

Donatella Izzo

## Setting a Free Woman Free: *The Portrait(s) of a Lady*<sup>1</sup>

This essay is an attempt to confront two texts at once: *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. One is of course Henry James's novel, which I have never ceased to come back to over a couple of decades, and never failed to respond to as both woman and literary critic, as a crucial experience on both planes. The other is just as obviously the movie that Jane Campion directed in 1996.<sup>2</sup>

My approach to both texts will be an analytic, but not a systematic one. The novel is too canonical, too rich in textual and critical implications, for me to pretend to any comprehensiveness within the short space of an essay.<sup>3</sup> As for the movie, my specific competence in film analysis is definitely too scant. But I did feel, on first watching Campion's *Portrait*, that she had given visual expression to some of the reflections on James's novel which I had been developing over the years: that's why my reading of some crucial passages in James's *Portrait* will interweave with my reading of Jane Campion's reading of them. While not trying to put forth any overall interpretation or evaluation of Campion's achievement, I hope to make one point which to my mind critics and reviewers of the movie have not sufficiently stressed:<sup>4</sup> namely, that much of the significance of Jane Campion's performance lies exactly in the peculiar and uncanonical way her film is positioned

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<sup>2</sup> *The Portrait of a Lady*, dir. Jane Campion, prod. Propaganda Films, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> I once attempted to do so, however, as a younger and less wary critic: see my "The Portrait of a Lady and Modern Narrative," in Joel Porte, ed., *New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990): 33-48.

<sup>4</sup> This no longer holds true: since this essay was first completed, Jamesian criticism has made up for this lack, as witness in particular the special section of *The Henry James Review* 18:2 (Spring 1997) devoted to "Responses to Jane Campion's *The Portrait of a Lady*."

vis-à-vis its pre-text; and that Campion's *Portrait*, therefore, should be read *both* as a successful instance of modern film adaptation, *and* as an intervention in Jamesian criticism.

The opening sequence is revealing. The time setting (a present-day not otherwise specified); the characters featured (a group of anonymous young women leisurely moving and dancing; voices off—presumably theirs—discussing love); and the metalinguistic transition from their free and graceful movements to the title, minutely hand-written on the palm of one girl's hand, all point in the same direction: they are the explicit manifesto of a contemporary woman's outlook, as well as the metaphor of the lasting presence and relevance of a past that is still literally inscribed on the very body of women. Significantly, nothing but the switch from black and white to color marks the transition to Isabel Archer's story, already under way and introduced *in medias res*, as if a natural continuity connected her to the contemporary young women in the first scene; there is no fade out/fade in effect, no formal framing, no distancing of Isabel's story into a past to be aesthetically experienced in its remoteness through a profusion of scenery and furnishings, like Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence*.

Jane Campion's film constantly challenges the audience by systematically inhibiting an easy, passive reception of the narrative. The abrupt, defamiliarizing cut of sequences interrupts narrative continuity and prevents the viewer from yielding to its flow; slant shots and extreme close-ups of details, while recalling the Jamesian emphasis on point of view, also highlight the self-consciously marginal quality of the camera's choice of vantage point. The underlying rationale of such decisions seems to be a foregrounding of style, whose ultimate function is to de-automatize the viewer's perception of the story. Jane Campion's film is thus both an extremely faithful and an extremely transgressive rendering of James's novel: by questioning cinema as reproduction, by opening the gap between the literary and the filmic text, it makes the latter into "a" reading of the former, and an intentionally partial one. Through its very divergences and shifts in emphasis, Campion's *Portrait* has a twofold relevance: as a reading of Henry James's novel, it brings out its cultural possibilities in our present-day arena; and as a filmic reading, it brings out the *productive*, rather than merely *reproductive* quality of the film's relation to its pre-text, and by extension, of modern cinema as an art form.<sup>5</sup>

### **"Under certain circumstances..."**

Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not—some people of course never do —, the situation is

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<sup>5</sup> I'm here following the line of argument set by Giorgio De Vincenti, *Il concetto di modernità nel cinema* (Parma: Pratiche, 1993), who elaborates on André Bazin's theory of adaptation.

in itself delightful. Those that I have in mind in beginning to unfold this simple history offered an admirable setting to an innocent pastime.<sup>6</sup>

Even though it is one of the most often-quoted incipits in English literature, the first page of *The Portrait of a Lady* retains all its capacity to produce sense anew with each new reading. Its vocabulary, although far from literary or sustained, is abstract, totally devoid of any material referent in the first six or seven lines: “circumstances,” “hours,” “ceremony,” “situation”—even “tea” obviously refers not to the leaves of an aromatic plant or to the infusion obtained from it, but to the immaterial ritual staged around its consumption. Its syntax cages the reader into the tantalizing rhythm of a sentence which only comes to completion with its very last item, compelling one in the meantime to go through analytic specifications and particularizations, and to carefully weigh balanced alternatives. Meaning is dilated and deferred, and made difficult to grasp not through polysemic excess, but the very reverse, an overabundance of increment, paraphrase, specification, and modification of a minimum core of sense. And the same is true for the main categories of narrative discourse. Temporal denotation is unnervingly analyzed until it is dissolved into an ungraspable transition between no longer and not yet. The entrance of human actors is delayed until after the more intangible features of the situation have been analyzed for twenty lines’ length; and even then, they are introduced indirectly, first by way of litotes, then through their shadows, thus inverting ordinary relations of cause and effect. Indeed, only through their looks, their mutual gaze, and their position as recorded by the incorporeal eye of a hypothetical observer will their possible identities and relations to one another be surmised; and it will take three more pages for one of them to be named. As for space, it is less described than saturated with connotation: the house, at first a mere pictorial background, takes on historical and cultural significance through reference to “Edward the Sixth,” “the great Elizabeth,” “Cromwell’s wars,” “the Restoration,” as well as to the ivy and creepers climbing on its front—those symbolic equivalents of “a name and a history,” the absence of which James lamented in Hawthorne’s America. Moreover, the mutability of the house depending on light and prospect provides an early opportunity for hinting at the poetics of point of view as developed later in the novel.

