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# *Liberty and Women in James's The Portrait of a Lady*

*I*n many ways *The Portrait of a Lady* fulfils, even while it strongly modifies, the classic Victorian model of a plot built around choices, and of an intellectual pattern that interweaves free will and determinism. Isabel Archer is a masterly study of the complex ways in which the individual makes his or her destiny, being at the same time impelled by uncontrollable factors of culture, of inheritance, and of circumstances, and is further impelled by a situation which is created by the personal decision becoming entangled with circumstance — the doer and the deed, each determining the other (Graham 59).

Henry James, like many other writers, is deeply interested in the theme of liberty and the intellectual and psychological abilities to pass sound judgement and to make the right choices. Right from the very first pages of *The Portrait of a Lady*, he is quite ironical about Isabel's abilities to analyse things correctly, so that we know her vision of the world has to be questioned and understood, whatever the heroine chooses, in the light of her desires and deeper needs. Isabel, not unlike the female characters in Molière's "Les Femmes savantes," wants to improve her mind; she reads books about history, believing that she is superior to her sisters who have married ordinary working men. Nice ladies in America are not supposed to read serious books or novels if they want to lead an uneventful life and answer the hopes that strong and hardworking businessmen put in them. There is at the beginning of the novel a

cautious tone that the reader may well remember, especially after the arrival of the heroine in England and above all in Italy. The narrator, from the very first pages, sets a distance between his subject and himself to warn the reader of Isabel's many mistakes:

Meanwhile her errors and delusions were frequent such as a biographer interested in preserving the dignity of his subject must shrink from specifying. Her thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgement of people speaking with authority (53).

Her peremptory chit-chat amuses the men at Gardencourt, especially Mr Toutchett and Ralph. The author also laughs at men like Ralph and most of Isabel's suitors, who have deserted their natural world, that of business, and who have joined the universe of idle women. These men, presented as superior to decent businessmen such as Gaspard Goodwood, are either at the end of their lives or mere dilettantes, but they are very different from the businessmen Isabel is expected to marry. However, she is strongly attracted to them because they remind her so much of her father, that man who squandered his money, travelled several times to Europe, thought more about his pleasure than he cared about his family duty or for the sound education of his daughters. In England, she is under a spell for she has found the people she had been eager to meet: cultured and aristocratic men who spend their days talking, listening to music and admiring paintings.

These characteristics are stressed, even more so in Italy, where she meets Osmond, the epitome of the cultured American in exile, whose ancestors had come from Europe. All these expatriates need to go back to their roots, and they believe that walking aimlessly among ruins will bring them closer to their past. As Ann Douglass notices: "Significantly James concentrates on a nostalgic invocation of a lost gracious Europe" (260).

Henry James himself was in love with Italy and he enjoyed the company of learned people who devoted their lives to the admiration of

works of art, but he succeeded in being part of the artistic production of his time as well; so he could judge those pleasure-seekers severely: "In American eyes, Italy was an artistic resource for capitalist culture, and by definition both effeminate and ahistorical. . . . Like women and children, the Italians were assumed to live for and in their feelings" (Douglass 284). Nevertheless, Henry James's vision of Italy was quite ambiguous: he marvelled at the antiques and the museums but he was more cautious about the morbid influence they could have on American minds weakened by an excessive love for beauty and art:

Mr. Osmond talked of Florence, of Italy, of the pleasure of living in that country and of the abatements to the pleasure . . . . Italy, all the same, had spoiled a great many people (221).

One woman, in particular stands in sharp contrast to all those unproductive and tormented characters: Henrietta Stackpole. She is the modern lady and she works as a travelling reporter, a job which is usually held by a man. And her assessment of the people is quite reliable: her intellectual freedom matches her professional freedom. She is very much her own mistress and her commonsense approach to life makes people admire her, even if reluctantly. She sees through men and does not make mistakes about them.

Being on her own and having to rely on her own forces only, she knows that she will have no second chance; so she is both careful and straightforward in her dealing with them. She believes in herself and does not waste time with their "little games." She studies Ralph and her friends for her articles, as she warns them, but offers her heart to a much sounder character: Bantling.

Frightened by such independent-minded women, Osmond and Rosier — and even Warburton — look for old-fashioned ladies who have been educated to please their husbands and do not read newspapers or novels. They are supposed to be "works of art" to be admired or to be manipulated by their masters. Women are not expected to think on their own nor to speak out of tune. They are not even classified as human beings: they are objects to be put on the market. Beauty goes with

passivity in the perfect bride: Pansy “was admirably finished; she had had the last touch; she was a consummate piece” (301).

