

## CHAPTER 5

# Spotting the Parasite(s) in “Jimmy Rose”<sup>179</sup>

Among Melville’s works that have received the least scholarly attention is the short story “Jimmy Rose.” Published anonymously in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in November 1855, it deals with the attempts of the elderly first-person narrator, William Ford, to retell the life and death of an old acquaintance, the eponymous Rose. The scholarship on the story thus far has been modest, whether because scholars have felt that what could be said about it was exhausted in early readings or because the story has been dismissed as overly sentimental and lacking in quality.<sup>180</sup> Marvin Fisher’s claim from 1977 thus seems no less accurate today: “Compared to most of Melville’s stories, ‘Jimmy Rose’ has suffered from relative neglect; no one seems to have felt that it was particularly significant in regard to theme or technique” (133).<sup>181</sup>

The figure of the parasite, however, allows us to see that there is more to “Jimmy Rose” than first meets the eye. More precisely, among those previous critics who have offered contrasting opinions on William Ford’s character, not even those who have deemed him an unreliable narrator seem to have grasped just how similar he in many respects is to Jimmy Rose, who is obviously indebted to the classical figure of the parasite. As

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179 This chapter was originally published under the title “A Parlor of One’s Own: On Spotting the Parasite in ‘Jimmy Rose’” in *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* in 2017. Reprinted with permission.

180 As Lea Newman shows, the readings that exist usually attempt to locate the real-life models for the characters in the story or the narrator’s house, and/or they address the importance of the rose metaphor to the story, compare it to other writings by Melville, or debate the ethical character of Jimmy Rose, as well as the narrator’s reliability (255–68). Among more recent scholars who have approached the story in a different manner, see Yablon (133–35) and Scanlan (86–98). Both compare “Bartleby” and “Jimmy Rose” to reflect upon the rapid transformations that New York went through during the 1850s, as well as the nostalgic longing for the past to which these changes gave birth.

181 Or, in Newman’s words: “A great many Melville enthusiasts ignore the story entirely, which is a kind of condemnation by omission” (266).

I will argue, this is most likely due to Ford's oblique mode of narration, which downplays his own involvement and omits information that could be used against him.<sup>182</sup> A closer scrutiny of what he says, as well as of the lacunae found in his narrative, begins to indicate that—not unlike the pairing of *Bartleby* and the narrator—here too we encounter a relationship where it is not entirely clear who is the ultimate parasite.

## The Two Careers of Jimmy Rose

Ford's narrative opens with a description of how, “[a] time ago, no matter how long precisely”, he had moved to New York after becoming “unexpected heir to a great old house in a narrow street of one of the lower wards, once the haunt of style and fashion, full of gay parlors and bridal chambers; but now, for the most part, transformed into counting-rooms and warehouses” (“JR” 336). Even though the old house is in a state of decay, and even though his wife wants to modernize it, it is obvious that Ford is reluctant to make any changes, considering it a remnant of a bygone era: “in this old house of mine, so strangely spared, some monument of departed days survived” (“JR” 336). In particular, he absolutely refuses to redecorate its decaying parlor, with its once grand, but now partly destroyed ornamental wallpaper. As he makes known—thus introducing the story's titular figure—the main reason is because of the room's “long association in my mind with one of the original proprietors of the mansion,” the recently deceased James Rose (“JR” 338).

In the second part of the story, Ford describes the unfortunate events that came to affect Rose, whom he consistently refers to as Jimmy. A handsome and charming ladies' man with rosy cheeks, the latter was once famous for his lavish parties and extravagant dinners. Ford compares Jimmy to “the great Florentine trader, Cosmo the Magnificent,” noting that large crowds were attracted by his “uncommon cheeriness; the splendor of his dress; his sparkling wit; radiant chandeliers; infinite fund of small-talk; French furniture; glowing welcomes to his guests;

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182 For critics who have found the narrator to be reliable, see Tutt, Gargano, and Slater; for the opposite view, see Jeffrey, and Bickley Jr. (*Method* 47–8).

his bounteous heart and board; his noble graces and his glorious wine" ("JR" 338–39). However, Jimmy's days as popular host come to an end when he is ruined by a string of bad luck in business, leading to most of his former companions abandoning him, and his creditors, "once fast friends," now pursuing "him as carrion for jails" ("JR" 342). Upon learning of his misfortune, the narrator tries to track him down to help. Finally learning where Rose is hiding to avoid his creditors—in the very house Ford will later inherit—he offers his services, only to have his bankrupt acquaintance tell him that "I can trust no man now" ("JR" 341). When the distressed man finally threatens him with a gun, the narrator flees.