Such stylistic features—obviously foreshadowing, for any well-trained Jamesian reader, the most prominent and celebrated features of the novel—have long kept me under their spell, thus preventing me from noticing the possible meaningfulness of the short remark parenthetically appended to the Hamlet-like alternative between having or not having tea: “— some people of course never do— .” An offhand, almost careless remark, but nevertheless one that is brought

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<sup>6</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), ed. Robert D. Bamberg (New York: Norton, 1975), 17. Page references will henceforth be cited parenthetically in the text.

into strong relief by its parenthetical placing—a well-known Jamesian mannerism. But *who* is it that never takes part in the ceremony known as afternoon tea?

When once you have asked the question, the answer is an obvious one: it is cooks, parlor-maids, butlers, all those who officiate the ceremony without actually taking part in it—or rather, without “partaking,” a verb with strong ritual overtones, the verb pertaining to the Eucharist. And along with the servants, it’s all those people who do not belong to the Anglo-Saxon upper- or middle-class, and are consequently cut off from performing this quintessential Victorian ritual, the household celebration of the British Empire. Interestingly enough, tea-cups and silverware are all-pervasive in *Campion’s* film, thus making up for the absence of this crucial first scene in the screenplay; and servants (along with beggars) are an obtrusive and indiscreet presence on stage, thus bearing witness to the perceptiveness of a rendering which in systematic fashion, here as elsewhere, makes eloquently explicit what the novel had just as eloquently implied.

Henry James has been traditionally charged with indifference to the lower classes and lack of interest in social issues; in the last few years, however, he has been recast as a perceptive social critic, and attention has shifted to works like *The American Scene*. But an acute social awareness, as Jamesian critics have just begun to realize, is by no means limited to his non-fiction, and *The Portrait of a Lady* is no exception. Even though he will not center his narrative on those people who “never do,” James here is doing something different, and peculiar to him: he is not describing the phenomenology of society, but foregrounding its structural mode of operation. In other words, James is simultaneously displaying and concealing—or rather, displaying by concealing, displaying the act of concealing—the exclusionary device, the class device, which grounds not so much the novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, as the social formation of which it is a representation. The deceptive carelessness and the obviousness implied in his “of course” effectively lay bare the working of ideology, whose prime effect is the naturalization of historically specific social relations in the eyes of all participants in a given social formation. A strategy, incidentally, which James will successfully adopt again in tales such as “Brooksmith” or “In the Cage.”

In this view, the opening of *The Portrait of a Lady* reads as the spectacular staging of an Althusserian notion of ideology, and of its manifestation in the individual’s life through collective rituals and material practices.<sup>7</sup> Such a staging might be suspected of a celebratory intent were it not for the “whether” which, as had been the case in “Daisy Miller,”<sup>8</sup> undermines the false universality of the

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<sup>7</sup> Here and hereafter, I’m referring to Althusser’s theory of ideology in its classic formulation: Louis Althusser, “Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’état,” *La Pensée* 151 (1970). Quotations are from “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation),” in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Mapping Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1994): 100-140. Page references will henceforth be cited parenthetically in the text.

representation by suggesting the existence of alternatives, however repressed; and were it not for another word—"privilege"—which, a few lines below, unobtrusively insists that the "innocent pastime" of some is founded on the premise of social inequality.

Reading James and Althusser side by side promises to bring about new discoveries. "The persons concerned in it were taking their pleasure quietly, and they were not of the sex which is supposed to furnish the regular votaries of the ceremony I have mentioned." Such a sentence would be unintelligible to a *Candide*, or even to a reader from a different culture, since it can only convey meaning within a known and shared framework governing the attribution of roles in social practices along the lines of gender. Such gendered roles are further endowed with strong normative overtones, as suggested by the use of "is supposed to." Thus, in less than a page, *The Portrait of a Lady* produces an awareness of two crucial facts: first, that "one's enjoyment of such a scene at such an hour" is entirely ruled by class and gender determinations, positioning the individual in this (as well as in any other) scene; and second, that only by virtue of ideology are determinations concealed and norms and exclusions naturalized, so that the fruit of circumstances can be transformed into a specious "eternity of pleasure."

"Under certain circumstances" thus resonates as more than an expression of James's habitual relativism, and of his taste for nuances and distinctions; it sounds, indeed, as a dismal recognition of the decisive role played by social determinations in the individual's life. This should not be taken in the generic sense which applies to the whole history of the realist novel, but in the more abstract and more specific one of a semiological and ideological analysis of the working of such determinations.

One is now in a better position to understand the significance of the obstinate deferral of Isabel's entrance in the scene (as well as of the other human actors' before her). The ceremony—the ritualized social practice—pre-exists the individual; only within this superindividual discourse can the individual appear and be constituted as subject. Like the semantic core in the inclusions and specifications of James's diction, the human character's presence is here encapsulated into a setting which is not just pictorial or connotative background, but overall social and historical determination. Isabel enters the scene within a social ritual that textually pre-exists her, framed by the other characters' comments and expectations, just as she is framed by the doorway on her first appearance. The incipit of *Portrait* thus foretells something that Isabel will only realize much later: the notion of individuality—autonomous, original, and irreplaceable—is, in Althusser's words,

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<sup>8</sup> For a reading of "Daisy Miller" as deconstructive staging of patriarchal ideology, see my "Daisy Miller' e il discorso dell'ideologia," *R.S.A. Journal* 1 (1990): 45-68.

“the elementary ideological effect” (129); in the social world, and in the world of the novel, there are no individuals, but only (Althusserian) subjects.

