



**HAL**  
open science

## ”We are all Isabel Archers” A ”Bonne Femme” Conversation with Jane Campion and Laura Jones

Sophie Menoux

► **To cite this version:**

Sophie Menoux. ”We are all Isabel Archers” A ”Bonne Femme” Conversation with Jane Campion and Laura Jones. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 1998, CAPES Curriculum : The Portrait of a Lady, 16, pp.16-33. hal-02348387

**HAL Id: hal-02348387**

**<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02348387v1>**

Submitted on 5 Nov 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# *“We are all Isabel Archers” A “Bonne Femme” Conversation with Jane Campion and Laura Jones*

The following paper is based on selected extracts from a private conversation I had with Jane Campion and Laura Jones, at the restaurant “Bonne femme” (hence my title) in Sydney on 25 November 1998.<sup>1</sup> This was a most special event and an unforgettable experience for me: I had been told that Jane Campion, who very seldom accepts interviews, had kindly agreed to see me because of her love for Henry James’s work, and also, perhaps because she had sensed the same passion in me. I was also much honoured, being granted the opportunity of meeting the author of the film’s screenplay, the writer Laura Jones, whom Jane had asked to join our conversation.

Jane Campion’s *The Portrait of a Lady* is one of the best film adaptations of Henry James’s novels ever — probably because only a woman artist could fully understand James, who is, in a way, so “feminine.” Ever since the release of the film (1996) I had felt compelled to interview Jane and Laura about the way they had worked on the transposition of James’s novel into a film. Together with my admiration for Jane’s style — I am a fan of *The Piano* — one of my reasons for doing this was a teacher’s genuine curiosity: perhaps she would give me some tips on how to communicate our love for this author, generally considered as a “difficult author” among French students, who find it hard to understand his style, and who also find Isabel’s choices rather puzzling.

---

<sup>1</sup> Informal conversation with Jane Campion and the screenplay writer Laura Jones at the restaurant “Bonne femme,” Sydney, 25 November 1998. Published with their kind agreement. I wish here to thank them both, as well as Vicky Harper and Alice Garner.

I thought how difficult it must have been to turn James's novel, with its rich and complex psychological insight and enigmatic central character(s), into something visible and understandable by large audiences. I had been struck by Laura Jones's explaining in her preface to the screenplay,<sup>1</sup> that she felt they were doing for James what he had never succeeded in doing: being successfully performed on a stage (or a screen). Laura and I ruefully evoked the failure of his play *Guy Domville*, and the opening night when James was actually booed and hissed off the stage... Contrary to Jane, Henry James had never been popular, because success meant "catering for the masses," he said in a very disparaging way. James, Jane says, was simply "so sensitive, so clever, so deep..."

I had often wondered about the reasons why Jane had chosen this particular novel by James; among the lessons of this interview is the indisputable fact of her long-standing admiration for James, who wrote "extremely modern" novels whose feminine characters bear a striking resemblance to young women of today, especially Australian women. According to Jane, the story of Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, could be the story of any young woman the same age, which is one of the messages conveyed by the opening sequence, meant to enhance the modernity of James's novel and of Isabel's situation: there is no time gap really. Isabel's face is not *essentially* different from the faces of her present-day "sisters," and the crystal-clear piece of music played on the flutes and recorders is equally valid for them all... The inward-turned look expresses similar desires, longings and fears: the title of this piece is relevant to them all: it is aptly called "My Life Before Me"...

I had been entranced by the film on purely aesthetic grounds; now I discovered that not only are Jane and Laura great artists, but they are also James scholars! Laura Jones's screenplay was based on a thorough study of James's plot and characters; their creative work involved meetings and discussions with James scholars, a visit to Lamb House, James's house in Rye (Sussex), and an impressive amount of research; they had an excellent knowledge of James's biography, and its

---

<sup>1</sup> Laura Jones, *The Portrait of a Lady, The Screenplay Based on the Novel by Henry James*, New York: Penguin Books, 1996.

essential data (among which they mentioned those relevant to the film: James's love for his consumptive cousin Minny Temple; his friendship for Constance Fenimore Woolson, who committed suicide in Venice; his love for a young Swedish sculptor). They had used certain quotes from critics as clues and guidelines to their film. Alfred Habegger and William Gass seem to have been their favourites.