The third and final part of the narrative concerns Jimmy's life after the bankruptcy. When the narrator finally meets him again, twenty-five years later, he is stunned by how little his old associate seems to have changed:

He whom I expected to behold—if behold at all—dry, shrunken, meagre, cadaverously fierce with misery and misanthropy—amazement! the old Parisian roses bloomed in his cheeks. And yet poor as any rat; poor in the last dregs of poverty; a pauper beyond alms-house pauperism; a promenading pauper in a thin, thread-bare, careful coat; a pauper with wealth of polished words; a courteous, smiling, shivering gentleman. ("JR" 342)

The quote indicates that when they finally meet again, Ford expects Jimmy to have followed the misanthropic course of the title character of a text not directly referred to in the story, but which Melville drew on in several of his works: Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (c. 1604–1607).<sup>183</sup> Timon is the man who lavishly spends his riches on entertaining friends, but whose former companions all refuse to help him when he is ruined. He then starts hating mankind, eventually retreating to a cave outside of Athens, where he finally dies in solitude; as he puts it, after throwing warm water on those who formerly used to flatter him:

Live loath'd, and long,  
Most smiling, smooth, detested parasites,  
Courteous destroyers, affable wolves, meek bears,

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183 On the influence of *Timon of Athens* on Melville's writings, see Watson. As we will see in Chapter 6, Shakespeare's Athenian misanthrope is also relevant to *The Confidence-Man*.

You fools of fortune, trencher-friends, time's flies,  
 Cap-and-knee slaves, vapours, and minute-jacks!  
 Of man and beast the infinite malady  
 Crust you quite o'er. (Shakespeare 3.6.90–96)

While the first part of Jimmy's life thus perfectly corresponds to that of Timon, the second, to Ford's surprise, has not. Even though Jimmy never regained his riches after the bankruptcy, he is still the same charming gentleman. In addition, his inability to trust his fellow men turns out to have been short-lived; for, as Ford claims, "[p]erhaps at bottom Jimmy was too thoroughly good and kind to be made from any cause a man-hater. And doubtless it at last seemed irreligious to Jimmy even to shun mankind" ("JR" 342).

Hence, Richard Bridgman is correct in labeling Jimmy a "counter-Timon" (236). In fact, as Lea Newman has pointed out (258), "Jimmy Rose" can almost be seen as the story of what might have happened if Shakespeare's misanthrope, having been transported to nineteenth-century New York, had reacted differently to the advice given to him by the cynic Apemantus, who seeks him out and asks him to return to Athens: "Be thou a flatterer now, and seek to thrive/ By that which has undone thee. Hinge thy knee,/ And let his very breath whom thou'lt observe/ Blow off thy cap; praise his most vicious strain,/ And call it excellent" (Shakespeare 4.3.213–17). While Timon scornfully rejects Apemantus' proposal to flatter others, Ford's description indicates that it is this tactic which has enabled Jimmy to survive all these years. Formerly he gave dinners, but after the bankruptcy, he has become dependent upon the charity of others. As the narrator puts it:

From an unknown quarter he received an income of some seventy dollars, more or less. The principal he would never touch, but, by various modes of eking it out, managed to live on the interest. He lived in an attic, where he supplied himself with food. He took but one regular repast a day—meal and milk—and nothing more, *unless procured at others' tables*. Often about the tea-hour he would drop in upon some old acquaintance, clad in his neat, forlorn frock coat, with worn velvet sewed upon the edges of the cuffs, and a similar device upon the hems of his pantaloons, to hide that dire look of having been grated off by

rats. On Sunday he made a point of always dining at some fine house or other.  
("JR" 342; emphasis added)

In other words, having started out as a host giving sumptuous feasts, the result of Jimmy Rose's financial troubles is a new career as a parasite.