The textual economy organizing the opening scene of *The Portrait of a Lady* may also shed new light on the metatextual metaphors whereby the text defines itself in terms of two opposite structural patterns: history—“in beginning to unfold this simple history” (17)—and painting—“the peculiarly English picture I have attempted to sketch” (18). These self-definitions are equally authoritative, since both are conveyed by the narrator’s voice, and both are placed in textually prominent positions (near the beginning and at the end of the first paragraph respectively); but they are also mutually contradictory, since the former refers to the mimetic and historiographic quality of narrative, while the latter highlights the pictorial dimension implied in the novel’s title and the self-referentiality of spatial form; the former stresses the diachronic dimension and suggests the panoramic ambitions of the novel, the latter insists on synchrony and concentration on a single object, the subject being portrayed. The contradiction only disappears in the light of the operations the text performs with respect to ideology—operations which lend a historiographic quality to the novel, not in the sense of a factual record, but of the novel’s grip on the historicity of the social machinery that produces the character/the subject as such. This ambition underlies the “portrait of a lady,” where “lady” historicizes the individual, by deconstructing identity along the gender and class lines which socially determine it; and “portrait” is the artistic probing of subjectivity understood, in Althusser’s terms, as “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (123).

### **“... like the heroine of an immoral novel”**

As several critics have noted, during the well-known “metaphysical conversation” in chapter XIX Isabel opposes Madame Merle’s socialized version of identity by voicing an Emersonian notion of self. Madame Merle emphasizes the expressive, symptomatic value of any outer manifestation of identity (“‘One’s self—for other people—is one’s expression of one’s self,’” 175), and almost envisages the possibility of a self decentered into its expressions: “‘It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again’” (175). To Isabel, on the other hand, identity is an essence, a full origin, exceeding any manifestation, whose relation to the self can never be a necessary one. Garments and houses, tastes and acquaintances—that “cluster of appurtenances” which Madame Merle, significantly echoing the opening sentence of the novel, describes as the “envelope of circumstances”—do not pertain to the self, but are “a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one” (175): a function of society rather than individual essence.

What is in question in either case, however, is not so much the original and essential quality of self, as the expressive and necessary relation between the

individual's essence and the individual's social attributes. Neither character does in fact push her argument so far as to assume either that there is no originary term in the relation between individual and society, or that this origin may be other than the self. However, whereas Madame Merle highlights the issue of expression (and the rest of the novel is there to show to what extent perfect mastery of outer form can betray, rather than express the self), what is at stake in Isabel's words is the possibility of freedom for the self, unencumbered by the "envelope of circumstances" and potentially capable of unlimited (and unspecified) expansion.<sup>9</sup>

As any reader of *The Portrait of a Lady* knows, Isabel is constantly talking about freedom; her early refusal of marriage, for instance, is accounted for in terms of her "love of liberty" (which is however "as yet almost exclusively theoretic," as the narrator ironically remarks, 145). But the presuppositions, the costs and the limits of such an indefinite and negative notion of freedom (freedom from unspecified external ties and restrictions) are possibly among those facts about which "the love of knowledge coexisted in her mind with the finest capacity for ignorance" (173). Ralph Touchett knows better, as shown by the phrasing of his request that his father bequeath most of his money to Isabel: "'If she has an easy income she'll never have to marry for a support. ... She wishes to be free, and your bequest will make her free'" (160). In Ralph's words, the notion of freedom for the self is soberly laid on solid economic foundations. But what is more, the very idea of wealth is in its turn founded, in circular fashion, on the subjective demands of interiority: "'I call people rich when they're able to meet the requirements of their imagination. Isabel has a great deal of imagination'" (160).

In this paradox lie the roots of Isabel's drama. The *deus ex machina* of her uncle's bequest suddenly enfranchises Isabel from the need to sell herself on the marriage market like other Jamesian heroines, and sets her "free." Or rather, sets her free from everything *but* her imagination, thereby constituting her as the perfect case-study for the ideological, as well as economic roots of women's subalternity—that is, for ideology in its twofold character, both material *and* mental, of "lived relation" whereby social relations are reproduced, as Louis Althusser has it, "in the 'consciousness', i.e. in the attitude of the individual subjects" (136). The very conviction of being a free, autonomous, self-directed individual, who is consequently accountable for her ideas and decisions, is the result of ideology—a delusion of being able to transcend circumstances, thus attaining the absolute realm of freedom. Therein lies, in Althusser's theory, the primary ideological effect: by interpellating us as subjects, it makes us *subject to* ideology.

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<sup>9</sup> Alessandro Portelli effectively discusses the issue of freedom and limits in "*Freedom, Fortune, and Fancy: Henry James e la frontiera*," *Acoma* 12 (Inverno 1998): 52-62.

Isabel Archer's story is a compelling representation and a painful exposure of this delusion. A philosophically empowered self, she seems to be utterly unaware of the contradiction inherent in her view of the self's happiness as ultimately consisting of the reification of others (patently based, once again, on class privilege): "that's the supreme good fortune: to be in a better position for appreciating people than they are for appreciating you.' And she added that such, when one considered it, was simply the essence of the aristocratic situation. In this light, if in none other, one should aim at the aristocratic situation" (166). Based as it is on this unexamined assumption, Isabel's quest for "the high places of happiness, from which the world would seem to lie below one, so that one could look down with a sense of exaltation and advantage, and judge and choose and pity" (356) is bound to end in the bitterness of an ironic reversal. Reified in her turn by the gaze of that supreme *connoisseur*, Osmond ("a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects," 258) and by Madame Merle's plots ("She made a convenience of me," 475), Isabel will eventually come to think of herself as nothing but "an applied handled hung-up tool, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron" (459)—a metaphor which overturns her proud claim to free will ("if ever a girl was a free agent she had been," 340) by exposing her instrumentality to other people's ends, while additionally humbling her class exaltation through specific reference to bodily labor. As John Goode argues with reference to *The Golden Bowl*,<sup>10</sup> the celebration of bourgeois subjectivity, pushed to its extreme consequences, explodes its contradictions: the empowerment of self has its counterpart in the reification of the other, and reversal of roles is constantly possible: nothing but a potentially shifting power relation positions the individual within this dialectics.

