Subversion of the Courtship Narrative

Henry James's Portrait of a Lady's Suitors

by

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Abstract

My thesis argues that Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* subverts conventional courtship narratives through James's depiction of male suitors who pursue the novel's heroine, Isabel Archer. James is challenging the courtship narratives of his predecessors—narratives that follow a typical plotline in which the heroine is united with an ideal husband following a series of obstacles that she must overcome, including the courtship of suitors who both the reader and the heroine are made to realize are inappropriate or categorically wrong for her.

I will argue that James's series of suitors function as more than obstacles; rather, they are complicated, flawed, yet realistic individuals. Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood, and Ralph Touchett are not easily categorized as inappropriate choices as are the rejected suitors represented in conventional courtship narratives. James offers the reader and his heroine alternatives to the status quo in his depiction of men who are colorful characters with attributes and flaws that demand serious consideration from Isabel. Rather than being guided along a narrow trajectory in which the narrative structure directs her to the right husband, Isabel has *choices,* and serious ones at that. James's provision of suitors who are plausible candidates as husbands endows Isabel with an agency that distinguishes her from the heroines of other courtship narratives whose choices are limited by a plot construction which provides only one satisfactory suitor.

I am interested in viewing the narrative structure of *The Portrait of a Lady* as a response to courtship narratives encoded with assumptions about women, marriage, and ideals of masculinity. Isabel's decision to marry the manipulative and callous Gilbert Osmond does more than upset the courtship narratives that assume marriage is synonymous with happiness. James is elucidating a truth about agency by allowing his readers to realize that in order for Isabel to truly demonstrate free will, she must be allowed to fail egregiously and still be able to learn from and face the repercussions of her choices.

Some critics have inculpated James as an anti-feminist author, citing Isabel's return to her oppressive marriage at the novel's end and the subsequent perpetuation of her suffering as indicative of James's misogyny, since this ending does not grant his heroine the ubiquitous happily-ever-after conclusion characteristic of courtship narratives. However, I hope to illustrate how instead of confining his heroine to a world where marriage leads to assured happiness, James attempts to examine what happens to a smart woman who makes an unwise decision. Rather than limiting Isabel, James is paradoxically empowering her with agencies that allow her to learn from and confront her mistakes. James is challenging his readers to consider the possibility of a woman susceptible to error--a woman who is courageous enough to face the repercussions of her mistakes, and a woman whose story does not end when her marriage begins.

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Introduction

In the preface of the New York Edition of *The Portrait of a Lady,* Henry James explains how he came to create the supporting characters of Gilbert Osmond, Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood, Ralph Touchett, Madame Merle, Henrietta Stackpole, and Daniel and Lydia Touchett. James notes: "I seem to myself to have waked up one morning in possession of them…it was as if they had simply, by an impulse of their own floated into my ken, and all in response to my primary question: 'Well, what will she *do*?'" (James 14). [1] "She" of course, is Isabel Archer, the heroine of James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. Isabel's fate is the "primary question" of the novel according to James, and it is apparent that James himself did not know the answer: he allowed it to be revealed to him through his other characters, noting: "Their answer seemed to be that if I would trust them they would show me; on which, with an urgent appeal to them to make it at least as interesting as they could, I trusted them" (James 14).

That Henry James candidly admits in his preface that he created Isabel's character without completely knowing what fate she would be dealt is a matter of concern to some critics, especially those thinking about James through the lens of feminist criticism. For example Patricia Stubbs contends that the statement I quoted above elucidates James's anti-feminist tendencies. In *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel,* Stubbs argues that James's 'what will she do?' denotes a "cold-blooded spirit of observation," as James wonders "how his heroine will responds to the pressures he builds into her situation" (Stubbs 159). Stubbs contends that James's indifferent observation is not limited to Isabel Archer, but asserts that "the scheme James usually adopts in the novels is to place a woman in an impossible situation and then to pose as a neutral observer of her actions" (Stubbs 159).

[1] The preface was written specifically for the New York Edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* and offers James's own commentary on the novel twenty-five years after it was originally published.