## 1- FREEDOM CLAIMED

Isabel’s wish for freedom has ineluctably to collide with such a vision: “I can do what I choose. . . . I wish to choose my fate and know something of the human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me” (143). Actually, all major characters want to manipulate the others. Henrietta stands out in this world of devious but unlucky plotters. She understands that her friend is caught in a dangerous game and tries to take her out of it: “I don’t know what’s in you. . . . But for a nice girl you do attract the most unnatural people” (252) says Henrietta.

Mrs Touchett is the first person to delude herself into believing she can transform her niece into her lady’s companion. She appears as a benevolent fairy who offers Isabel a quite reasonable deal, since her niece does not want to work nor to do business and has no money to speak of: “Well, if you’ll be very good, and do everything I tell you. I’ll take you there” (36). But Mrs Touchett unwillingly sets other wheels in motion by bringing her to Gardencourt where she meets all the important people in her life, in particular Ralph and Madame Merle who will lead her to Osmond.

At Gardencourt she meets the man whose machinations will change her whole life: Ralph. Her cousin is a dilettante who suffers from tuberculosis, is quite depressed, and needs some special interest to bring some life into him, which he finds in her spirited young cousin. Her refusal of the extraordinary proposal made by Lord Warburton, a decent and good man, deeply involved in politics and who owns several mansions, suggests a cunning plan in Ralph’s sick mind. Since he wants to observe Isabel as she fends for herself in life, he supplies her with a fortune,

thanks to his dying father, wishing to see her reject all the love-stricken men that would possibly cross her path: "You know I'm extremely fond of the unexpected, and now that you've kept the game in your hands I depend on your giving us some grand example of it" (133), says Ralph cynically to the young girl.

Ralph's apparent generosity does not cost him much: he still has quite a lot of money, Gardencourt and another house in London; he can afford to travel wherever he wants until the end of his days. His indirect gift to Isabel is instrumental in his scheme. Since he refuses to do anything else, Ralph concentrates his energy in watching; he is a voyeur who wants to see his "characters" follow the plan he thought out for them. Stressing this point, the film by Jane Campion, shows him spying on Isabel on a bed with Warburton and Goodwood. This scene tells of her torments and hesitations when she has to make her decision about her suitors. Ralph knows too well how to manipulate his friends and he uses his disease to call on the pity of everybody around him — even of those who know the truth. Actually, when he dies a few years later, he dies more out of spite than of his sickness; Isabel had married and had escaped from his little secret show. Ralph dies of jealousy: "if you are [weak] I'm awfully sold out" (193) he had told her.

Ralph is not the only man who dreams of manipulating Isabel's future. Before his marriage to Isabel and thinking he would be able to manage her thoughts quite easily, Osmond says, comparing his situation to Warburton's: "He owns his tenants and has thousands of them. It's pleasant to own something, but inanimate objects are enough for me. I don't insist on flesh and blood and minds and consciences" (255).

Goodwood is the only honest man among Isabel's suitors. He is hardworking and strong. He is the male counterpart of Henrietta, but, ironically enough, Henry James subverts the classic love scene at the end of the novel. Goodwood remains ridiculously alone in the park, still hoping for Isabel to go with him to Boston. The hero who fought all the battles and is ready to save the princess and to obtain her love is eventually rejected with disgust by the lady who prefers to go back to the



monster who is awaiting her in his dark castle. It is a complete reversal of the traditional endings of gothic novels.

Isabel has always believed that she was clever enough to distinguish her true friends; she discards Henrietta's good advice and follows the perfidious Madame Merle to free herself from the Toutchett family, though she does receive her legacy from Mr. Toutchett quite readily: "Afterwards, however, she always remembered that one should never regret a generous error and if Madame Merle had not the merits she attributed to her, so much the worse for Madame Merle," (163) Isabel says naively. But this lady can be much more dangerous for her future than good Mrs Toutchett. Madame Merle is an adventuress whose sources of income are quite mysterious: "No one knows, no one has ever known, what she lives on, or how she has got all those beautiful things" (453). She hopes to obtain a dowry for her illegitimate daughter, Pansy, from the innocent Isabel. Serena is quite ambitious for her lover, Osmond, whom she wants to be rich and grateful. This time she has a plan which involves some work from this indolent and arrogant man: he has to use his natural talent to fascinate and seduce Isabel: "I want you of course to marry her" (209), she says.

Pansy would like to be a more subtle puppeteer; she uses her utter dependency on her father to call on Isabel's goodwill. Pansy makes a show of her complete acceptance of her father's orders: "Oh yes, I obey very well" (203); but she does not succeed in obtaining either money from Isabel or freedom from Osmond.