But Isabel's imagination is also colonized by different and indeed opposite representations, inscribing her in her culture as a woman, as well as a bourgeois individual. Prominent among these is literature: as is often the case with Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* is a metafictional study of the novel's role in shaping individual and collective imagination. Revealingly, "it's just like a novel!" (27) is one of Isabel's very first lines on her appearance. Literary stereotypes, explicitly highlighted as such, recurringly dictate the protagonist's ready-made responses to experience: "This immediately had a value—classic, romantic, redeeming, what did she know?—for her; 'the strong man in pain' was one of the categories of the human appeal, little charm as he [Goodwood] might exert in the given case" (138). On her visit to Lockleigh, for instance, Isabel is self-consciously acting out the plot of one of Jane Austen's novels (visit to the hero's ancestral estate, appreciation of his prominent and responsible role within the family and

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<sup>10</sup> John Goode, "'Character' and Henry James," *New Left Review* 40 (November-December 1966): 55-75.



the community, stroll in the garden, marriage proposal): she thinks of herself as “the heroine of the situation,” placed in circumstances “which a few weeks ago she would have deemed deeply romantic” (96). Lord Warburton, in his turn, underscores the paradigmatic value of the scene by his repeated mention of novels: “‘It was at first sight, as the novels say; I know now that’s not a fancy-phrase, and I shall think better of novels for evermore’” (97). In metalinguistic fashion, Isabel’s awareness of the novelistic pattern underlying her experience allows her, on this occasion, the distance needed to escape being trapped by a set role: “if she was now the heroine of the situation she succeeded scarcely the less in looking at it from the outside” (96). Isabel’s rejection of Lord Warburton allows her to start her story where a heroine of Jane Austen’s would have triumphantly ended it, thus increasing her sense of herself as an original individual following no prescribed path.

Isabel Archer’s imagination, however, is also haunted by less conscious literary patterns, evoked in a famous exchange: “‘Do you know where you’re drifting?’ ... ‘No, I haven’t the least idea, and I find it very pleasant not to know. A swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can’t see—that’s my idea of happiness’” (146). The self-reliant individual dwells side by side with Emma Bovary and her numberless colleagues and imitators in the sentimental novel,<sup>11</sup> thus bearing witness to the inherent instability of a feminine identity precariously poised between conflicting representations: the sovereign will of the self-legislating subject, the passive yielding of the heteronomous object. This simultaneous interiorization of contrasting patterns is the key to Isabel Archer’s “false consciousness”: on the one hand, she vigorously upholds female independence and self-sufficiency (“It was one of her theories that Isabel Archer was very fortunate in being independent. ... she held that a woman ought to be able to live by herself, ...and that it was perfectly possible to be happy without the society of a more or less coarse-minded person of another sex,” 55); on the other hand, images of submissiveness and self-surrender keep surfacing—a fact of which, as we are told, Isabel refuses to be fully aware:

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<sup>11</sup> R.W. Stallman, “The Houses That James Built — *The Portrait of a Lady*,” *Texas Quarterly* (Winter 1958): 176-96 was the first critic to point out that the source of Isabel’s image was Flaubert’s novel; the implications of the carriage image, however, have been noticed and commented on by several critics, notably Donald L. Mull, “Freedom and Judgment: The Antinomy of Action in *The Portrait of a Lady*,” *Arizona Quarterly* 27 (Summer, 1971): 124-132, who discusses it with reference to Isabel’s sense of freedom and self, and Adeline R. Tintner, “Isabel’s Carriage-Image and Emma’s Daydream,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 22 (Summer, 1976): 227-231. The most thorough and convincing demonstration of James’s indebtedness to popular and sentimental literature is provided by William R. Veeder, *Henry James — The Lessons of the Master. Popular Fiction and Personal Style in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1975). As Veeder shows, the carriage as setting of an elopement or seduction scene was a veritable *topos* in popular fiction (150).

Deep in her soul—it was the deepest thing there—lay a belief that if a certain light should dawn she could give herself completely; but this image, on the whole, was too formidable to be attractive. Isabel's thoughts hovered about it; but they seldom rested on it long; after a little it ended in alarms (56).

Isabel's keeping back at the threshold of a self-examination which might explode the contradictions in her interiorized representations of self, marks the triumph of ideology. And books—a recurring metaphor, a touchstone for experience, and a constant companion for Isabel whenever she sits waiting for somebody to bring a new twist to her life—take on the sinister role of occult persuaders, the privileged instrument of ideology.

Interestingly enough, books are virtually absent from Jane Campion's film, where only Countess Gemini is once presented as seeking entertainment in novels. Isabel's speculative ambitions (which, at the beginning of her career in the novel, gain her a reputation for bookishness) are retained in the movie, by way of a bizarre series of small notes, slipped in the frame of a closet, where abstract philosophical terms like "nihilism" and "abnegate" are inscribed: Western philosophy reduced to scraps, or possibly, to basic existential options. But the modeling ideological function of literature is elided in the film. One possible reason is that, in the translation of the novel to a different medium, the reference to novels would have lost much of its metatextual function—a function performed in the film by the rendering of Isabel's travels and sexual fantasies through an ironic revival of the stylistic devices of silent cinematography. But the disappearance of books is possibly more cogently accounted for by the historical developments which have diminished their former ideological power, while increasing the impact of aural and visual languages. Images are thus made to perform the double function that literature used to have in James's world: in Campion, too, metatextual reflection is coupled with a laying bare of the ideological function of the device. Virtually absent in the novel, mirrors are obsessively featured in the movie: by duplicating images, they foreground their primacy.

Mirror images, on the other hand, are far from univocal. Traditionally, the mirror can refer to both a quest for self and narcissistic self-complacency; as a metatextual metaphor, it has acted as a privileged emblem of both aesthetic realism, and modern and postmodern self-referentiality; as a *mise-en-abyme* operator, it can ambivalently imply either a mastery of sense authorized by textual self-reflection, or the infinite deferral of signification in endless self-mirroring. And as to its ideological value, feminist criticism has consistently argued that the mirror is a patriarchal instrument reproducing the male gaze and thereby perpetuating male power: by looking at themselves in the mirror and evaluating themselves in men's eyes, women assess their own beauty in terms of an obsessive conformity to a self-image that is ultimately functional to male desire.