Similar claims have been made by previous Melville scholars. Ralph M. Tutt for example mentions Jimmy's "parasitic readjustment" to his "shallow society" (30); R. W. B. Lewis asserts that he has been "transformed at a stroke from a wealthy man-about-town to a sandwich-filching parasite" (41); Edward Haviland Miller that he "is now a parasite upon the wealthy to whom he toadies for crusts of bread" (257); and William B. Dillingham that when the narrator meets him again, he has become "a pitiful old parasite" (311). As Jimmy undoubtedly belongs to the tradition stretching back to the comedic Greek and Roman parasites, these critics are correct in their choice of label. In failing to interrogate properly this literary tradition, they end up using the epithet "parasite" as little more than an insult for someone thought to be too lazy to work. However, as previously discussed, being a successful parasite is far from easy.

In overlooking the history of the comedic parasite, as well as through the use of derogatory terms such as "sandwich-filching," "toadies for crusts of bread," and "pitiful," these critics end up framing the title character in a much more negative light than does the narrator, who clearly indicates an awareness of the talent and adaptability that his old acquaintance has brought to the task of acquiring his free dinners. To borrow a phrase from Ishmael: as he is portrayed by Ford, Jimmy in many ways comes across as an incarnation of "the stubbornness of life" (*MD* 165).<sup>184</sup> Whereas the aforementioned scholars are in danger of accepting at face value the widespread stigmatization of those deemed unproductive and dependent upon others, the story itself can thus be read as a critical interrogation of exactly such problematic exclusionary social mechanisms.<sup>185</sup>

184 As Dillingham has pointed out (317), there is an interesting resemblance between the opening lines of Ford—"A time ago, no matter how long precisely" ("JR" 336)—and Ishmael: "Some years ago—never mind how long precisely" (*MD* 3). Along with Melville's other writings in the period 1853–1856, several scholars have approached "Jimmy Rose" as a hypothetical narrative of what could have become of Ishmael after his return from sea, see Slater, and Chase (*Herman Melville*).

185 For a somewhat related argument concerning the depiction of disability in *The Confidence-Man*, see Snyder and Mitchell (*Cultural Locations* 37–68 and "Masquerades"), and Samuels.

Ford touches upon several of the tactics that have enabled Jimmy to survive as a parasite. First, his famous smile is said to have become no less winning after the bankruptcy: “The lordly door which received him to his eleemosynary teas, knew no such smiling guest as Jimmy” (“JR” 343). Second, just like his literary ancestors, he uses his wit, learning, and ability to entertain as a means of securing invitations, be it by spreading “the news of the town” or by “frequenting the reading-rooms” to keep informed on “European affairs and the last literature, foreign and domestic” (“JR” 343). Third, having been a ladies’ man in the past, he still knows how to charm members of the opposite sex: “Neither did Jimmy give up his courtly ways. Whenever there were ladies at the table, sure were they of some fine word” (“JR” 343). He thus undoubtedly offers those who feed him *something* of value, meaning that it is not easy deciding who has the most to gain from the relationship—the hosts or the parasite; as Ford puts it:

Though in thy own need thou hadst no pence to give the poor, thou, Jimmy, still hadst alms to give the rich. For not the beggar chattering at the corner pines more after bread than the vain heart after compliment. The rich in their craving glut, as the poor in their craving want, we have with us always. So, I suppose, thought Jimmy Rose. (“JR” 344)

Hence, to have survived in this manner for such a long time, Jimmy must once have been a truly excellent parasite. Nevertheless, to quote Athenaeus’ previously mentioned *The Learned Banqueters*: “The bloom is quickly off a flatterer’s life;/ no one likes a parasite with gray temples” (6.255b). When the narrator meets Jimmy again, twenty-five years after the bankruptcy, he has been plying his tricks for so long that he is in the process of being outdated: dinner invitations are harder to come by, his charms no longer as appreciated as they used to be, his wit not as welcome, and his compliments often perceived as “somewhat musty” by the young ladies to whom they are directed (“JR” 343). In order not to further alienate his remaining patrons, he therefore has to know when to make himself scarce: “At certain houses, and not a few, Jimmy would drop in about ten minutes before the tea-hour, and drop out again about ten minutes after it; well knowing that his further presence was not indispensable

to the contentment or felicity of his host" ("JR" 343). Ford also notes that "[s]o numerous were the houses that Jimmy visited, or so cautious was he in timing his less welcome calls, that at certain mansions he only dropped in about once a year or so" ("JR" 344).