All those machinations have one point in common: they aim at using Isabel, but the innocent and naive girl does very much what she wants to do. She has an inner strength, that nobody suspected, to fight her way through all the traps set against her. She has the unusual talent of transforming the contrivances of Ralph and of Madame Merle into something positive for her. The fortune she owes to Ralph allows her to buy herself a husband, and Madame Merle's attempt at getting part of her

money for Pansy fails pathetically. She makes use of the freedom that she claimed for herself at the beginning, although nobody believed her at that time.

I'm not in my first youth — I can do what I choose — I belong quite to the independent class. I've neither father nor mother; I'm poor and of serious disposition; I'm not pretty. I therefore am not bound to be timid and conventional; indeed I can't afford such luxuries. Besides, I try to judge things for myself; to judge wrong, I think, is more honourable than not to judge at all. I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me (143).

Contrary to the other protagonists, she is not a plotter but a fighter. However, she has to fight her way through so many conspiracies that those battles leave their print on her happiness and her innocence. She is influenced by the dark and depressed characters that surround her. Her spontaneous discourse, her charming smile are all gone, but she is as beautiful as ever in a deeper and more tragic way. She imitates the sad ladies on the paintings of the walls of all those museums she visits. By so doing, Isabel lets Italy penetrate her. Her relationship with Osmond is particularly complex and needs further study, but one has to remember that Isabel leaves Italy to see Ralph when she decides to do so, even if at one point she needs briefly some support from Countess Gemini: "Ah I must see Ralph" (455) says Isabel on her way out.

## **2 - FREEDOM AUTHORIZED**

Women in the novel enjoy some kind of independence. Mrs Touchett, Henrietta, Madame Merle, all of them travel and cross the oceans alone. Mrs Touchett "lives away from her husband, you know, in that extraordinary American way of yours" (127), says Bantling. Naturally such independent ladies have to be able to manage their own fortune, to discuss with their bankers and other professional men. They have to understand business rules enough to take sensible decisions. When Mr Touchett dies, his wife immediately decides on the course to give to her business. What to buy or sell, what to leave to the bankers to manage.



'He has left me the house,' the newly-made widow said; 'but of course I shall not live in it; I have a much better one in Florence. The will was open only three days since, but I've already offered the house for sale. I've also a share in the bank; but I don't yet understand if I'm obliged to leave it there. If not I shall certainly take it out' (180).

Those abilities are called "gubernatorial" by Henry James who rather sympathises with a more subterranean approach of ladies' power. In his eyes, Isabel embodies more convincingly the type of subtle power usually attributed to women than Mrs Toutchett or the bewildering Henrietta.

At first, Isabel wants to take advantage of that freedom and claims her rights to a bemused Gaspard who offers her the protection of a husband. When she sets out with Madame Merle on her trip to the Middle East, she pretends to enjoy the same freedom as her aunt or Henrietta, though they lead extremely different lives. Henrietta has an occupation, she works for an income. She does not need to hide behind the protection of a man nor to benefit from an inherited legacy. She stands on her own. She defines her own rules. Bantling, her companion is quite unbelieving at first and has to be convinced of the deep truth of her attitude in life. He is totally bewitched by such an independent-minded lady:

Miss Stackpole never cared how anything looked, and, if she didn't care, pray why should he? But his curiosity was aroused; he wanted awfully to see if she would care. He was prepared to go as far as she — he didn't see why he should break down first (PL 241).

As a consequence, when Henrietta eventually accepts to marry Bantling, it is because she has tested him for five years and she appreciates his character. She does not jump at the first hint and she is rewarded by her conception of marriage. Her contesting is a breath of fresh air in a world where women are considered as objects and are supposed to show total submission to their lords and masters who only tolerate their secret fights to obtain a few crumbs of freedom, like poor Countess Gemini.

The pathetic Countess pretends to find some solace in the many romances she is supposed to entertain. This fanciful image of her is reinforced by the words of the wicked Serena who takes a perverse pleasure in blackening the reputation of the lady who will never become her sister-in-law. The Countess does not repudiate such vile tales about her because she wants to take some revenge for the many humiliations her aristocratic husband submits her to. In fact, her lovers, real or not, isolate her further from genteel society. She uses the narrow space of freedom old-fashioned society traditionally offers to weak women; but she merely becomes the prisoner of her lies and of her possible love affairs: her sad calls to real freedom fail utterly.

Both Mrs Touchett and Henrietta offer alternative choices to Isabel, so when she chooses to marry she knows she can have another kind of life. However, the old-fashioned world offers her a way of life she can cope with. She has tried to see if travelling as a rich but lonely lady would appeal to her, but she eventually decides to get married as Osmond seems to meet her most hidden needs — quite different from Henrietta's.

