresa's ecstasy with details not explained in her autobiography (Mormando 164). However, Bernini's rendition is no less erotic than the description Teresa herself gives in her autobiography. She states it is the first time she feels the flesh of the angel appear before her eyes "in bodily form" (qtd. in Soergel 480). This angel differs from the phantasmatic ones, whose presence Teresa used to feel in her "intellectual vision[s]" (qtd. in Soergel 480). Noticing the face of her divine penetrator burning with fire, Teresa concedes her vision is similar to a sexual experience; indeed, the angel's "long spear of gold" represents a phallic symbol "thrust[ed]" into her heart "at times" (qtd. in Soergel 480). Teresa's moans of pleasure after the angel's penetrations indicate her mystic experience is not purely spiritual but "the body has its share in it, even a large one" (qtd. in Soergel 480). This confession justifies the sexual interpretation of critics such as Jacques Lacan, who believe Teresa's ecstasy is an orgasmic experience.

Although Lacan claims his "discourse has something baroque about it," his suggested parallel analysis of Teresa's ecstasy and feminine jouissance is twice removed from the reality of this mystic experience (76). Reductive to Bernini's second-hand report, Lacan's source of reference to his conception of feminine jouissance is a voiceless object created by another man. Having limited his reader's consciousness to an object not requiring any listener, Lacan silences the voice of female sexuality. That is why Luce Irigaray invites the statue's audience to read Teresa's autobiographical writings instead (91). For, she believes, the woman is never silent but "inaudible" to those who listen to her "with ready-made grids" (29). Lacan's reluctance to refer to Teresa's writings and his insistence on its visual impression demonstrate his voyeuristic gaze, which needs to be reexamined in the counter-medieval poetics of the baroque that "desublimates the [spectator's] phantasm" (Buci-Glucksmann 49). As Christine Buci-Glucksmann argues, the baroque spectator no longer deifies the mystic woman but harbors a materialized phantasm suggesting a "bodily form" regardless of eschatological aesthetics (49). Contrary to Lacan's phantasm, Irigaray claims that, in order to grasp the true nature of Teresa's ecstasy, only a woman should read her mystical writings (91). Irigaray's assumption is that the interpretation's content depends on the interpreter's gender; the man's failure to comprehend women's ecstatic experiences accounts for their exile to his phallic imagination. The speaking woman can subvert such phallic fantasy on the strength of her autoerotic sexuality which enables her to experience jouissance at any moment, without such intermediaries as a "hand, a woman's body, [and] language" that men require to ignite their imaginations (Irigaray 24). Therefore, the integrity of the woman's subjectivity and corporeality is never commodified in the feminine language in the same way as the deprecatory gaze of men. As James's male characters commodify a woman's beauty to prove their narratorial superiority, their distorted pictures are doomed to fail, similarly to Bernini and Lacan's renditions. To demonstrate the authorial privilege of feminine aesthetics in Maisie's story, the following section revolves around the subjectivity of her aesthetic vision owing to the central consciousness James has granted her.



Irigaray's essentialist critique of feminine vision is traceable in Sarah Grand's "Undefinable," which features a male painter requiring an epiphany to respect his model's beauty. Grand's use of the word 'model' for her heroine is a pun: although the woman grants the painter voluntary consent to be painted, she has "peculiar power to raise [him] to the necessary altitude" of aesthetics (273). The painter sees the illustration of her power in "the liberty of language" that she relishes in passing her incisive comments: calling him "a painting machine," the woman wants him to "[r]end" "that veil of flesh" which has distorted his aesthetic vision (Grand 254; 276–277). Finally, the painter makes this epiphanic confession that the woman's beauty is not only undefinable, as the story's title suggests, but also inexpressible, for "nothing else which is human (...) so nearly approaches the divine as the exercise of" her vision (Grand 278). The power of this feminine vision flows from the inseparable bond between the woman and her body, which both Irigaray and Cixous lay great emphasis on. In *What Maisie Knew*, this bond is embedded in James's impressionistic integrity of subject and object. A good example of this two-fold integrity is Mrs. Wix's straighteners, which personify her in her dialogues with others: the movement of her glasses foreshadows her feelings before she speaks, respectively, with Sir Claude when "[t]he reproach of the straighteners darkened" (WMK 244) and with Maisie when "[t]he straighteners again roofed her over (...) seem[ing] to crack with the explosion of their wearer's honesty" (WMK 246–247). When she claims her reason for wearing this optic object is not her poor eyesight but "for the sake of others (...) to recognize the bearing (...) of her regard," she notifies James's reader of the power that a woman gains when integrated with an object (WMK 25). To prove the privileged aesthetics of such integrity in James's story, Maisie's materialistic observations and portrayals, often reported by the narrator, are good examples.