The film is based on the revised version of the novel, not only because the aesthetic aspect was more efficient, suggestive and compelling, but also because of Caspar Goodwood's kiss, which is described at full length in the 1908 edition, as Laura Jones explained. There is something almost mystic about this kiss like "white lightning," like a revelation, which I wished them to comment on: could we say that this was, in a way, "the story of a kiss?"

I remarked on Jane's film beginning with the description of the first kiss — of being kissed and kissing — as young girls whom we at first cannot see experience it... The black screen makes us very attentive to the girls' voices off about it, so that we have the thrilling impression that it is going to be an extremely romantic, intimate and, perhaps, daring, film. It is, basically, a romance, as much as about manipulation: being in love, plotting with friends, involving a friend into a plot... this is modern, too, and anyone can understand that.

Jane laughed when she remembered these girls' "so bold, so unexpected and precise" conversation. "Daring" it seems to have been! Especially with sentences like that of the one girl saying "and you see that face coming towards you, and you know that you're going to be kissed." Isabel herself is being quite "daring" in that scene, Jane said. The scene in which we can see Isabel's secret fantasies is even more so. Jane is aware that certain James scholars found it shocking: Henry James would never have written about the things Flaubert wrote about in *Emma Bovary* for instance, Laura added. I felt this scene seems to advocate certain modern interpretations of the novel resting on an analysis of James's

hints at Isabel's sexuality, and it does imply there is something masochistic in Isabel and a voyeuristic side to Ralph's character... Isabel's fantasies are suggested in the novel, and the sexual aspect is important in the process of Isabel's emotional growth, Jane thinks. This process is hinted at, and sometimes analysed, by James, but Jane felt she had to be more literal, for 1996 audiences. This seems to have been a way for Jane and Laura to provide the viewer with an inside view of Isabel's psychology: there was perhaps no better way of translating James's lengthy analyses of the characters' psychology onto a screen. They had to make them visible in some other way, to supply the present day viewer with *images* he could understand.

For all this amount of preparation work, and impregnation by James's vision, though, I feel this film is a true creation, a *film d'auteur*, by Campion. This is a viewpoint shared by Laura Jones. I had been wondering whether Jane Campion herself felt her film was more Jame-sian or more "Campionian." It seems to me she considers her *Portrait* as an original translation of James into her personal artistic idiom; and she is very keen on considering it as a tribute to James's all-encompassing, inexhaustible genius.

Her artistic re-creation involved first an appropriation of the original work, then an outward "translation" into another medium (visual images and sounds) that had to be evocative for all. Laura said "the screenplay writer's work is first to de-plot it and then re-plot it into a different medium... so as to make the public understand and feel how we both did." *The Portrait of a Lady* is "a great artist's film" (Jones) and if we do notice that there are scenes and details in the screenplay that were not shot or that were eventually removed, the changes that were made were necessary. What was eventually removed simply did not fit in, and probably was "not consistent with Jane's art," Laura explained. For instance, Jane says, "we did have to alter locations;" in fact, the shooting moved ten times, taking place in Sydney (opening sequence), England and Italy. Osmond was to make his declaration to Isabel in his yellow room... This is, I feel, a most successful change, especially with the

ominous — proleptic — death's head that we can briefly glimpse in the crypt where Osmond declares his love to Isabel.

Only material reasons account for the fact that the first half of the novel is absent from the film and from the screenplay, so that we can have no clear idea of what kind of education she has received, of her relation to her father, her American character and her mistakes, her discovery of the British codes of behaviour, her emotional turmoil... It is almost impossible for the viewer unacquainted with James to guess that she has just arrived in England.

The most striking alteration, though, is the ending. Contrary to the screenplay, Isabel's reunion with Pansy at the convent, when Isabel tells Pansy "I've come for you," has been removed from the film. Neither do we see Isabel's explicit return to Italy, nor the final dialogue, when Henrietta tells Caspar Isabel has gone back to Rome. This is for symbolic reasons as well as for aesthetic ones, Jane explains; she feels that these sequences did not add anything, while they did spoil the effect: she wanted to finish with the tree that we had at the beginning.