While the title character thus shares many of the central traits of the comedic parasites, Melville's story is clearly no comedy. Jimmy's hunger serves a tragic, rather than a comedic function. This can be seen from the following passage, where it becomes clear that the aging parasite has reached a point where he must swallow his pride for tea and scraps of bread, perfectly aware that a proper meal will only be served after he has left:

How forlorn it was to see him so heartily drinking the generous tea, cup after cup, and eating the flavorful bread and butter, piece after piece, when, owing to the lateness of the dinner hour with the rest, and the abundance of that one grand meal with them, no one besides Jimmy touched the bread and butter, or exceeded a single cup of Souchong. And knowing all this very well, poor Jimmy would try to hide his hunger, and yet gratify it too, by striving hard to carry on a sprightly conversation with his hostess, and throwing in the eagerest mouthfuls with a sort of absent-minded air, as if he ate merely for custom's sake, and not starvation's. ("JR" 343)

That is to say, Melville has created a tragic parasite whose pathetic traits are counterbalanced by his extraordinary ability to swallow his pride and to adapt to his poverty and the situation he finds himself in.<sup>186</sup> In "Jimmy Rose" he has taken up the traditional comedic stock figure not to reproduce it, but to do something new by probing and modifying it, adding new traits to it, removing old ones, or by combining different traits in unexpected ways. This is the case for Jimmy, but it might also be true for William Ford. Even though the latter does not come across as particularly interested in food, as such, there are still several indications that the

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<sup>186</sup> As Gavin Jones has argued in his chapter on Melville in *American Hunger*, his work is defined by its "sustained development of a dynamic, balanced, yet critical response to the contentious cultural questions that always seem to inform debates over socioeconomic inequality" (22). Even though he only mentions "Jimmy Rose" in passing, there is little doubt that Jones' sustained analytical focus on poverty intersects with the question of social parasitism.

story might also contain another sponger, albeit one intent on hiding his true character.

## William Ford's Surprising Inheritance

As several critics have argued, even though the story bears his name, Jimmy Rose is not necessarily its most important character; in the words of Lea Newman: "As one of several of Melville's stories in which the narrator is as central to the meaning as the alleged protagonist, 'Jimmy Rose' has generated as much commentary on behalf of William Ford, who tells the story, as of Jimmy, who is its subject" (263).

Previous scholars have offered contradicting reflections on Ford's character. To some, he is endowed with a "superior insight which enables him to penetrate the surface of Jimmy's shallow society" (Tutt 30), thus functioning as "a moral yardstick" against which this superficial social milieu is judged and found wanting (Slater 273). Or, to quote James W. Gargano, who claims that through "the story he so honestly tells," Ford exposes "the ingratitude, parasitism, and selfishness" of Jimmy's social milieu (279, 278). On the other hand, there are those who consider him a sentimental old man who is not only unable to see the truth about Jimmy, but also unable to acknowledge "the shallowness in his own character" (Bickley Jr. *Method* 48). Others go even further, describing him as an unreliable narrator who frequently "skirts the truth," whose story is marked by significant omissions and lacunae, and whose relationship to the elites frequenting Jimmy's parties is far from unambiguous (Jeffrey 70). Nonetheless, even David K. Jeffrey, who argues that there is "a close affinity between the narrator and Jimmy; the two do not contrast but are very similar" (71), did not raise the possibility that Ford might embody parasitic traits of his own.

Assessing Ford's possible parasitic qualities requires answering one simple question: How did he end up as the owner of Jimmy's old house? To me, this is the central question raised by the story. Nonetheless, few scholars have asked it, either simply ignoring the issue or settling for unsatisfactory conclusions like pointing out that Ford inherits it "by some stroke of fortune which is never explained" (Tutt 30). One exception

is William B. Dillingham, who notes that the inheritance "is a curious detail, though it has not teased critics into speculating much about it" (302). All Ford mentions is that Jimmy "was among my earliest acquaintances," and that at the funeral, he "and two other tottering old fellows took hack, and in sole procession followed him to his grave" ("JR" 338). For this reason, Dillingham's own attempt at an answer does not seem particularly convincing, nor does it help explain the story: "A possible explanation is that Jimmy Rose is a relative of William Ford's and that this is a family house passed on from one member to another over the years" (302).