Campion's film cleverly brings into play this wealth of implications, constantly

foregrounding the crucial and ambivalent function of images (and of mirrors as bearers/producers of images), while shunning the opposite dangers of allegoric simplification and baroque proliferation through her extremely self-conscious, ironic stance. With very few exceptions (notably, Isabel's swift, intense, and self-questioning glance on the occasion of her visit to dying Ralph Touchett in Gardencourt), Campion's mirrors never reflect the scene and the characters, or only do so in a slant way, or from the rear. In their preference for the back side and the unusual perspective, they allow of no self-mastery, no control of one's image; indeed, in reversing customary images, they lend an unusual degree of visibility to the *other* side. By hindering the visual automatism of mirroring as passive reproduction/recognition, Campion brings out its potential as re-production—'other,' marginal, and defamiliarizing—in what amounts to a visual critique of the visual image.

Such a blatantly oblique use of mirrors also suggests implications on a different plane: it might be read as a refusal to *frame* one's subject according to the rules of classical representation, constantly recalled by a profusion of gilt frames throughout the movie. A woman's portrait magnificently framed—the inevitable *mise en abyme* of the title—is displayed to an admiring Isabel during her first visit to Osmond's house. It is certainly no accident if this official-looking version of the image in its most codified form appears in Osmond's hands: the icon of an aesthetic, static, and repressive notion of femininity, it pertains to Osmond's style of portraiture, not—I would contend—to either James's or Campion's *Portrait*.

### **“But when darkness returned she was free”**

One source of Isabel Archer's appeal, and of the reverberations she sets off within each of her (women) readers, lies, as I have been trying to show, in a twofold contradiction: a contradiction inherent, on the one hand, in bourgeois individualism, and in its celebration of the self-reliance of “central man,” the individual's metaphysically grounded and boundless autonomy (all the more powerful in America due to its antinomian and Emersonian traditions); on the other hand, in the unsolved dialectics opening in the gap between the metaphysical freedom of a self thus conceived, and the passivity, dependence and subordination traditionally inscribing woman as such in Western culture.

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, a typology of women running the whole gamut from Pansy Osmond to Henrietta Stackpole explore the different versions of femininity, thus contributing to portray the notion of feminine individuality as highly problematic. Even though the expression of this conflict in the novel is dated (conveyed as it is in the language of nineteenth-century culture and of the opposition between European and American mores), its basic historical terms are

still relevant today, since it is along those lines that women are still being constituted as subjects in our culture.

The last third of James's *Portrait* is an elaborate staging of patriarchal authority as a quintessential ideological effect. A "negative" man ("no property, no title, no honours, no houses, no lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant belongings of any sort," 293),<sup>12</sup> Osmond is the representative of a power that results entirely from his gender positioning—an ideal representative, in fact, since his authority is so totally unrelated to any other form of superiority, be it of wealth or status.<sup>13</sup> Significantly enough, his only qualification on his first appearance is as *father*—a qualification on whose repressive and interdictory character Campion's film leaves even less doubt than the novel, as witness the episode of Pansy's painful stopping on the threshold of a sunny garden to comply with her father's prohibition. As a father and a husband, Osmond is the keeper and minister of a power that has sacred and institutional overtones, and whose normative quality is quite independent of his own individual capacity to coax or coerce: "His last words were not a command, they constituted a kind of appeal ... they represented something transcendent and absolute, like the sign of the cross or the flag of one's country" (446). Isabel's reverential fear of him ("afraid" is a recurring word in the Rome section of the novel) is only to be accounted for by such an investiture: "he was her appointed and inscribed master" (386).

The final succession of revelations, which follow upon one another in melodramatic fashion, reconstruct the stages of Isabel's deception and deconstruct her delusion of having been a free agent all along (with its corollary duties, responsibility and consistency). As a result, Osmond's ascendancy is divested of any personal motivation. Stripped of all justification in either economic, moral or emotional terms, Osmond's power is the impersonal one of the ideological apparatus: "constantly present to her mind were the traditionary decencies and sanctities of marriage" (386). That's why, with truly amazing perceptiveness, the novel represents the roots of Osmond's domination as lying entirely *within* Isabel's imagination: "She still wished to justify herself; he had the power, in

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<sup>12</sup> This echoes Madame Merle's former presentation of Osmond: "'No career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything'" (172).

<sup>13</sup> An informal, unscientific poll I took among some women viewers of Campion's movie who were also readers of the novel would seem to show that most of them (myself included) found the male characters in the movie unattractive and uninteresting compared with their appeal in the novel. This is all very subjective, to be sure, and to a considerable extent it can be regarded as the inevitable result of the gap between the individual inner image a reader forms of characters, and the objective visual version one is confronted with in the movie. I also wonder, however, whether this shared impression might not be the consequence of Campion's deliberate choice to undercut the personal appeal of male characters. If this were the case, Campion would be extending James's way of handling Osmond to the whole male world of the story.

an extraordinary degree, of making her feel this need. There was something in her imagination he could always appeal to against her judgement” (445).<sup>14</sup>

The role of “lady,” then, is not just a mask one can put on for a perfect and alienated performance:

if she wore a mask it completely covered her face. There was something fixed and mechanical in the serenity painted on it; this was not an expression, Ralph said—it was a representation, it was even an advertisement. ... The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. What did Isabel represent? Ralph asked himself; and he could only answer by saying that she represented Gilbert Osmond. (331)

As Ralph Touchett seems to realize, “representation” is less a univocal term than a complex cluster of related concepts: far from being a mere performance that only involves the outer sphere, it pertains to the very identity of the individual (“had become quite another person”), whose experiential relation to reality is inevitably interwoven with codes, is always-already a “representation.” What is being represented here is a patriarchal culture, where, as is the case with the exchange of women analyzed by Lévi-Strauss, women are not supposed to *be* but to *stand for*, as symbolic objects representing men.