Jane Campion's personal style is very much there to be seen, so that it seems *The Portrait* should be considered as a fragment in the whole of Campion's work. From *Sweetie*, to *An Angel at my Table*, *The Piano* to *The Portrait*, one of Jane's favourite themes is the "portraits" of a "lady" or of a young girl whose itinerary is also an initiation, a feminine quest for identity. As Laura pointed out, what Isabel wants is to be initiated: even if it means being attracted to darkness, she *knows* that with Osmond, who is obviously an experienced man, and a very attractive one (he is so cultivated, so exquisitely tasteful), she is going to be. Isabel Archer is very close to Janet Frame (*An Angel at my table*) or to Ada (*The Piano*); we also briefly recognize the actress who played in *Sweetie*...

Among the (quite) numerous film versions of James's works, Jane Campion and Laura Jones seemed to single out James Ivory's films

and *Washington Square*. The 1998 *The Wings of the Dove*, Jane said, was "a more spectacular film" than her *Portrait*, but featured a very touching Milly, very compellingly embodied/acted by an extremely talented young actress.

I tried to know whether they would agree with a comparison of their film with Stephen Frears' *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988), all the more so as John Malkovitch features in both films.<sup>1</sup> I thought that we could compare Gilbert Osmond, with his turn-of-the-century decadent dandyish side, with Valmont, the perverse libertine in Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons*. Both could be described as "the incarnation of taste," both prefer beautiful objects to flesh-and-blood beings... And isn't Osmond, just like Valmont, a sadeian character? I had always been struck by the affinities between nineteenth century fin-de-siècle aestheticism (as shown in *The Portrait*) and eighteenth century decadence and *libertinage* staged in Laclos's and Stephen Frears's *Dangerous Liaisons*. Valmont (John Malkovitch) and the Marquise de Merteuil (Glenn Close) plot against the virtuous Mme de Tourvel (Michelle Pfeiffer) and then against the *ingenue*, Cécile de Volanges (a convent schoolgirl like Pansy), just like Mme Merle and Osmond plot against Isabel, and then to marry Pansy, whose lover, Rosier, reminds us of Cécile's lover (the Chevalier Danceny). And at the core of the two books, there is the theme of arranged marriages...

But neither Jane nor Laura seemed to share such a bleak vision of James's novel. Besides, said Laura, "there is clearly a pact in *Dangerous Liaisons*; the rules of the game are set in advance between Valmont and Mme de Merteuil; they are playing a game together, which is not the case in *The Portrait*, where things get out of Mme Merle's control; moreover, in *Dangerous Liaisons*, Valmont falls in love in the end..." They did not share my definitely pessimistic views on the plot, with Isabel as a slightly masochistic sacrificial dove, Ralph as a vampire-like "peeping-Tom" who ironically is at the origins of her subsequent unhappiness... It seemed to me that just as in *The Wings of the Dove*, Isabel Archer finds

---

<sup>1</sup> I was to discover later on that John Malkovitch had initially been selected for Ralph's part; but he finally accepted Osmond's role instead, after William Hurt's refusal to play Osmond's part.

herself trapped and betrayed by her dearest friends, Mme Merle and also, in a way, Ralph, because of his money.

Even though Laura agreed there was “something voyeuristic about Ralph,” Jane insisted on his essential benevolence: he is “not an evil character.” His bad health and fear of rejection are the causes of the tragedy: he is the one who is really in love with Isabel, but he never dares to tell her: “look, I’m ill, but let us try and be happy together and see what happens.” He loves her so much that ultimately, he dies of *grief*, realizing how mistaken he has been and how unhappy Isabel has been in Osmond’s Palazzo Roccanera, “the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation...” Jane was very sensitive to the fact that Ralph’s consumption and hopeless love for Isabel reminded us of James’s love for his consumptive cousin, Minny Temple, as if making Ralph die of the same illness enabled him, years later, to experience what Minny may have felt, which shows the extent of James’s love for her.