A closer look at what might be gleaned from the story about Ford's personality and character traits begins to indicate another possibility. First, he comes across as a conservative and sentimental old gentleman who longs for the past and has little interest in the present or the future. Not unlike the house itself, he can thus be seen as a "holdout" from an age gone by, to adopt Nick Yablon's term (131). This is for instance evident from the way Ford opposes his wife, whom he fears "was too young for me" ("JR" 338). She wants to replace their main parlor's old and partially faded French wallpaper, but he adamantly refuses her requests for something more modern. What is important to him is the quality and sense of history of the original, which shows roses and peacocks: "such paper could only have come from Paris—genuine Versailles paper—the sort of paper that might have hung in Marie Antoinette's boudoir" ("JR" 337). This has led Marvin Fisher to conclude that "[t]he narrator is distinctly French in his tastes and outlook, his family and their servant girl no less distinctly American. But significantly he is not Jacobin French, but definitely *ancien régime* in his values" (137). While in many ways an accurate description, I would add that instead of labeling Ford's taste as French, as such, it rather indicates his fundamental attachment to the aristocracy of the Old World and its system of core values.<sup>187</sup>

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187 As Ralph M. Tutt has argued, the roses in the parlor's wallpaper can be read as "an emblem of aristocracy" (30). The claim made in one of G. K. Chesterton's stories that in "those larger landscape gardens of the landed aristocracy ... peacocks as pets are not uncommon" (117), suggests that the same also holds for peacocks.

This becomes even more evident in another story that Melville wrote in the same period, and which is likely also narrated by Ford: “I and My Chimney,” published in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* in March 1856.<sup>188</sup> Here the unnamed narrator—hereafter referred to as “I”—is the owner of a house in the country with an extraordinarily large chimney. “I” is very fond of this chimney, describing it in terms of royalty, nobility, and aristocratic prerogatives. His wife, however, is not, and her major goal is therefore to tear it down—this because, “like the English aristocracy, [it] casts a contracting shade all round it” (“IMC” 359). Thus, in both “Jimmy Rose” and “I and My Chimney,” there is an opposition between the aristocratic traditions of yesteryear and current democratic ones, where the narrators are stubbornly on the side of the former, even though the splendor of the past has faded and crumbled. Where others—their wives, in particular—see a present and future full of opportunities, the aging narrators see nothing but “degenerate days” (“IMC” 355).

“I” makes known his own attitude to work when he describes himself as “a dozy old dreamer” who “dote[s] on seventh days as days of rest, and out of a sabbatical horror of industry, will, on a week day, go out of my road a quarter of a mile, to avoid the sight of a man at work” (“IMC” 360–61). Thus, in the true spirit of the aristocracy, “I” seems to abhor work. Moreover, for the most part he also appears to be able to avoid it: “I never was a very forward old fellow, nor what my farming neighbors call a forehanded one. Indeed, those rumors about my behindhandedness are so far correct, that I have an odd sauntering way with me sometimes of going about with my hands behind my back” (“IMC” 353). In fact, the one time in the story he does a bit of manual labor, he remarks that “so deeply was I penetrated with wonder at the chimney, that one day—*when I was a*

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188 For the argument that Ford is the narrator of both, see Fogle (72–73), and M. Fisher (200–1), who stress that both stories are told by a conservative and old-fashioned man in opposition to a younger, more vital wife who wants to radically change their homes. Both couples have two daughters (unnamed in “Jimmy Rose”; named Julia and Anna in “I and My Chimney”) and a maid named Biddy. If the narrators are indeed one and the same person, this means that “I and My Chimney” must take place before the narrator moves to New York after inheriting Jimmy’s house in “Jimmy Rose.” For the argument that these stories and “The Apple-Tree Table” (1856)—which also features a married, unnamed narrator with daughters named Julia and Anna, and a maid named Biddy—were written in sequence between the late summer of 1854 and the summer or fall of 1855, see Newman (256).