Stubbs is not alone in her criticism of James's treatment of female characters, as she and other critics have attacked not only James for his presumed anti-feminist views, but more specifically for the fate that James assigns Isabel, both in her marriage to Gilbert Osmond and her decision to return to him again at the end of the novel. In *Henry James and the "Woman Business"* Alfred Habegger identifies Isabel's marriage and return to Osmond as the ultimate confirmation of James's weakening of his female characters and favoring of male dominance:

> To make Isabel marry Osmond, and then go back to him once she knows better, was to be unfair and illiberal to the memory of a free spirit. It was to insist that even the American girl, the freest woman of all, finds freedom too much of a burden, and it was to forget that any heroine worth making an ado about can be defeated only against her will. (Habegger 26)

Habegger's reading of Isabel's fate clearly views the scenario of her marriage to Osmond and her return to him as anything but arbitrary. Rather, Isabel is a pawn whose actions and fate are carefully orchestrated by a creator out of ulterior motives for creating the Isabel that readers know. Throughout his book Habegger cites missives and journal articles written by James expressing what Habegger reads as James's anti-feminist views. Habegger contends: "The basic fact is that up until his late middle age Henry James was for the most part contemptuous of women's suffrage and women's entry into the professions. An early letter of his makes a passing pejorative reference to 'free thinking young ladies'" (Habegger 6)--ladies, of course, very similar to the imaginatively expansive Isabel and intellectually curious Isabel Archer.

As much as Habegger's exposé seeks to depict James as a man who is hostile to the independence of women in his fiction and reality, both the missives and James's *The Portrait of a Lady* indicate otherwise—reminding us that there is more suppleness in his views than

Habegger or Stubbs allow. To cite one example from the former--James certainly weighed in on the debate regarding women's suffrage in his correspondence. In a letter to his parents, James applauds his father Henry James Sr. on an article regarding the women's movement, writing: "Your *Atlantic* Article I decidedly like—I mean for matter. I am very glad to see some one…insist upon the distinction of sexes."[2] Though James acknowledges the distinction of the sexes here, in no way does he hint at the inferiority of the female sex, and interactions with the women he associated with throughout his life confirm this sense. Many of his closest confidants and most trusted correspondents were women, including Grace Norton, a lifelong family friend and correspondent, Alice James who was Henry's sister, and his beloved cousin Minnie Temple. I was fortunate enough to visit Harvard University's Houghton Library where many of these letters between James and his female correspondents are archived, and after reading many of these letters I am confident in my assertion that far from being a man who believed in the inferiority of the female sex, James was a man who recognized women as intellectual equals with whom he could engage in fruitful discussions regarding political and social matters of contemporary relevance. Rather than close minded or unprogressive as some critics such as Habegger have characterized him, James's prolific correspondence with women proves the contrary.

To cite but one example I encountered, in a letter written to Grace Norton in 1879, James discusses the latest writing on the emancipation of women, desiring Norton's own assessments of the most recent feminist writing (a literature that James was an adept reader of), and applauding the efforts of women who have taken definitive stances politically and have successfully articulated their thoughts on the women's movement in widespread publications.[3] Besides his

[2] Henry James Jr. letter to parents: 14 January 1879. Housed at Harvard University's Houghton Library.
[3] Henry James Jr. letter to Grace Norton: 8 June 1879. Housed at Harvard University's Houghton Library.

direct correspondence with women, the works of prominent female writers were of the utmost interest to James, and the subject of many of his letters. In a collection of letters between James and his brother William spanning from July 1876 to February 1877, the two brothers discuss George Eliot's latest novel *Daniel Deronda* and lavish compliments upon the author and her work which both men deem important enough to be the subject of a number of letters to each other. In one letter James relates a recent meeting with George Eliot (whom he refers to as G.E.): "The great G.E. herself is both sweet and superior…I had my turn at sitting beside her & being conversed with in a low, but most harmonious tone…I have not fault to find with her."[4] Here, James presents himself as a man humbled by the presence of a woman whose work he finds laudable, and also a man not above displaying an almost boyish excitement at having his "turn at sitting" next to a woman he greatly esteems. Given the nature of James's epistolary communication, not only the content, but also the recipients of his missives indicate that James had a profound appreciation for women and their capabilities as intellectual individuals—individuals whose talents, ambitions, and opinions James respected thoroughly, both in his daily life and in his fiction.