It is patriarchal ideology as constitutive of subjectivity, therefore, that “something in her imagination” dictating Isabel’s awed respect for the “obligations of marriage” (481), and making her so heedful of what “seems right,” even at Ralph’s deathbed, as to arouse his hurt surprise: “‘As seems right—as seems right?’ He repeated her words. ‘Yes, you think a great deal about that’. ‘Of course one must’” (479)—where both the normative quality and the obviousness of the ideological effect are once again marked. Isabel even goes so far (for all her Emersonian heritage) as to regard the very existence of an individuality of her own as an original sin for which forgiveness is needed: “she had done her best to be what he would like. But she was, after all, herself—she couldn’t help that” (357).

Even unhappiness—potentially, a pre-revolutionary feeling of dissatisfaction with the *status quo*—is kept at bay by ideology. In a typical twist, individual

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<sup>14</sup> Campion’s movie repeatedly hints at Isabel’s strong sexual attraction to Osmond, and more generally, at her sensuality (e.g., by showing her fantasies about Ralph Touchett, Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood, as well as about Osmond before their marriage). Campion thus tries to give full expression to the sexual element, which, in James’s novel, is consistently understated and repressed, and only allowed to surface through the implications of language. Under this respect, I would maintain, James’s case is stronger than Campion: the critical achievement of the novel, to my mind, lies exactly in its laying bare of the exquisitely ideological quality of Osmond’s hold on Isabel, even after their former “admirable intimacy” is over. Although sex is obviously far from unconnected with power, Campion’s insistence on the sexual nature of Isabel’s involvement changes it from a study of the unanalyzed power of patriarchal ideology into a comparatively less original version of the ambiguity of sexual desire.

suffering is distanced, diluted, and dissolved into a generic notion of timeless human fate:

She had long before this taken old Rome into her confidence, for in a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe. She rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright; she dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places, where its very modern quality detached itself and grew objective, so that ... she could almost smile at it and think of its smallness. Small it was, in the large Roman record, and her haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot easily carried her from the less to the greater. (430)

Isabel's realization of historical vicissitude is thus transmogrified into its opposite, an assumption of eternity and immutability: it acts as an alibi which naturalizes individual discontent by universalizing it, and thus prevents its historically specific features from standing out. The text, however, by explicitly underscoring the "very modern quality" of her grievance, openly contradicts Isabel, thus exposing the ideological mode of operation of her escape into universality.

At one point in the novel, nevertheless, Isabel Archer's realization of a communal destiny does not produce an alibi for surrender, but is possibly conducive to a new form of awareness. This is not, like Isabel's meditative vigil in chapter XLII, a subjective balance account of her existential experience: it is a cognitive moment, the beginning of an inquiry into the modes of operation of an oppressive system.

An outstanding locus in James's investigation of women's condition, chapter LII stages Isabel's confrontation with three women, each in her own way victimized by enforced conformity to models of femininity which, however different, all equally deny them individuality and freedom. Madame Catherine, the nun: a woman "whose conception of duty was the acceptance of every care," and whose tone conveys with a "leaden weight" to Isabel's ear "the surrender of a personality, the authority of the Church" (460) as an experience of earthly oppression rather than mystical joy. Madame Merle, the adulteress: a modern, bitter and lay version of an illustrious ancestress. She too gives birth to a daughter during her husband's absence; but whereas her model's red A, as a public mark of shame, while displaying the offense can also be negotiated, transformed and redeemed, Madame Merle is condemned to preserve appearances, thereby sacrificing both her capacity for love and her motherhood to the laws of a society which, unlike Puritan Boston, allows of no redemption or transcendence. And finally, Pansy, who submissively and resignedly yields to the fatherly/patriarchal authority which has systematically repressed her as an individual and broken her resistance:

Isabel looked into her eyes and saw there mainly a prayer to be treated easily. ... the collapse of the girl's momentary resistance (mute and modest though it had been) seemed only her tribute to the truth of things. ... She had no vocation for struggling with combinations ... She bowed her pretty head to authority and only asked of authority to be merciful. (462)

Pansy is the giant mirror, the magnified outer projection of women's culturally produced inner acquiescence; her predicament, therefore, is an opportunity for Isabel to realize the operations of the repressive system which has produced her, and which regulates her behavior down to the minutest details. As Isabel had noticed during the party scene in chapter XLIII, "That perfect amenity under acute constraint was part of a larger system" (367). And "acute constraint," incidentally, also seems to be the key to Campion's rendering of the ball scene. Ironically and realistically rejecting all aesthetic and sentimental idealization, and running counter to a time-honored tradition of cinematic dancing, she spectacularly amplifies the physical and material side of that "constraint," by showing plenty of sweating, fainting, overfatigued and overheated young ladies (so different, by the way, from the freely moving, gracefully dancing girls in the opening sequence).

Pansy's convent reclusion is the first and only episode in the novel where the fatherly/patriarchal authority openly reveals its oppressive quality, and its violent and coercive mode of operation. "The Catholics are very wise after all. The convent is a great institution; we can't do without it; it corresponds to an essential need in families, in society" (442). In Osmond's words, the convent is significantly divested of any religious value (Osmond is no Catholic), and thus stands out as the quintessential disciplinary institution: the repressive apparatus which succeeds the ideological one when the latter can no longer guarantee the conformity of individual behavior. In Isabel's view, the convent eloquently appears as a "well-appointed prison" (456), a "penal establishment" (460)—a Foucaultian place of surveillance and punishment, the extreme metaphor of the institutional quality of feminine discipline as selflessness and self-submission.

The repressive institution, however, is also the place where solidarity among women can dawn. Isabel's attitude here is no longer sentimental, based on the homogenizing stereotype of romantic love as supreme blessing, as had been the case with her response to the Pansy-Rosier affair during the ball scene: "her own unhappiness, after all, had something in common with his ... here, in recognizable, if not in romantic form, was the most affecting thing in the world—young love struggling with adversity" (366). It is, instead, a possible gesture of resistance against patriarchal power—a sisterly gesture, grounded as it is in a recognition of a shared predicament which obliterates differences in both age and disciplinary role: "they held each other a moment in a silent embrace, like two sisters" (462-3).