Then came the question of James’s alter egos: wasn’t Ralph’s illness and his questionable refusal to marry comparable to James’s ascribing his single state to an “obscure hurt?” Wasn’t Ralph’s role of observer similar to James’s own stance? Laura objected to this, explaining that nearly all the characters are alter egos of James: “when it comes to that question, even Isabel Archer is James’s alter ego!” Jane also objected to my vision of James casting himself as a sickly invalid (Ralph), and thinks of Caspar Goodwood as *the* positive male character, and perhaps James’s heroic ideal, the man he would have liked to look like, even though Caspar, for all his physical strength and energy, is no perfect man, being an American, and neither refined nor cultivated.

What is interesting here, noted Laura, is Caspar’s function in the novel, as opposed to the other characters: Laura insisted on Caspar being “the unchanging note in *The Portrait of a Lady*,” whose presence was necessary as opposed to Isabel’s changes. He is the one who never



changes; he is so steadfast, so reliable and so predictable. On the other hand, Lord Warburton was offering Isabel obviously what she had been hoping for, but she chose Osmond who could offer her nothing but who left her free to decide. Which is basically the reason why she chooses him, of all men!

But then, as both Jane Campion and Laura Jones insisted, the novel as they read it is a fairy-tale, and the story of an initiation too. There is a dark side and a luminous side to James's *Portrait of a Lady*, and also to the film. Gilbert Osmond is to be seen as a dark sorcerer — a dark, evil character whom nothing nor anyone redeems — and belongs, just like Mme Merle, to the dark side of the novel. Serena Merle is the dark lady whereas Isabel is the luminous one; similarly, Ralph is the benign creator whereas Osmond stands for the dark esthete. Mme Merle — like step-mothers in fairy-tales? — is the one who — "because of her motherly love for Pansy," "for Pansy's sake" (Campion) — will weave the plot and draw Isabel into her trap with her sinuous seduction, her charm, her perfection, her sophistication, her numerous talents, and her refined manners. She is the woman Isabel would like to resemble. She is undeniably one of the most complex — and interesting — characters in the novel.

This fairy-tale structure involves a quest pattern for the heroine, and her initiation. I think that Jane explores the relations between mothers and daughters, biological and surrogate ones (Pansy/Isabel; or Mme Merle/Isabel, Mme Merle/Pansy) in the light of the relations between initiated and initiators.

I feel the nightmarish, or gothic, aspect of the film should not be overlooked. Jane also felt that "Isabel is attracted and seduced by the powers of darkness," even if she thinks all she hankers after is knowledge. One of the quotations from James they used as a clue was Isabel's "idea of happiness": "A swift carriage of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see — that's my idea of happiness." I personally was struck by Isabel's pliancy and submissive attitude as much as by Osmond's physical violence in the film. This reminded me of *The Sacred Fount*. In this 1901 novel, Henry James has his narrator, who

is yet another “observer” character, just like Ralph, say: “I saw as I had never seen before what consuming passion can make of the marked individual on whom, as with fixed beak and claws, it has settled as on a prey. . . . So it was brought home to me that the victim could be abased, and so it disengaged itself from these things that the abasement could be conscious.” Besides, Jane and Laura seem to have pondered that kind of relationship between man and woman, as is suggested by the quotation they gave me by William Gass on *The Portrait of a Lady*, as “James’ first fully exposed case of human manipulation; of what it means to be a consumer of persons, and of what it means to be a person consumed.”

It seems to me the power of music, in Campion’s film as well as in James’s novel, is somehow akin to the charms, the magic spells that can be found in fairy-tales. The “piano scene,” when Isabel first makes the acquaintance of Mme Merle (chapter XVIII), is indeed very close to a fairy-tale like *Sleeping Beauty*, with the entranced Princess lured by an uncanny voice singing her into touching the fatal spinning wheel. Jane and Laura seemed to agree with this. This is of course partly due to Jane’s film, *The Piano*, which has made viewers more sensitive than ever to the role of music in creative processes and emotional life. I have shown elsewhere that we should consider the presence of music, sounds, noises of all kind in James’s novel as a means for James to represent the invisible stirrings of Isabel’s feelings and imagination, and to hint at things that could not be shown or written about because they were neither “proper,” nor, for that matter, fully understood in his day...