Still, there are critics who contend that for far too long James's condescending view towards women has been overlooked and that James's views about women influenced even his fictional writing. Habegger's reading of Isabel's decision to return to Osmond views Isabel as a woman who despite her assertion of independence and desire to make her own decisions, ultimately wants and needs a master—something she finds in Osmond. Habegger cites not only Isabel's return to Osmond as illustrative of his predication, but also Isabel's fascination with Osmond's daughter Pansy who complaisantly obeys her father's every command. Habegger writes: "The fact that Isabel's far more lively mind is captivated by this appallingly tractable daughter sums

[4] Henry James Jr. letter to William James: 28 January 1878. Housed at Harvard University's Houghton Library.

up James's muted lesson: Even the freest American woman dreams of submission to a dominating master" (Habegger 158).

In much the same way, Patricia Stubbs views James's treatment of Isabel as anti-feminist and indicative of his contempt for women's suffrage—essentially viewing Isabel not just as a character who struggles with decisions and societal expectations, but as a pawn James manipulates throughout the novel in order to establish his thoughts on feminism. Stubbs reasons that James's readers can see proof of his anti-feminist views by looking to Isabel's marriage to Osmond. Stubbs criticizes the marriage as highly unlikely given Isabel's intellect, which Stubbs reasons should give her the perceptiveness to recognize Osmond for the cheat that he is. If Isabel's hasty and unreflective decision is out of character, Stubbs argues, "then it must come directly from James himself…this interference from James is more than an unfortunate artistic blemish; it reveals something of his antipathy to women who desire freedom" (Stubbs 161).

Interestingly enough another feminist critic, Ellen Morgan, actually faults James for *not* giving Isabel the intellect to confront her circumstances, stating: "James did not give Isabel the force of intellect and character to take a critical view of her society and detach herself from it either before or after her marriage" (Morgan 18). Whereas Stubbs finds fault with James for inflicting an unlikely circumstance on Isabel given her intellect and perception, Morgan faults James for failing to endow Isabel with these faculties to begin with. That each of these critics are at odds over the capabilities James has provided Isabel further complicates the argument of Isabel's status as a weak or empowered woman, and provides an interesting instance of disagreement within the critical field that seeks to portray James as an anti-feminist author.

In her analysis of other ways James maligns Isabel, Stubbs focuses her criticism on ways in which she believes James has severely limited Isabel's sexuality. The last scene in which the

reader sees Isabel, Caspar Goodwood has again made an appearance, professing his love for Isabel and entreating her to leave her husband once and for all. Undeniably, this offer is attractive to Isabel: "She had wanted help, and here was help; it had come in a rushing torrent…she believed just then that to let him take her in his arms would be the next best thing to her dying" (James 611). However, as soon as Goodwood kisses Isabel, she experiences "a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that least pleased her…" (James 612). Because of the overwhelmingly sexual nature of Goodwood's presence and Isabel's subsequent rejection of that sexual attraction Stubbs argues that James is "endorsing [Isabel's] rejection of passion, her denial of her whole sexual nature" (Stubbs 165). Indeed, after this encounter Isabel clearly knows what to do: "She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path" (James 612).

Though I intend to refute these claims about Isabel in the following chapters of my thesis, as readers we are induced to wonder about the ways in which other female characters are portrayed in *The Portrait of a Lady*. One must naturally wonder if James is an anti-feminist author as these criticisms claim, how will he present his other female characters? According to Morgan's article not a single female character in *The Portrait of a Lady* offers us a model of an independent or liberated woman. Rather, "James has provided in the women around Isabel a catalog of consequences for breaking the rules of [a patriarchal society]" (Morgan 20). Furthermore, Morgan argues that even women who appear to be liberated or in control of their destinies fall short of this status upon further inspection and that as readers we can find no redeeming qualities among any of them.

Consider Mrs. Touchett. Although Mrs. Touchett is a self-directing woman who does as she wishes and ignores the desires and needs of her husband in pursuit of her own happiness, Morgan contends that Mrs. Touchett is hardly a role model for anyone: "her independence and individuality are maintained at the expense of warmth and love. To begin with, she has a very underdeveloped capacity to feel. Then by leaving her husband…she has forfeited intimate companionship with her child" (Morgan 20). Henrietta Stackpole does not escape Morgan's criticism either. Morgan argues that James presents us with a caricature of a liberated American woman, and one that James's purposely pokes fun at. Despite maintaining her own career and remaining financially independent, Morgan argues that we cannot esteem Henrietta in any way because of the other qualities James has ascribed to her. Henrietta is "faintly ridiculous most of the time and is, in short, the stereotype of the meddling, unsubtle, vulgar…emancipated American female" (Morgan 20). Morgan also comes to the conclusion that the hallmark of Henrietta's failure as an example of a woman that the reader can find redeemable qualities in lies in the fact that she decides to marry at the end of the novel: "[Henrietta's] marriage invalidates her example of independence" (Morgan 20).