*little out of my mind, I now think*—getting a spade from the garden, I set to work, digging round the foundation” (“IMC” 357; emphasis added). Moreover, he describes his aims in life solely in terms of his opposition to his wife’s plans: “I have not a single scheme or expectation on earth, save in unequal resistance of the undue encroachment of hers” (“IMC” 361). In other words, “I” would without a doubt agree with Ishmael’s previously quoted claim about detesting “all honorable respectable toils, trials, and tribulations of every kind whatsoever” (*MD* 5).

These traits seem equally applicable to William Ford, who never clarifies how he makes his living. What he does lovingly mention, however, is sofas to relax in and “delicious breakfast toast,” and he also talks of joining the “loitering census” of the “few strange old gentlemen and ladies” yet to be found in his neighborhood (“JR” 336). From this perspective, his attachment to the good old days when he had recourse to Jimmy’s lavish dinners and expensive wines appears in a different light. Even though Ford, in Sheila Post-Lauria’s words, is someone who “distances himself from the tragedy of Jimmy Rose by restricting his role to impassive observer” (171), and also seems to purposefully minimize the degree of his personal involvement in the life of his acquaintance, there is little doubt that he, too, must have been an active participant at these dinners and parties. For, as David K. Jeffrey has rightly noted: “It is in the narrator’s descriptions of Jimmy’s parties that he most clearly exposes his longing for the past, and at the same time his description links him inadvertently with the society he condemns throughout the story” (71). After all, he could hardly have described these festive occasions in the manner that he does if he did not have first-hand experience to draw upon, and, at one point, he also explicitly mentions that “[i]t was but four or five days since seeing Jimmy at his house the centre of all eyes” (“JR” 339). That he must have been present on multiple occasions is betrayed when, describing how he happened to meet an “indignant gentleman” who had lost money due to the bankruptcy, he remarks that “now that I bethink me, I recall how I had *more than once* observed this same middle-aged gentleman, and how that toward the close of one of Jimmy’s dinners he would sit at the table pretending to be earnestly talking with beaming Jimmy” (“JR” 340; emphasis added).

Moreover, Ford's presence as a guest at *past* feasts casts an interesting light on his descriptions of Jimmy's tactics for acquiring nourishment, after the two are reacquainted. Take, for example, the previously quoted passage where he lamented "[h]ow forlorn it was to see him so heartily drinking the generous tea ... and eating the flavorful bread," when, due to the late dinner they were waiting for, nobody else ate anything. Logically, if Ford has really seen what he here claims to have seen, he must have been present on at least one such occasion, implying that no less than the other guests, he, too, had waited for the late dinner to be served as soon as his hungry associate had left.

While the story does not allow the reader to come to any clear conclusions, it thus gives birth to the suspicion that when it comes to free dinners, Ford might have more in common with Jimmy than he is willing to admit—perhaps one could even go so far as to see the two as the sides of another one of Melville's diptychs.<sup>189</sup> And if he is indeed an idler whose fondness for aristocratic prerogatives equals his dislike of manual labor, as well as someone who considers the present age a degenerated version of the glorious days when Jimmy was in his bloom, then he, no less than his old host, must be aware of the necessity of telling people what they want to hear to earn such free meals. Ford's nostalgic style and the sentimental refrain he repeatedly interjects might therefore be understood as a way of presenting a potentially difficult topic in a manner that will offend no one: "Poor Jimmy Rose" ("JR" 338), and "Ah! poor, poor Jimmy—God guard us all—poor Jimmy Rose!" ("JR" 339; for varieties, see 342, 343, 345).<sup>190</sup> Moreover, the cheerfulness with which he ends the narrative ultimately turns it into a story of hope, rather than one of despair: "Transplanted to another soil, all the unkind past forgot, God grant that Jimmy's roses

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189 When considered in this light, interesting points of contact become visible between "Jimmy Rose" and Melville's other stories that deal with the opposition between hunger and plenitude, as well as wealth and poverty, such as "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" and "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs."