It seemed to me that the music suggests this turmoil and this state of expectancy beautifully. I call this “la leçon de piano d’Isabel.” It is as if music were the ideal medium to convey Isabel’s encounter with the forces of darkness, the very forces that give her the key to her own sensuous nature. In the film, we are almost overwhelmed by the ubiquitous presence of this beautiful romantic, and, at times, uncanny music. I felt it was powerfully suggestive of the pervasive, though unseen,

presence of evil: as Henry James said in the preface to his ghostly tales, it makes "the very air reek with the presence of evil."

I am convinced that such romantic, sentimental music turns the story into something gothic. This music is, literally *uncanny*. I am using the word "uncanny" here in the Freudian sense; according to Freud "the uncanny" (*das Unheimliche*) is felt when we suddenly find ourselves faced with "the return of what has been repressed" (generally, repressed subconscious desires)<sup>1</sup> Does music stand for this return of the repressed? But then, what has Isabel repressed?

The main recurrent musical theme of the film, romantically fraught with passion, and rather grim sounding, is heard in the key scenes. We hear it for the first time as an accompaniment to the "fantasy scene": from then on, it will be proleptic, serving as an omen and as a sign of Isabel's greater personal commitment, and even as a sign of her (erotic?) response to certain events. The other main musical theme, the music of Schubert initially played by Mme Merle, will be, from that first occurrence onwards, fraught with a sense of pathos, of impending tragedy and of fascination for — and even, actually, fear of — "Mme Merlish" tricks.

Although she seemed interested, Jane's response to this was more pragmatic than mine; but James's reference to Schubert *in the novel* appealed to her, and seemed to her significant, almost like a coded message: everybody knows what Schubert's music stands for (romantic flights of fancy, moonlit romance...). Any audience would get the hint.

About such technical questions as the treatment of time according to the medium used (cinema vs. literature), Jane explained that she was very careful to treat time in the same way as James does, so as to give the viewer a similar impression of the passing of time and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Here is Freud's definition of "the uncanny": the return of "something which is familiar and long-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it through the process of repression." (English Transl. in *Writings on Art and Literature*, Stanford University Press 1997 n 217)

changes, the maturing process it brings about. The image of the tree is useful here too.

Although James has often been praised as a precursor of certain techniques akin to those involved in film-making, like, for instance, the restricted consciousness or “point of view technique,” these technical achievements and refined narrative techniques were apparently not what primarily appealed to Jane as a film director, because “you can’t deal with James properly on purely technical terms.”

Certain decisions seemed natural enough: contrary to what Martin Scorsese does in *The Age of Innocence*, we do not have a voice over comment explaining the customs of New York society or the characters’ thoughts, behaviour, reactions, or innermost feelings... Simply because “the voice over creates a distance... it is a hindrance to the empathy I wanted the viewer to feel with the characters; a voice over would have been intrusive. I tried to make things more subjective that way.” But as far as “focalization,” “point of view” are concerned, James’s later achievements (such as *What Maisie Knew*: Maisie’s point of view is a dominant feature and not only is it capital for us to understand the novel at all, but also vital to its pervasive tragic irony...) do not apply to *Portrait*, a rather classical, traditional novel from that aspect: sometimes we have Isabel’s point of view, sometimes it is Ralph’s... Jane and Laura chose the omniscient narrator’s view point with occasional insights into Isabel’s or Ralph’s psychology. It is their understanding of the characters which determined the choice of the techniques Jane used.

Jane reminds us that the focal point occasionally changes when for instance, Isabel is being watched by other people, like when Warburton and Ralph lean out of the balcony and see her black silhouette hurrying away and realize how changed she is. Laura agreed with me, when I remarked on Jane’s artistic use of light/darkness effects, *of chiaroscuro*. Hers is, literally, a very *picturesque* portrait, with lots of scenes artistically composed like pictures: we can recognize the

brownish, foggy atmosphere of Rembrandt's paintings (the stables of *Roccanera*), or scenes that evoke the Impressionists (Isabel and Osmond's stroll through the gardens with Pansy); the setting for Isabel's party is composed (by Osmond!) much in the manner of Velazquez (the stiff *pose* of the Osmond family seated on the sofa). Pansy is shown at the tea-table in the graceful and unaffected manner of Vermeer's milk maid. Ralph's tea-cup with the lemons around looks like a still life... There are many examples of this.