Morgan's criticisms of James's female characters in *The Portrait of a Lady* are not entirely inaccurate. While each of these women displays undeniable strengths and is assertive in the measures she takes to maintain that her personal freedoms and desires are not jeopardized, their motives are largely self-serving. However, despite their sometimes superficial motives, Mrs. Touchett and Henrietta are independent women who often defy society's expectations in pursuit of their own happiness—characteristics that Morgan seems to ignore entirely, providing the reader with merely one side of these characters' complex natures.

Morgan's reading of Henrietta as "meddling" and "ridiculous" is one that I take objection to not because these adjectives fail to describe Henrietta to some extent, but because they are not the only adjectives that could describe her. Henrietta is bold, almost fearless—a true example of a financially independent woman who works for a living and establishes herself socially and financially without the assistance of a male. In fact, James is careful to present an image of Henrietta that serves as a portrayal of an ardent, liberated American woman free from any form of restraints. Before Ralph meets Henrietta, he asks Isabel whether he shall love or hate Henrietta. Isabel makes it clear that however Ralph is affected by Miss Stackpole it will be of no consequence to Henrietta: "[Henrietta] doesn't care a straw what men think of her" (James 97). When Ralph reasons that he is therefore bound to dislike Henrietta and begins to mock the fact that she is a female reporter, Isabel is quick to note: "It's very easy to laugh at her but it is not easy to be as brave as she" (James 97).

Miss Stackpole seems to know no bounds, something that merits Morgan's criticism of her figuring as meddling character. When she is invited by Isabel to observe the Touchett family and then proceeds to write an article about them for her newspaper, Isabel must demand that it is not published and reprimands Henrietta for her lack of propriety. Though this faux pas on Henrietta's part certainly emphasizes her disregard for the thoughts and feelings of other characters, to describe her as vulgar as Morgan does is quite a stretch. In fact, Henrietta is a breath of fresh air compared to ladies such as the Misses Molyneux, Lord Warburton's sisters whose preoccupation, adoration, and dependence on their older brother is a stifling contrast to the bustling and successful career woman we see in Henrietta Stackpole. In Henrietta, James presents a woman with flaws, but also a woman who is not afraid to have flaws—a woman who is admired by Isabel precisely for the freedom she exhibits as she makes her own choices to

please herself while disregarding the expectations of others. James paints a flattering picture of Henrietta whom Isabel marvels at and "Esteemed the courage, energy and good-humor of [Henrietta]" (James 65). James also describes Henrietta as "The van of progress" and a woman who "had clear-cut views on most subjects" (James 66). Indeed, for Isabel "Henrietta…was chiefly a proof that a woman might suffice to herself and be happy" (James 66). Whatever her flaws may be Henrietta is decidedly a woman in control of her destiny. Through Henrietta, James has created a unique, empowered woman who is free to do as she pleases and serves as a female figure of strength and independence whose status as such is not so much compromised as it is confirmed by her marriage to a non-entity like Mr. Bantling at the end of the novel.

In her critique of Isabel's aunt, Morgan is quick to point out Mrs. Touchett's flaws, yet chooses to ignore a facet of Mrs. Touchett's character that James wanted to emphasize—that she is a woman who finds herself in an unhappy situation and is not afraid to find a way out despite societal expectations about her role as a wife and mother. Morgan's primary objection to James's novel lies in the fact that Isabel does not challenge the institution of marriage:

> It is Isabel's inability fully to confront the institution of marriage, to question its appropriateness for her…her inability or disinclination to face the frightening isolation which awaits the woman who steps outside the marital convention, and to carve out a life in the shape of her own values, which mark *The Portrait of a Lady* as a non-feminist book. (Morgan 18)

However, Morgan faults Mrs. Touchett for committing the very actions which she laments Isabel is unable to take: "[Mrs. Touchett] has a very underdeveloped capacity to feel. Then by leaving the husband with whom she could not be happy she has forfeited intimate companionship and her child…So much for Aunt Lydia Touchett as a role model of the independent woman"

(Morgan 20). Morgan's logic is a bit confusing given her earlier entreaty for Isabel to adopt a course of action that she critiques Mrs. Touchett for embracing.