This new pledge among women is not confined to Isabel's explicit and repeated promise to Pansy; it even extends to Madame Merle, despite all reasons for hatred and revenge. "'You must never say that—that you don't like Madame Merle'" (463), Isabel asks of Pansy; and such a request implicitly conveys an underlying communion, a capacity for sympathy which Isabel had already voiced when first acquainted with her friend's treacherous behavior to herself: "'Ah poor, poor woman!'" (452). Such a feeling appears incongruous and unreasonable

under the circumstances, as Countess Gemini sarcastically underscores: “‘It’s very kind of you to pity her!’ she discordantly laughed. ‘Yes indeed, you have a way of your own —!’” (452); the more so, since it immediately embraces the first Mrs. Osmond as well (“‘That’s all that’s wanting—that you should take up *her* cause!’” 452). Isabel’s sympathy is, indeed, “a way of her own”: unaccountable in terms of the traditional opposition between women as rivals for man’s attention, it is governed by a different logic altogether—one of mutual understanding and solidarity among women.

If one reads Isabel’s promise to Pansy as a pledge foreshadowing common resistance, her final return to Rome need no longer appear as a surrender to the deathlike forces of “the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation” (360), nor her refusal to elope with Goodwood as a recoiling from sexual passion or from the responsibilities of an independent life, according to the prevailing critical readings of this episode.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Goodwood’s kiss may well be nothing but one more snare on Isabel Archer’s path—namely, romantic love, a delusive alternative to institutional marriage, as witness Emma Bovary, Effi Briest, Anna Karenina, or Edna Pontellier. Goodwood’s love—a deceptive promise of redemption and happy ending—is actually presented as a continuation of Osmond’s institutional domination, since it is premised on an identical arrangement of man-woman relations. By resorting to the whole rhetoric

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<sup>15</sup> Virtually all critics of the novel have unavoidably dealt with its ending, producing, however, a comparatively limited range of interpretations. Surprisingly enough, few readings (even when inspired by textual or cultural methods) resist the adoption of psychological interpretive keys — which might be taken as an involuntary tribute to James’s mastery in creating the “*effet-personnage*.” Interpretations have ranged from Isabel’s frigidity and unconscious desire to shun Goodwood’s masculinity; through her Victorian fear of her own newly awakened sexuality; her death drive; her imprisonment in social convention, which makes her incapable of true freedom; her mature acceptance of the limits of human will; to her wish to have it even with Osmond, while keeping the status of married lady, the highest one available to Victorian women. For a limited but representative sample of such readings see: Lisa Appignanesi, *Femininity and the Creative Imagination. A Study of Henry James, Robert Musil and Marcel Proust* (London: Vision, 1973); Beth Sharon Ash, “Frail Vessels and Vast Designs: A Psychoanalytic Portrait of Isabel Archer,” in Joel Porte, ed., *New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady*: 123-62; M. Giulia Fabi, “The Reluctant Patriarch: A Study of *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, and *The Awkward Age*,” *The Henry James Review*, 13: 1 (Winter 1992):1-18; Nancy Morrow, “Playing the Game of Life: The Dilemma of Christopher Newman and Isabel Archer,” *Studies in American Fiction*, 16:1 (Spring 1988): 65-82; Mary Suzanne Schriber, *Gender and the Writer’s Imagination. From Cooper to Wharton* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987); W. R. Veeder, *The Lessons of the Master*: 177-83; Robert White, “Love, Marriage, and Divorce: The Matter of Sexuality in *The Portrait of a Lady*,” *The Henry James Review*, 7: 2-3 (Winter-Spring 1986):59-71. Also remarkable is the chapter on *The Portrait of a Lady* in Alfred Habegger’s questionable, provocative but stimulating book *Henry James and the “Woman Business”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); reprinted in J. Porte, ed., *New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady*: 49-93.



of chivalry, Goodwood purports to be the protector and redeemer of an oppressed and helpless woman, thus perpetuating an asymmetrical and unequal relation whose sanction he seeks in passion rather than the law, and whose basically coercive and overwhelming character is suggested by the images of physical violence and material possession recurring throughout the scene. Even Goodwood's claim to legitimacy—i.e., that Ralph Touchett entrusted Isabel to him before dying—is nothing but the repetition of a symbolic pattern of patriarchal transmission of women as property: “He was a member of your family and he left you ... to my care” (487).<sup>16</sup> And even though Isabel explicitly rejects such a claim (“You had no business to talk about me!” 487), the phrasing of her inner response to Goodwood's moral and physical pressure is unmistakably cast in the same vocabulary of patriarchal discipline, obedience and fear formerly evoked by Osmond: “he had not hurt her; it was only a touch, which she had obeyed;” “she was afraid” (486). In following Goodwood, Isabel would be once again yielding to an imagination dictating selflessness and self-surrender—by now coterminous with death: “she believed just then that to let him take her in his arms would be the next best thing to her dying” (489). And death as an option had been already considered and discarded by Isabel during her journey to England: a semantic continuity had been established between flight and death, as opposed to a notion of life as suffering and endurance, but also defiance, resistance, and possible regeneration:

It might be desirable to get quite away, really away, farther away than little grey-green England, but this privilege was evidently to be denied her. Deep in her soul—deeper than any appetite for renunciation—was the sense that life would be her business for a long time to come. And at moments there was something inspiring, almost enlivening, in the conviction. It was a proof of strength—it was a proof she should some day be happy again. ... Isabel recognised, as it passed before her eyes, the quick vague shadow of a long future. She should never escape; she should last to the end. (466)

To my mind, then, the lightning that accompanies Goodwood's kiss—that emblematic “act of possession” summing up “each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact in his face, his figure, his presence” (489)—is not the kind of light that illuminates the way; it is, rather, a dazzling flash, whose momentary brightness conceals a “house of darkness” which by now no longer appears as Isabel's individual predicament, but as the shared condition of women at a crucial historical moment in the development of a