This enhances the effect of the relatively few shifts from colour to black and white: black and white and slow motion are used, more or less, as the equivalent to internal focalization: it is a way of showing, visually, Isabel's state of mind. As Jane explained, contrary to our impression of it, there aren't that many black and white shots, except in the travel-log; it *looks* black and white, but in fact, it is a very clever work on contrasts and colours that does it; this was meant to create a "house of darkness" effect. One of our students once asked whether "this different treatment (especially during the travels) was an extra-diegetic commentary meant to minimize the importance of the external, geographical journey, and, on the contrary, to stress the importance of the internal journey?" Jane seemed to agree.

The black and white "home movie" of Isabel's travels reminded me of the brief cartoon sequence in *the Piano* (Flora's fake story of her father's death); this is Jane's own style. It was already there in her seminal film, she said. As for what Jane called Isabel's "travel-log," she said it was meant to convey the idea that travelling merely brings about a change of scenery, which does not change anything when one is in love, especially, in Isabel's situation, with Mme Merle to supervise everything. Being in love, Isabel cannot remove or delete her memories of Osmond simply by being away. That "subconscious" or "subliminal" persistence of Osmond's memory — indeed, I would readily call it her hauntedness — is what is powerfully suggested by the hypnotic image of the striped parasol revolving with its shadow on the ground used to mesmerize Isabel...

According to Jane, the key to the film and to the novel lies in Isabel's psychology rather than in purely technical feats. She considers Alfred Habegger's study as one of the best keys to Isabel, especially when he writes: "Freedom and fatherlessness have split the heroine into two disconnected halves — a partly factitious determination to be her own master, and a dark fascination with images of dominance and submission."

Jane is primarily interested in Isabel's development, in the way she reacts to her surroundings, the way she endeavours to free herself from the education she has received, by choosing the only man whom no one among her intimates approves of, much as a teenager would do; the way she is deluded by her illusions about freedom, and how she mistakes lack of constraints for freedom... Osmond is clever in that he never ever tells her "I want to marry you;" he just says, as though it did not matter, in his detached way, "I find I am absolutely in love with you..." He leaves it in her hands, and of course she rushes back to him and marries him! And Isabel is extremely consistent, she will very bravely stick to her choices and bear out their consequences: this is, also, for Ralph's sake, not to let him know that she's unhappy, that his hopes were misplaced. Eventually, however, Ralph's pain is unavoidable: he does die of it. (Perhaps, here, Arnold Kettle's sentence was something they used, something influential: "*The Portrait of a Lady* is one of the most profound expressions in literature of the illusion that freedom is an abstract quality inherent in the individual soul.")

I jumped at the opportunity of asking them questions about details that were, for me, enigmatic. I was dying to know the meaning of the little notes on which Isabel had scribbled difficult words, like: "nihilism," "probity," "aberration," "abnegate," "admonism." We see Isabel taking them away before she leaves for London because, Laura said, of her sense of privacy (she does not want her aunt to see them)... I wondered whether these polysyllabic words were meant as clues or as key-words to understand the film. Jane had a delightful comparison: she compared

these notes to the "affirmations" some people stick up beside their mirror — "I'm the best"... or mantras or some little sentence to help them on in their daily life.

But also, Jane and Laura confirmed that this was a hint at Isabel's thirst for knowledge: they are difficult words that Isabel is trying to "learn," in a very naive and childish way, as though they were vital for her not to "misread" Europe... as though they were the keys to her own life. Isabel is so eager to discover European culture and art, she tries very much to cultivate herself by enlarging her vocabulary, she is so eager to emulate her model, Mme Merle, and to belong to what she sees as the cultivated refined elite of Europe, but what is, in fact, the little, sheltered and prejudiced world of American expatriates. It hardly comes as a surprise that she should fall such an easy prey to Osmond's refined manners and perfect command of vocabulary and culture. Indeed, according to the (unpublished) Polygram promotional summary of the film, "*The Portrait of a Lady* is the tale of a young American woman who challenges the confines of her would-be sheltered destiny on the hermetically closed American expatriate circuit in late nineteenth century Europe."