It is difficult to deny Mrs. Touchett's autonomy regardless of whether or not one agrees with Morgan's analysis of her failure as a model of an independent woman. Much like Henrietta, Mrs. Touchett's actions and decisions are reflections of her own needs and desires. Although married to Mr. Touchett, "[Mrs. Touchett] was virtually separated from her husband, but she appeared to perceive nothing irregular in the situation. It had become clear, at an early stage of their community, that they should never desire the same thing at the same moment" (James 35). Simply because she and her husband are ill-suited for each other and because Mrs. Touchett is not fond of the British style of living she takes up a place in Florence and establishes herself there. Though fond of neither England nor her husband, Mrs. Touchett usually spends one month each year in the company of Mr. Touchett and their son—a period of time she deems sufficient for maintaining her role as wife and mother. Although the reader is told that Mr. Touchett has doubts about this "unnatural" arrangement, Mrs. Touchett could not be more content: "This arrangement greatly pleased her; it was so felicitously definite" (James 35). While Mrs. Touchett's abandoning of her husband and son during the greater part of each year in order to seek her own happiness is not especially praiseworthy, what is more extraordinary is Morgan's insistence that in Mrs. Touchett, James has created yet another female character who is a weak model of independence. Morgan's understanding of Mrs. Touchett as an "utterly inappropriate…model for anyone" (Morgan 20) hinges on Mrs. Touchett's lack of warmth, which presumably leads to leaving her husband in England. Morgan's criticism of Mrs. Touchett's actions would seem to side with the societal expectation during that time which would entreat her to complaisantly endure an unhappy marriage. Rather than cheering on Mrs.

Touchett as she tours Europe unwilling to have her ambitions slowed down by an unhappy marital alliance, Morgan judges Mrs. Touchett as an unsuitable woman who is not worthy of emulation simply because she has left an unhappy marriage in pursuit of other desires—oddly enough an occurrence Morgan chides James for failing to provide Isabel with.

Stripped down to the essentials of the matter, Mrs. Touchett is a woman who finds herself in an unpleasant situation and ultimately takes action to alter her circumstances. Mrs. Touchett demonstrates her strength as a character in her ability to act independently of others and carve out her own destiny. She will not be hampered by a marriage that she finds unpleasant, and will continue to do as she pleases despite the view that society has of her. Morgan might argue that one is hard pressed to find within Mrs. Touchett's character any semblance of a female model of independence, but Isabel's perception of Mrs. Touchett proves otherwise. When Isabel is asked by Ralph to articulate why she admires Mrs. Touchett, Isabel responds: "It's because she doesn't expect one to like her. She doesn't care whether one does or not" (James 61). Much like Henrietta Stackpole, James has provided both the reader and Isabel with further proof that a woman need not be limited in her decision making or autonomy simply because those around her might think ill of her. On the contrary, Henrietta and Mrs. Touchett are sufficient proof that James does not weaken or limit his female characters in *Portrait,* but rather endows them with the strength and intellect to seek their own happiness regardless of societal expectations. Morgan's scrutinizing each of James's female characters and her insistence that each flaw elucidates James's anti-feminist views assumes that a female worthy of emulation should be uncomplicated. In would appear that Morgan demands flawlessness from every female character James creates, as any imperfections in these characters are proof of James's anti-feminist views.

Morgan's expectation for female characters then, demands a perfection that is as uninteresting as it is unrealistic in its expectations for women.