190 As Post-Lauria argues, the narrator's sentimentality resembles the tone common in texts about poverty published in *Harper's*. As she sees it, this holds for all the stories Melville published in the magazine: "Melville consciously adheres to the *Harper's* dictum for a sentimental structure in crafting his own message. His interest in questioning or even challenging the ideological views supported by both the magazine and the sentimental form had to be relegated to the substrata of his *Harper's* tales" (176).

may immortally survive!" ("JR" 345). In so doing, Ford transforms the narrative into the kind of story he could have safely told at one of Jimmy's dinners without having to risk alienating his patrons.

## Tasty Compliments for a Vain Heart

The question remains: Why did the narrator inherit Jimmy's house? Considering his rhetorical strategies, the fact that Ford never gives an answer to this question gives the impression that he might have kept this information to himself on purpose, rather than simply forgotten to mention it. What he does share with the reader, however, is that "a sweet girl" looked after Jimmy near the end of his life: "The only daughter of an opulent alderman, she knew Jimmy well, and saw to him in his declining days. During his last sickness, with her own hands she carried him jellies and blanc-mange; made tea for him in his attic, and turned the poor old gentleman in his bed" ("JR" 344). Ford mentions neither that Jimmy had any family or relatives, nor does he do anything to counter the impression that he only met him a few times after the bankruptcy. This might lead the reader to suspect that the one who deserved to inherit his house would have been she who made his last days as comfortable as possible.

What Ford does share, however, is that he went to visit Jimmy after chancing to hear about his illness, and that something peculiar happened while he was there: "I hardly know that I should mention here one little incident connected with this young lady's ministrations, and poor Jimmy's reception of them. But it is harm to neither; I will tell it" ("JR" 344). What happens is that the young woman has brought "several books, of such a sort as are sent by serious-minded well-wishers to invalids in a serious crisis," but when she retires to leave Ford and Jimmy alone, the latter, "with what small remains of strength were his, pitched the books into the furthest corner, murmuring, 'Why will she bring me this sad old stuff? Does she take me for a pauper? Thinks she to salve a gentleman's heart with Poor Man's Plaster?'" ("JR" 344). Some critics have taken this as an indication of the shortcomings of Jimmy; James W. Gargano for example considers the outburst as evidence of how he "rejects self-knowledge and obstinately fancies himself, to the end, a kind of grandee"

(279). As I see it, what is important is rather that the sick man here inadvertently offers an opening for anybody with an interest in appearing as his true friend. What these words clearly indicate is that Jimmy has his pride. He still considers himself a gentleman and wants to be treated as one, rather than as a pauper. Since the narrator comments that “[f]or not the beggar chattering at the corner pines more after bread than the vain heart after compliment” (344), it does not seem unlikely that such tasty compliments and reassurances are exactly what he must have offered his acquaintance and his vain heart. However, Ford’s actual words to Jimmy are never revealed—instead, he simply breaks off from the story with the help of another one of his bland, non-offensive interjections: “Poor, poor Jimmy—God guard us all—poor Jimmy Rose!” (“JR” 345).

In the end, one can only speculate if the inheritance of the house came as a surprise to Ford, or if it was something he aimed for through plying the vanity of his dying acquaintance with fair, but empty words.<sup>191</sup> No matter what the answer, inherit the house he did, and at the close of the story, the reader’s last glimpse is of him once more contentedly looking at the elegant peacocks and roses of the parlor’s faded wallpaper, having dried a sentimental tear from his eye. This ending is obviously far from the glamor and radiance of the extravagant parties he experienced in his youth, but then again—not unlike Jimmy—the aging Ford is not somebody who appears to demand all that much from life. What it takes to keep him satisfied, it seems, is to have a parlor of his own where he can meditate on the past and enjoy his aristocratic idleness—potentially while waiting for an invitation to his next free dinner—all the while trying to keep his busy wife from wreaking too much havoc on his peace of mind.

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191 One of the stock characters the Roman *parasitus* had the most in common with was the *captator* or inheritance-hunter. Addressing Horace’s *Satire* 2.5, Cynthia Damon points out their similarities and their main difference: “The parasitical origin of Horace’s *captator* is fairly easy to discern. Both types ‘consume’ their hosts, but whereas the parasite needs his ration daily, the *captator* can afford to wait for his prize” (121). The many omissions and lacunae of William Ford’s narrative, in particularly concerning Jimmy’s death and the details of the inheritance, thus indicate that he might embody traits taken from both these figures.