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An unscrupulous critic, determined to get his hands on the private papers of a great poet, finds himself duelling with the grim old lady who was once the poet's mistress and muse. Aspern's lost world of beauty and romance still seems to hand in the glamorous air of Venice, but the price of admission turns out to involve another party, the old woman's unmagical niece. What exactly is Aspern's admirer prepared to pay?

In the other stories collected here - 'The Private Life', 'The Middle Years', and 'The Death of the Lion' - the elusive figure of the writer again arouses passions of pursuit and dispute among rival admirers and patrons. James never wrote more pointedly about the pleasures and pains of the writer, or more wittily about the public that seeks to profit from him.

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