* * * *

I am interested in addressing these issues from an alternative perspective—from that of the structure of James's fiction, particularly as it relates to novels that take up similar themes to those in *The Portrait of a Lady.* I will view this novel in terms of how its narrative structure and plot function as a response to the work of James's predecessors such as George Eliot and Jane Austen. Throughout my thesis I will draw from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* as well as Eliot's *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*—all novels that are encoded with assumptions about women, ideals of masculinity, and marriage that I will argue James takes direct issue with. My interest in James's *The Portrait of a Lady* lies not in the argument that his plot weakens and subverts women, but rather in the ways his plot challenges assumptions made about men and women in the works of his predecessors—specifically how James evolves the courtship novel by presenting Isabel with multiple, eligible suitors vying for her affection, three of whom are reasonable choices for a husband. Isabel's marriage to Osmond—the most cruel and tyrannical of her suitors not only pushes the plot of *Portrait* to escape the confinement and predictability of a courtship novel, but simultaneously presents James as an author invested in understanding the plight of women during the nineteenth century by offering an alternative story of a woman forced to confront the consequences of her unwise choices.

In *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction,* Joseph Boone argues: "The most familiar pattern in Anglo-American romantic fiction, of course, is that of courtship, whose ideal goal approximates the companionate union of loving friends" (Boone 80). The prevalence of this courtship narrative makes it familiar to practically anyone who has ever read a novel, and

Boone argues that this courtship narrative follows a general plotline in which: "On a thematic level, the ending in marriage that follows courtship…thus at once affirms the existing or revitalized social order and symbolizes the lovers' completion in each other" (Boone 80). Furthermore, Boone notes that the courtship novel revolves around a theme of delayed gratification for both the characters and the readers, "for only as long as the lovers are kept apart or the desired condition is deferred will the story keep moving forward or the reader continue reading" (Boone 80).

To illustrate his argument, Boone looks to the well known characters of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy and the plot of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice.* Though Elizabeth and Darcy eventually are married by the novel's end, they must overcome a slew of obstacles—obstacles that form chapters and essentially the novel itself. According to Boone, the hallmark of a courtship narrative involves lovers who are "sundered by a score of obstacles—including parents, wrong suitors, geography, personal prejudice, and class barriers—all of which must be removed to facilitate a successful alliance" (Boone 80). An important aspect of the courtship novel that I wish to delve into is Boone's assertion that one such obstacle includes the threat of marriage to the wrong suitor. The presence of this phenomenon abounds in *Pride and Prejudice* as Elizabeth's and Mr. Darcy's eventual marital bliss is threatened by the subplot of other characters who initially present themselves as seemingly plausible suitors for Elizabeth. Austen introduces the characters of Mr. Wickham and Mr. Collins as subplots to the novel, and both function as sort of barriers to Elizabeth's eventual alliance with Mr. Darcy. Mr. Wickham seems like an ideal husband for Elizabeth given her initial attraction to him. Mr. Wickham succeeds in making a striking first impression on Elizabeth and her sisters: "[Wickham] wanted only regimentals to make him completely charming. His appearance was greatly in his favor; he had

all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address" (Austen 61). Elizabeth cannot help but admire this charming and eloquent man, and finds herself flattered by the attentions he pays to her. Elizabeth finds him engaging and genuinely enjoys his company, feeling that "the commonest, dullest, most threadbare topic might be rendered interesting by the skill of [Wickham]" (Austen 64).

Boone argues that the courtship narrative is "built around the principle of delayed gratification" and *Pride and Prejudice* features this principle prominently. Though it appears that Wickham is everything Elizabeth could want in a man—charming, handsome, and a pleasure to converse with, he falls out of Elizabeth's and the reader's good graces when Darcy sends Elizabeth a letter exposing Wickham for the contemptible coward he is. This turn of events alters the plot as Elizabeth must re-evaluate her prejudices and hasty judgments of character once she learns the true nature of Wickham, and reflects that Mr. Darcy "was capable of a turn," and is "entirely blameless throughout the whole" (Austen 176). Boone argues: "the consequent revision of [Elizabeth's] misperceptions, in turn, revises the direction of the plot. The humiliation of facing her unfounded prejudices begins a process of self-knowledge…that culminates in her recognition of Darcy's actual worth as a suitor" (Boone 93). In this series of events, Austen has successfully removed Wickham from the equation as a potential suitor, and has advanced the plot in the direction of bringing Elizabeth and Darcy together. By presenting Wickham in this light, Austen has effectively allowed Elizabeth and the reader to cross an unworthy suitor off of the list as a potential choice for Elizabeth, and in doing so, guides Elizabeth on a path towards Darcy.