In the preface, James reveals his "design" (WMK viii) on Maisie's "limited consciousness" to represent "the very field of [his] picture while (...) guarding with care the integrity of the objects presented" (WMK ix). Christina Britzolakis, accordingly, calls Maisie's aesthetic vision "the medium of (...) transmutation between animate and inanimate, person and thing" (379). According to Britzolakis, James employs Maisie's vision as an allegory to critique the "dehumanizing and objectify[ing]" trend of capitalist ideology (380). Nonetheless, the perceptive power of Maisie's imagination—or "wonder" as James calls it—is what Britzolakis overlooks in her political reading of James's materialism (WMK xi). This wonder bears the signature of Maisie's empathetic and impartial vision that has the right to "lend[] to poorer persons and things (...) a precious element of dignity" (WMK xi). Though raised in a circle wherein it is "in the nature of things to be none of a small child's business," Maisie soon learns being a silent and sensitive observer promises her attention and subjectivity (WMK 161). Her silence, however, should not lead to this misunderstanding that she is a camera-narrator without any distinguished aesthetic values; she is, indeed, "present" in making "her history" yet in a "separate" "manner" (WMK 107). One indication of Maisie's subjective spectatorship is her distinguished taste in feminine beauty; this taste develops a sympathetic picture of imperfection that is also seen in baroque poetry. As Patrizia Bettella explains, baroque poetry deviates from the Neoplatonic conception of ideal and flawless beauty; for example, old age is revered due to the commiserating obsessions of the poets with the "transience" of "earthly" existence and "the loss of feminine beauty due to aging" (Bettella 132). Such commiseration is also seen in portrayals of Shakespeare's Dark Lady, whose imperfect beauty is manifested in her dark hair and skin (Bettella 133). In *What Maisie Knew*, there are two examples of imperfect beauty, one aged and the other dark-skinned, about whose unconventional beauty Maisie shares the exemplified aesthetic values of baroque poetry.

The narrator offers an ill-favored and displeasing description of Mrs. Wix's old appearance—the "greasy greyness" of her hair which "had originally been yellow, but time had turned that elegance to ashes, to a turbid sallow unvenerable white" (WMK 25). Further, her gauche and awkward clothing presents her as a tasteless and ugly woman: the narrator likens her "melancholy garb (...) [w]ith the added suggestion of her goggles" to "the polished shell or corslet of a horrid beetle" (WMK 25). Her next unattractive feature is the "divergent obliquity of [her] vision" that introduces her as a cross-eyed woman (WMK 25). These grotesque portrayals, however, appeal differently to Maisie, whose sense of beauty is not as superficial as that of the narrator. As Martha Banta argues, Maisie is caught in an "aesthetic dilemma" to "choose between those who are often not loving or kind but (...) possess (...) beauty (...)

and those (...) who are kind but ugly, and givers of an ugly love” (503). Banta believes these contradictory impulses in Maisie’s consciousness make her believe ugliness is “an outward form of some inner monstrosity of spirit” (503). Nevertheless, careful scrutiny of Maisie’s interactions with such ugly but adoring women as Mrs. Wix and the Countess elucidates her unbiased aesthetic vision.