Why does Isabel choose Osmond? From the very start Isabel rejects the proposals of quite strong and able men, to accept in the end the one who seems the strangest of them all. She runs away from Gaspard whose quiet and virile strength frightens her:

There was a disagreeably strong push, a kind of hardness of presence, in his way of rising before her. . . . She wished him no ounce less of his manhood, but she sometimes thought he would be rather nicer if he looked, for instance, a little different. (105; 106)

Then she refuses the more mundane proposal made by Lord Warburton whose political and elegant character proved too complicated for her. She feels that she could never be on an equal footing with such a formidable man whose perfect manners do not hide extraordinary abilities: "A certain instinct, not imperious, but persuasive, told her to resist — murmured to her that virtually she had a system and an orbit of her own" (95).

As long as she keeps such powerful men at bay she believes in her own power, but she knows those little victories will be short-lived and that they will not satisfy her whole life. So she lets herself be convinced quite easily by Madame Merle to accept a husband; Ralph's plan is already still-born, even if the young man does not know it. Women prove too strong for him, they do not comply with his wishes: actually they do not even pay attention to them. That is probably the reason why he never tried to get married.

It's a very good thing for a girl to have refused a few good offers — so long of course as they are not the best she's likely to have. Pardon me if my tone seems horribly corrupt; one must take a wordly view sometimes. Only don't keep on refusing for the sake of refusing. it's a pleasant exercise of power; but accepting's after all an exercise of power as well. (176)

Isabel has rejected Warburton's proposal because she feels that she may still meet somebody more in accordance with her wishes: "I adore a moat," (101) she replies quietly to him, and she explains further on:

I can't escape unhappiness. . . . In marrying you I shall be trying to be happy. . . . But it comes over me every now and then that I can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating myself . . . [f]rom life. From the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer. (119)

### 3 - A SADO-MASOCHISTIC FREEDOM

By marrying Osmond she looks for a very complex sado-masochistic relationship; she does not shrink from his dark house, where he sends her to meet his daughter before their marriage. She passes her first test of complete submission and she likes it enough to resume her relationship with him later. But she is not fooled at all by little Pansy who wastes no time in begging for her support when she gets married. Isabel is interested in the power Osmond exerts over his daughter. She shows no fear. Later he offers her Roccanera, the black stone of sacrifice, and

with it the delusion of imprisonment. Ralph was a mere shadow of the dangerous Osmond. He prepared her to respond to a more fascinating and darker type of man. Nonetheless, her cousin is deeply surprised when she sees he understands the depth of her strange desires: "Ralph was shocked and humiliated; his calculation had been false and the last person in the world in whom he was the most interested was lost" (286). He tries to make her change her mind by informing her about what she is putting herself into: "You were the last person I expected to get caught.' 'I don't know why you call it caught'. 'Because you're going to be put into a cage'" (288).

Isabel could live it over again, the incredulous terror with which she had taken the measures of her dwelling. Between those four walls she had lived ever since; there were to surround her for the rest of her life. it was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. Osmond's beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air (362).

Ralph tried to manipulate her but Osmond wants to rule over her life, her wishes and even her thoughts. Patiently Osmond offers Isabel a more narrow prison than the palazzo, that of her own mind: "The real offence, as she ultimately perceived was her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his" (362). However, this sadomasochistic relationship is not one-sided. Isabel, who decided to launch herself in it, is a befitting partner. She knows how to make him suffer as well. She presents him as a man without any fortune and to increase his humiliation she is happy to see her many former suitors in their houses, in Italy, thus triggering off Osmond's jealousy. She does not miss one opportunity to remind everybody why she married Osmond: "no property, no title, no honours, no houses, nor lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant belongings of any sort. It's the total absence of all these things that pleases me" (293).

The frequent comings of Ralph and Warburton trigger psychological violence in the couple; so much so that Ralph, at one point, refuses to play the game and stops seeing her: "But he made Isabel pay for her old-time kindness, of which so much was still left; and as Ralph

had no idea of her paying too much, so when his suspicion had become sharp, he had taken himself off." (332)

Isabel takes advantage of a flimsy courtship between Warburton and Pansy to play the same game, pushing both Osmond and Warburton to extremes. Both men are provoked and become very angry with Isabel. Warburton becomes tired of the game at last and Osmond feels that he has been made a fool of again, this time by Pansy and Isabel. So he punishes both of them. Pansy is sent to a convent-prison to ponder over her attempt at deceiving him: "There is to be nothing ascetic; there's just to be a certain sense of sequestration. She'll have time to think, and there's something I want her to think about" (442).