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<sup>16</sup> William Veeder, “The Feminine Orphan and the Emergent Master: Self-Realization in Henry James,” *The Henry James Review* 12:1 (Winter 1991): 20-54. Veeder is the only critic, to my knowledge, who has noticed the patriarchal continuity between Osmond and Goodwood. In his earlier *The Lessons of the Master*, he had also provided an intertextual reading of the novel's ending: by analyzing the fictional and cultural codes at work in it, he revealed the stereotypical quality of Goodwood's offer, and consequently its regressive, sentimental implications.

bourgeois, patriarchal society. In a semantic reversal as powerful as a Pauline paradox, the semantics of images prevailing hitherto is subverted: the light flashed by Goodwood is retrospectively connected to that “certain light” expected and feared by Isabel as marking the moment of her utter surrender—a perspective as “formidable” in her eyes as Goodwood is said to be; whereas darkness is possibly reassessed as the realm, however dysphoric, of the experience of the truth, unscreened by delusive and consolatory self-deceptions. “Truth comes in with darkness,” Melville had written.

“But when darkness returned she was free.” Isabel’s new freedom, however, is no longer the delusive freedom of a self unencumbered by circumstances, as of old. For Isabel Archer too, “the true realm of freedom can only blossom forth with the realm of necessity as its basis,” as stated in a well-known formula of *Capital*—a source somewhat less remote from Henry James than one might have imagined. Such an awareness does not entail the passive acceptance of necessity as a constraining and repressive force, but a realization of one’s “real conditions of existence,” the only freedom from which lies in acting on them and within them.

As William Veeder has noted, “*The Portrait* ends not with Isabel having gone back to her husband, but with her *going back*.”<sup>17</sup> The very fact, one might add, that readers and critics alike tend to paraphrase the conclusion of the novel as Isabel’s “going back to Osmond” is a sign of a widespread complicity with the patriarchal system, virtually implying that a woman can only be thought of in connection with a man, and that Isabel’s only choice is between Goodwood and Osmond, between the specular and symmetric alternatives of two equally pre-scribed stories—adultery and marriage. But the novel’s ending—in a move so unconventional that its semantic value cannot be overestimated—leaves us with Isabel Archer endowed with a new awareness and on the threshold to an unspecified path: “She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path” (490).

Across this threshold lies the reader’s freedom—freedom to think of Isabel as keeping faith to her pledge to Pansy,<sup>18</sup> rather than her legal bond to Osmond; as

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<sup>17</sup> W.R.Veeder, “The Feminine Orphan,” 36.

<sup>18</sup> This is the reading originally provided by the screenplay of Campion’s film (Laura Jones, *The Portrait of a Lady. The screenplay based on the novel by Henry James*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996, 133-4): after Henrietta’s announcement to Goodwood that Isabel had gone back to Rome, the film’s last scene featured Isabel’s visit to Pansy’s convent:

*Pansy in her little lamplit cell. She sits in the shadows: silent, patient. The door opens.*

Portress: A visitor to see you.

**Isabel** comes into the room. The door shuts behind her. **Isabel** steps into the lamplight.

**Pansy** looks at her as if at an apparition. **Pansy’s** voice out of the shadows:

Pansy: You’ve come back.

**Isabel** — eyes dazzled by light — finds it hard to see the girl in the shadows beyond the lamplight.

not just going *back*, but going *on* to her future, which may well be one of suffering, but need not be one of self-sacrifice, surrender, or despair. In the last sequence of Campion's film, this openness is made beautifully explicit: Isabel runs toward the house in slow motion, and is finally stilled on the threshold, with her back to the lit room, facing outside; her look into the camera reciprocates the viewer's questioning gaze and silent interrogation on her future. For all its seeming "infidelity," this ending is to my mind a highly perceptive one, doing justice not just to Campion's contemporary stance,<sup>19</sup> but also to implications that are already there in James's novel.

For Henry James too, after all, the truth can have a revolutionary import—as a preliminary condition for change, if nothing else. What matters, then, is not whether or not Isabel Archer will go back to her husband, when and by what means she will achieve her freedom, what kind of life is in store for her: perfect textual machine though she is, Isabel Archer is, after all, not a person. The point is a textual and ideological one: *this* representation of her dilemma is in itself liberatory, in its long-range consciousness-raising effects, if not in its actual dramatic outcome. Retrospectively, I think this is the possible reason why I've always experienced the ending of the novel as inspiring rather than depressing: after all, Isabel's battle was not lost—or if it was, the long war it foreshadowed was still to be fought. After reading *The Portrait of a Lady*, the emperor's new clothes are plainly to be seen for what they are—the emperor being the discourse of patriarchy. In Campion's film, the giant male statue overhanging Isabel and Madame Merle during one of their last meetings is a naked and mutilated one—the phallus is missing. A mark of the ironic self-consciousness of a contemporary woman director, to be sure, who retrospectively mocks the emblems of patriarchy; but also, the creative visual translation of a process that is well under way in James's novel. By denying himself the last word—the final, authoritative, and authoritarian word on Isabel's future—the novel's author prevents Isabel Archer from being totally congealed into the "portrait of a lady." *The Portrait of a Lady* thus opens out toward a future where new freedom may arise from new awareness—both for Isabel and for us, who read and watch her story.

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Isabel: Yes, I've come for you.

*She holds out her hands towards Pansy.*

**Pansy** sees **Isabel's** hands, held out, in the brightest part of the light.

*The End.*

<sup>19</sup> As Jane Campion has pointed out in several interviews, she decided upon the film's open ending after trying out different possibilities, out of a sense of frustration at the novel's conclusion, and its inadequacy after Isabel's painful trial to conquer her freedom.

### Film Based on Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*

*The Portrait of a Lady* (1996) dir. Jane Campion. Screenplay Laura Jones. Perf. Nicole Kidman (Isabel Archer), John Malkovich (Gilbert Osmond), Barbara Hershey (Madame Serena Merle), Mary-Louise Parker (Henrietta Stackpole), Martin Donovan (Ralph Touchett), Shelley Winters (Mrs. Touchett), Richard E. Grant (Lord Warburton), et al.

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