Another enigmatic detail my students had desperately tried to interpret was the image — or symbol? — of the wasp that Ralph catches under his glass. Some people actually wonder about the exact symbolism of this: does it foreshadow Isabel's situation? Who does the wasp stand for? Caspar, who is at that moment the subject of the conversation? Who or what does the glass stand for? Osmond? Ralph and his money? society at large? To this, Jane gave an artist's answer: it seems to have been sheer serendipity; there were swarms of wasps in London during the shooting of the film, so the idea of Ralph's catching one quite naturally occurred to her. Jane objects to the term "symbol" being applied to that particular element, even though it is relevant to the general situation: Isabel's, Caspar's and Ralph's... The wasps here do not stand for something else like a symbol would. Wasps in themselves are significant: they live during the summer, they can fly, and they sting... A

student had gone as far as to put it in terms of WASP = White Anglo-Saxon Protestant; to which Jane and Laura objected again.

There was yet another detail our students found puzzling: the presence of the Touchetts' numerous dogs. What was their role? The smallest one is omnipresent, and constantly keeps an eye on her, just like Ralph's watchful gaze... To which Jane answered simply that these dogs do not "stand for" anything other than a warm, comforting, sympathetic presence at Gardencourt; they provide Isabel with a homely presence and the notion of what home is. They are not "symbols": they love her the way only animals can love, in a perfectly disinterested, natural, instinctive way. Isabel's being fond of the dogs Ralph himself is so fond of is significant enough.

Jane voiced her concern with that kind of reading, considering that one cannot go and analyse such details that way, "looking out for symbols." On the contrary, she considers that the most important thing is to aim at the larger meaning and then see whether such details as these fit in the larger pattern — not the other way round, trying to construct a large pattern resting on small details.

According to Jane, the major, if not the one and only, symbol in her film is that of the tree. "And very consciously so" (Campion). Indeed, I had noticed the presence of a big tree in several of her films, *An Angel at my Table*, *The Piano*; it seems to be repeatedly linked with a young girl's, or a woman's "awakening." Isabel, just like Ada or Janet are seen wandering among trees, or seeking a refuge among them. Laura mentioned the giant tree around which everything happens in *Sweetie*. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, the very same tree opens the film and closes it, Jane explained, and they were careful to make sure the viewer would recognize it. *The Portrait of a Lady* starts in summertime, when nature is in full bloom, and the world's full of hopeful prospects. "The tree was natural, but we had to prop up the big bough a little." It stands for nature, in the sense it has in England — contrary to Italy, which is pure artifice,



with all those beautiful objects, all those statues. The tree is "almost a holistic symbol" (Campion). Isabel herself is so innocent, so perfectly attuned to nature. Even the tree offers her a branch to sit on, a shelter. The dense foliage provides a sense of privacy... this tree is her first and her last shelter...

Jane explained the crew went back to this tree in winter, to shoot the scene when Isabel, after Ralph's death, sits on the very same bench as the one where Warburton proposed to her. This time we can see Caspar Goodwood's boots through the branches as we had seen Warburton's through the foliage: the film opened with Warburton coming after Isabel into her little nook and it ends on the very same bench. The tree's branches reach out to the sky and its roots run deep but they are now "covered with the snow that freezes everything and makes everything look clean and open: in the end, she can clearly see through the branches without leaves. It had to be the same tree at the beginning and at the end." (Campion)

Partly because of this symbol, I had always felt that the film conveys quite an optimistic message, whereas I had read the novel more like a tragedy: isn't Isabel, like a tragic heroine, aware of her fate, without being able to act against it? Isabel's struggles for freedom are somehow doomed to end up in a prison or a "trap"... I believed that Isabel was compelled to go back to Osmond because of her sense of duty and her attraction to darkness. This was, partly, because of her promise to Pansy, but also in order to live out the consequences of her choice, even though she knows how wrong it has been. It seemed to me to be one of James's "heroic sacrifices," a recurrent theme in James's works: "the beauty of such sacrifices is in proportion to their absurdity..." I thought that this was the final twist.