Isabel is supposed to stay with her husband and she is forbidden to rush to Ralph in London. But Osmond has no real power over Isabel who eventually runs to England when she decides to do so. The only victim of those dangerous games is poor Pansy who does not know what to do, though Isabel offers her a chance to run away with her out of her convent and meet up Rosier who loves her. Pansy is therefore involved in the strange relationship of the couple, and dares not break away from her bizarre father. She prefers to choose complete submission because she was educated this way in the convent and by her father. She is a frightened young person, whereas Isabel has the inner strength of deciding to leave when she draws the line. Moreover, she has enough money to afford to live on her own if it pleases her.

Therefore, Osmond's menacing tone becomes almost ridiculous: "I really can't argue with you on the hypothesis of your defying me" (447). Isabel is setting the limits to their fight as always, even though from time to time she lets the game get a little out of hand, and he knows it: "There is in Isabel herself a certain willingness to be employed, a desire to be taken up and fancied, if only because that very enslavement on other terms makes her more free" (Gass 697).



Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* dwells on the negative freedoms that so many characters indulge in and their pathological refusal of doing something of their lives. Unhappiness is the logical outcome of the wrong choices most of them make. Isabel, like many other protagonists, is given an open choice but she fails utterly the test of life, as her biographer warns us at the beginning.

Mrs Touchett prefers to lead a lonely life and becomes so bored with herself in her old age that she makes one mistake after another: she invites Isabel to follow her to England; then she confides too much in the dangerous Madame Merle who betrays everybody in the fanciful hope of becoming a lady, though she is known as no more than an adventuress. As Countess Gemini says scornfully:

She hoped for years she might marry a great man; that has always been her idea. She has waited and watched and plotted and prayed,; but she has never succeeded. I don't call Madame Merle a success you know. I don't know what she might accomplish yet, but at present she has very little to show (453).

Serena's own errors are quite numerous, the biggest one, of course, being the arranged marriage of a supposedly naive, young and rich girl to her own lover . But nothing turns out right for that fallen woman: "I shall go to America" (464) she concludes sadly.

The two dandies, Ralph and Osmond also fail miserably. Instead of being proud of some accomplishment in art, for instance, Osmond has to face the ironical look of his friends who know about the circumstances of his marriage; moreover, Ralph is regarded with pity because of his illness but nobody appreciates his indolent attitude. As to Rosier, he is another example of those useless American gentlemen who fled their native country because of their inability to fit into the pattern.

Isabel is a case study of the innocent girl who meets decadent characters far away from her country and becomes utterly corrupted by them. If she had married Goodwood in Boston, she would never have evolved into that strange masochistic lady who draws so much pleasure in wandering among the ruins of Rome, pretending she is as sad as the



people who suffered before her in the same places. Even Goodwood is contaminated by that putrid atmosphere; he was a strong-willed industrialist, but he ends up by being a weak and obsessed heart-broken lover, standing aimlessly in the streets of London waiting for Isabel to come back to him.

Although the reader may be tempted to notice here one of Henry James's favourite themes — the corruption of innocent American souls by perverted Europeans —, it must be remembered that in *The Portrait of a Lady*, all the corrupted and corrupting characters come from America; they meet regularly and do not mix with ordinary European people; so the decadence of the protagonists seems rightly to have been imported from America rather than being the result of a discovery they might have made in the old world. Unhappiness is the common fate of people who do not choose wisely their future: logically enough, loneliness, depression, and perversion are the natural outcome of such a foolish behaviour.

Henry James seemed to emphasise the cautionary tale about unhappy marriages, adding a warning note against laziness which leads to self-disgust and serious depression. All the major characters are doomed and they spend their freedom digging a grave for their hopes of happiness. "Idleness leads to vice," as goes the popular saying, Isabel acknowledges it sadly, but she does not try to awake herself from that spell. She prefers to abandon herself to dreams of a better life. Most characters seem to choose to remember endlessly the pains of a broken heart or the failure of their projects, or the frustrations due to misconceived plans. However, there is still hope for them if they decide to wrench themselves from those thoughts and to do something positive with their time: "She gave an envious thought to the happier lot of men, who are always free to plunge into the healing waters of action" (324).

The only hopeful character is Henrietta who has remained true to the American values of honesty, sincerity, friendship and hard work, and is consequently rewarded by true love. She is the freest character in the

novel; she made her way; she passed sensible judgements on people; she drew the line at fake and obsolete moral values; she met with hardships but she remained true to her deeper self.

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