Although Mrs. Wix first appears as “a figure to laugh at (...) [like] an animal (...) whom people (...) described to each other and imitated,” Maisie develops a liking for her old governess after succumbing to her “charm” that has always been evocative of this feeling that Mrs. Wix is “peculiarly and soothingly safe” (WMK 25–26). Seeing Mrs. Wix “as safe as” her dead daughter who is “in heaven” now, Maisie creates a celestial and goddess-like picture of her (WMK 26)—once in Boulogne-Sur-Mer, she elevates the ugly Mrs. Wix to the divine and timeless beauty of the Virgin Mary (WMK 270). Maisie’s reason for loving Mrs. Wix despite her dowdy appearance is that “the quality of her motive surpasses the sharpness of her angles” (WMK 278). Mrs. Wix once explains her motive for “never losing sight of” Maisie to her in a soothing “tone,” the “mark” of which she always bears in their dialogues (WMK 278). This motive elevates her to a sublime position in Maisie’s vision, “convert[ing]” her “from feebleness to force” (WMK 278). A similar conversion is seen for the last woman Maisie sees with her father. The Countess first strikes Maisie “more as an animal than as a ‘real’ lady,” equated in her vision to “a clever frizzled poodle in a frill or a dreadful human monkey in a spangled petticoat” (WMK 193). The Countess is no exception to other dark-skinned women whose flamboyant clothes become visually appealing to Maisie.<sup>5</sup> Her distinguishing feature is, however, the pang of sympathy she evokes in Maisie; as the result of this pang, a “great pain” strikes Maisie when she sees the Countess’s efforts to draw near her and be “kind” to her (WMK 194–195). Maisie finds it painful to deprecate this dark lady whose beauty is not, “unfortunately,” as perfect as that of Mrs. Beale and Ida (WMK 194). As the intimacy of their interactions develops, the “small silly terror” that Maisie felt in their first encounter under her racist impressions of disgust and fear gives way to sympathy (WMK 194).

Although James’s critics diverge in evaluating Maisie’s perceptive powers, I see her aesthetic sensibility as superior to the narrator’s superficial sophistication and as reflective of James’s corporeal materialism. To further prove the supremacy of feminine aesthetics in Maisie’s story, I now turn to another aspect of her vision: her imaginative faculty, the association of which with the baroque topos of motion opens up a discussion about another motif of New Woman writing.

### 4.3. MOVING BODIES AND ROVING EYES

One of the identifying features of the baroque style is the topos of motion that makes its sculpture fly, its “architecture grow[] wings,” its painting move “on the wall,” and its building “soar” (Fleming 124). The manifestation of this topos in baroque art concerns the spatial dimensions of the diagonal lines that bear ontological meanings; this hypothesis is based on Blaise Pascal’s claim that “[e]verything comes to be by way of figure and movement” (qtd. Maravall 175). Besides the visual manifestations of motion in the external world, this baroque topos is inscribed in the spectator’s consciousness. As Gregg Lambert contends, “motion prevents the spectator from losing consciousness and falling into a state of vertigo” caused by the baroque design’s grandeur (44). The technique the baroque artist employs to penetrate the spectator’s consciousness is called “disillusionment” or “tactic of accommodation” (Maravall 194): it means the spectator gets used to the illusory beauty of the object and sees it as what it *should be*, not as what it *is*. This technique is part of the “guided culture” of the baroque to move its spectators “from within,” but it depends on their volunteer and conscious decision<sup>6</sup> to accommodate to the appearances after a secondary meditation (Maravall 75). Similarly, the fluid and malleable nature of the female body is considered a meaning-making potential in the theories of Cixous and Irigaray.

Fluidity implies the resistant potential of feminine jouissance against the fixed and normative structures of phallogocentrism. This jouissance is “[a]lways in motion,” moving from one spot

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5 Once sitting at a bench with Mrs. Wix in Boulogne-Sur-Mer, Maisie observes “brown old women in such white-frilled caps and such long gold ear-rings sat and knitted or snoozed” (WMK 267). In another scene, when Maisie and Mrs. Beale visit an exhibition at Earl’s court Maisie perceives “a large presentment of bright brown ladies (...) in a medium suggestive of tropical luxuriance” (WMK 171).