On the contrary, Jane's film, especially with the music, which is luminous at the end, suggests there can be hope even if she returns to Rome. This music, "suspended in the air," as James would say, powerfully reminds us of the last word to the novel: "patience..." Jane was glad it sounded more open-ended, much more optimistic and closer to modern

viewers. Laura insisted that the novel ended with Henrietta saying “just you wait,” so that they thought there was something to hope for, one way or the other.

According to Jane, Isabel will “come back to Rome a different person,” since “she knows.” It is difficult to guess what Osmond’s reaction will be, once he understands Isabel now *knows*. Isabel is unlikely to remain passively in his grip the way she has been so far; this awareness may urge her to help Pansy marry the man she loves; Osmond’s hatred for her may urge him to let Isabel go as soon as Pansy’s marriage is arranged. But this is perhaps mere wishful thinking. What Jane felt was important, and must be respected, was the fact that James had left his heroine in the air. With that kind of ending he contradicts and opposes the Victorian novel with its neat denouement, Jane noted. He is not at all like Edith Wharton. He leaves it for us to flesh it out with our own feelings and fancies... which is extremely bold and modern. This of course does not mean being entitled to drift away from the text too much, Jane said.

Jane’s message here is definitely optimistic, as is revealed by her casting: her choice of a young man like Christian Bale for the part of Edward Rosier. In the novel, we are told that Rosier remembers Isabel as a little girl in Switzerland, and that she found him attractive then. He should be the same age as Isabel, or slightly older than she is, but not the same age as Pansy. The result is a perfect balance, almost a mirror structure: the younger couple of lovers (Pansy-Rosier) balances the older one(s), in a way that is extremely appealing to modern audiences. But in James’s novel, with Rosier the same age as Isabel, I had the feeling that the story reverted on itself: Pansy’s suitors (Rosier, then Warburton) are the very same as Isabel’s... Added to the fact that Isabel’s suitors used to be Mme Merle’s suitors (Ralph, then Osmond), this seemed to me a stifling small world, and a no-way-out structure, with always the same persons (uncannily) coming back: women’s fates were tragically bound within repetitive patterns. And I thought that Pansy’s marriage was bound to be identical to Isabel’s or Mme Merle’s...

But Jane insisted rather on what Isabel had learnt, on the experience she had gained through her misery. She also pointed out to me Pansy's role in Isabel's "awakening." It's Pansy's marriage that helps Isabel to understand her own life. Isabel does not suspect anything until she sees Mme Merle and Osmond plotting to marry Pansy to Warburton; "gradually the truth of her own marriage dawns on her," Jane said.

Jane's is a feminist-sounding voice, as the choice of Mary Louise Parker (Henrietta Stackpole) exemplifies. Even if in the film Henrietta is, surprisingly, less of a "new woman" than in James's novel, where we can see her earning her own living, writing (she is a journalist), or utter devastating speeches, scathing remarks, ironical comments on British institutions, etc. In Jane's film, Henrietta is less of an "intellectual," more down-to-earth (she takes care of Ralph, she takes the spare bread at Pratt's club in a "Waste not" bag, etc.). She seems more spinsterish in the film, all the more so as Mr Bantling is absent (we only catch glimpses of him, and these appear to be residual images). But this is no deliberate choice of Jane's, who does consider Henrietta as "the most modern of James's heroines": a full treatment of this (secondary) character would have "meant rethinking the whole balance of the film," which was not possible, due to material imperatives.

On the whole, today's Australian women are akin to James's nineteenth century American heroines. And there, I definitely agree with Jane and with Laura: today's free women look like innocent, vulnerable, vibrant outspoken and brave Isabel Archer. In the same way as Gustave Flaubert "was" Madame Bovary, Jane Campion *is* Isabel Archer... and so are we...

Sophie MENOUX<sup>1</sup>



---

<sup>1</sup> Université de La Réunion, 15 rue René Cassin, 97414 Saint Denis Messag Cedex 9 (France).