6 Such a decision is also taken by the madman, who, according to Foucault, is not “the victim of an illusion” but “deceives himself” to be passively persuaded (*Madness and Civilization*, emphasis in original).

of the woman's body to another, for the woman has "sex organs more or less everywhere" and "finds pleasure almost anywhere" (Irigaray 28, emphasis in original; 210). This multiplicity of erogenous zones manifests itself in the complexity and subtlety of the feminine language that resists being "uniform, homogeneous, [and] classifiable into codes" (Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" 876). Such dynamism and indefinability are also traceable in the definitions of baroque and modernism<sup>7</sup>— the modernist styles of James Joyce and Jean Genet are what Cixous exemplifies as a male's experimentation with the theories of *écriture féminine*.

In New Woman writing, restlessness represents the heroine's inner drive toward emancipation. As Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright, identified by the pseudonym George Egerton, describes her protagonist in "A Cross Line," there is "an impression of restlessness" in her nature even when she is "motionless in a chair" (10). Netta Syrett also asserts that the inherent mutability of feminine *jouissance* is incomprehensible to men: Kathleen, the protagonist of "Thy Heart's Desire," irritably wonders "if men know what it feels like to be restless" (251). Indeed, the New Woman writer manifests the feminist notion of fluidity through the baroque motif of motion to portray the protagonist's sense of freedom.<sup>8</sup> In Egerton's "Now Spring has Come," the protagonist once goes in front of the mirror to examine her beauty from her lover's standpoint. She notices a "quivering" fact about herself, that is, her inadequate self-knowledge; she observes, her corporeal features are the "same," but her integrity with her body seems to be lost—to restore her integrity, she "dance[s] all round the room" to present herself as an energetic and spirited "little girl" (Egerton 48). In *What Maisie Knew*, such symbolic images are never kept away from the protagonist's prying eyes.

The first example emblemizes Maisie's coming of age when she perceives the movements of her "stiff dolls on the dusky shelves" (WMK 15). This keen perception later transforms from objects to individuals, as she notices the way Miss Overmore holds "her fork with her little finger curled out" (WMK 16); these gentle, "graceful," and "show[y]" movements give Miss Overmore, who has not yet married to Maisie's father, a superior status in comparison to Ida (WMK 17). Consequently, tracking down the bodily manners of her surrounding people, i.e. the way their "eyes [are] riveted and [their] nudges [are] interchanged," comprises one of Maisie's "leisure" interests (WMK 300). These inputs are welcomed in her imaginative faculty to categorize people based on their kinesthetic perceptions. However, Maisie is no exception to these moving bodies: her restless spirit and unstable status, commuting between her real parents and their new spouses, reveals she is "perched on a prancing horse, and (...) [must] ma[ke] a movement to hold on to something" (WMK 132). The kinesthetic image of the "prancing horse" implies Maisie's precarious status as the daughter of divorce. Adam Frank associates this image with "Maisie's changing knowledge" that, he believes, "threatens to knock her off balance and trample her underfoot or needs to be reined in" (168). However, the detrimental side effects of this treasured knowledge are worth coping with provided that the utopian dreams of freedom come true. Although James ends Maisie's story in her teenage years, the future of her social knowledge can be envisioned in *The Awkward Age*.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

The significance of this research lies in extending the literary scholarship of the baroque in modernist literature by dint of the recurrent motifs that are labeled as the baroque topoi. In this paper, I looked at the correspondences between the phenomenological aesthetics of the baroque, the feminist motifs of New Woman writing, and James's late-fictional delineation of female corporeality to unveil one of the undiscussed facts for the convolution of his

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7 As Umberto Eco argues, modernist artists delve into a "fluid" and mobile world dependent on its viewer's "creativity," as they prefer the uncomfortable and restless position of the baroque spectator over any "privileged, definitive, [and] frontal view" (7).

8 My cisgender reading of the interrelated notions of motion and fluidity diverges from the queer interpretation that some New Woman scholars make of her transgressive sexuality. Martha H. Patterson, for example, attributes the "wavelike imagery" in one of Willa Cather's short stories to the sexual pleasure of her homosocial characters (158).

9 Once in Mr. Mitchett's house away from the controlling gaze of her mother, Nanda displays a beautiful exhibition of liberation with her cavorting movements: "She moved from end to end of the terrace, pausing, gazing about her, taking in with a face that showed the pleasure of a brief independence.... The scene had an expectant stillness that she was too charmed to desire to break.... It set her after a minute into less difficult motion; she passed slowly down the steps, wandering further" (AA 169).

meanings. James's proto-modernist narrative recalls the unfinished aesthetics of the baroque that requires the reader's constant contribution to discerning meaning. This similarity can be detected in James's corporeal materialism, which represents the female body's aesthetic role in pursuing his impressionistic integrity of subject and object. Attributing an experimental and transgressive potential to female corporeality, such post-structural feminists as Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva propose the female writer's decensored access to her body as the basic tenet of *écriture féminine* or feminine writing. Finding the theories of *écriture féminine* in need of a concrete example, this paper celebrated the contemporaneity between James's proto-modernist writings and New Woman fiction to not only suggest the latter as a late-Victorian precursor to *écriture féminine* but also trace the indications of the baroque aesthetics in his woman-centered novel *What Maisie Knew*.


My arguments started with the psychoanalytic analysis of Maisie's maternal abandonment to demonstrate the division between Kristeva and Cixous concerning the remedy for melancholia. While Kristeva suggests the ecstatic embrace of a father figure to gain access to the language with which the melancholic subject can articulate her sorrow, Cixous proposes the subject's retreat to her innate bisexuality to avoid the monolithic meanings of the father's symbolic realm. Though first appearing as a father figure who helps Maisie fill the void of her maternal absence, Sir Claude reneges on his pledge of loyalty to Maisie. Maisie thus rejects Sir Claude's ecstatic embrace, retreating to the bisexuality Cixous suggests as the alternative remedy of Kristevian paternal identification. The illustration of this bisexuality is Maisie's bipolar characterization, fluctuating between coyness and audacity, which presents her in a dilemma to act as either the apostle of Mrs. Wix's moral conduct or the aspiring modern girl of her decadent era. This dilemma—which is a part of Jamesian ambiguity—requires a Foucauldian framework to reassess the central theme of New Woman writing, that is, women's emancipation, under a baroque definition of madness. The quest for truth that the madman of the baroque theatre pursues is also perceived in New Woman writing to breed the true conception of womanhood. In baroque theatre, the transgressive knowledge of the madman becomes subject to a confining scheme of disillusionment that employs the death-oriented aesthetics of the baroque as a moral backdrop. Similarly, the apocalyptic image of Mrs. Wix's dead daughter obstructs Maisie's progress toward the genuine definition of New Woman.

In the last section, my arguments strayed from the linear analysis of Maisie's psychological and moral developments to investigate the authorial privilege James has granted to her materialistic vision. This privilege reflects the Jamesian approach to the feminist notion of the woman's integrity with her body. Maisie's commiserations with the imperfect beauties of the aged Mrs. Wix and the dark-skinned Countess represent the nonconformity and privilege of her (baroque) aesthetic subtleties. Further, her imaginative engagement with the moving bodies around her marks the emergence of a New-Womanish quality in her vision. In New Woman writing, the jolly movements of the heroine's body portend the wish-fulfillment of her dreams about emancipation. Indeed, Maisie's wavering status as a vagrant shuttling between her parents and stepparents foreshadows the mutability of her social future as a possible New-Woman-to-be.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Mosavat  
*Anglo Saxonica*  
DOI: 10.5334/as.111

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**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Mosavat, Mohamad.  
“Baroque and Female Body:  
From Ecstasy to Madness in  
Henry James’s *What Maisie  
Knew*”. *Anglo Saxonica*,  
No. 21, issue 1, art. 3, 2023,  
pp. 1–14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/as.111>

**Submitted:** 06 January 2023

**Accepted:** 03 April 2023

**Published:** 21 April 2023

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