Though Mr. Collins is nothing like the suave Wickham, and is presented as more of an extreme annoyance than a serious suitor, he nonetheless factors into the "obstacle" category that

Boone alludes to because of his relation to the Bennet family. A marriage between Mr. Collins and Elizabeth would bring her mother and sisters stability upon Mr. Bennet's death. Thus Mr. Collins functions as a character who adds another subplot not unlike Wickham—someone who presents himself as a problem to Elizabeth and must be dealt with before she can secure true happiness with Darcy. Once again, Austen guides Elizabeth along a straight path, making it perfectly clear that Mr. Collins is not husband material for Elizabeth. The narrator acknowledges: "Mr. Collins was not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society" (Austen 58). There are no redeeming qualities about Mr. Collins, and he is presented as an absolute fool who is so simple that he fails to realize when he is being openly mocked. Mr. Collins's fickle nature is also emphasized in his haste to change his affections from Jane to Elizabeth once Mrs. Bennet cautions against Jane in the hopes that Jane will marry Bingley. Though Mr. Collins reportedly went to bed fancying Jane, a simple conversation with Mrs. Bennet is apparently all the convincing Collins needs in order to attach himself to Elizabeth: "Mr. Collins had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth—and it was soon done—done while Mrs. Bennet was stirring the fire" (Austen 59). That Collins so hastily resolves to prefer Elizabeth because courting her sister is out of the question clearly identifies him as fickle, superficial, and entirely unsuitable for Elizabeth, or any other admirable woman in the novel. Furthermore, Mr. Collins's presence fits well in the courtship narrative due to his position as a family member of Elizabeth who brings about embarrassment and disgrace in the display of his pandering and fawning over Darcy once he learns that this Darcy is the nephew of his beloved patroness Lady Catherine.

Austen guides readers through the narrative by presenting us with the characters of Wickham and Mr. Collins who are meant to be obstacles, but only for a brief amount of time. They are

uncomplicated figures because Austen leads us to see that they are pitiful and even contemptible, and are meant to have no role in Elizabeth's future. To say that these men are uncomplicated is not to diminish their importance in the novel. Boone makes the case that Collins and Wickham "forewarn of the dangers of marriage for the sake of material security or sexual attraction alone" (Boone 92). However, their categorization by the narrator as persons we are meant to view as unsuitable suitors, paired with their indiscretions make it abundantly clear in Austen's narrative that Mr. Collins and Wickham function merely as subplots enabling the heroine the opportunity to dismiss them as obstacles in her set trajectory towards a happy ending.

Austen solves the problem of the "wrong" suitor in the courtship narrative through her revelation that neither Mr. Collins nor Mr. Wickham are suitable for the heroine, and are in fact so wrong for her that anything but a firm rejection would lead to sure catastrophe. Whereas Austen's narrative allows the reader a clear guide by which to evaluate the suitors in Elizabeth's life, and cheer when she rejects them in favor of the complex Mr. Darcy, James's *The Portrait of a Lady* extracts itself from the courtship plot and moves along a different path.

Rather than creating a world in which Isabel is distracted by the wrong suitors and eventually discovers her path to the right husband, James turns the plot of the courtship novel on its head. He introduces early in the novel suitors for Isabel—men who ardently desire Isabel and truly care for her. However, unlike Austen's Wickham and Mr. Collins, James's suitors are not problems, but rather solutions—at least if they are considered in terms of saving Isabel from an unfortunate marriage. Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood, and Ralph Touchett each adore Isabel to no end, and this adoration complicates the plot not only because Isabel marries none of these men and instead chooses Osmond—the most contemptible male character in the novel, but because James does not grant us the opportunity to peel away layers and see hidden or cruel

sides of Warburton, Caspar, and Ralph, but includes them throughout the entirety of the novel as patient, good men who remain dutifully and almost devastatingly devoted to Isabel. James refuses to pander to the typical courtship narrative story line and in doing so creates a slew of suitors for Isabel whose difficulty to place labels on only makes them more realistic and interesting. Whereas a reading of Austen's novel permits us to label Wickham a dishonest brute, and Mr. Collins a mindless sycophant, James designs eligible suitors who are more complicated, less predictable, and present Isabel not with a set trajectory, but with difficult choices that she, not the narrator or plot devices will address.

Though I intend to address James's depictions of Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood, and Ralph Touchett in the following chapters as complicated and atypical suitors in terms of a courtship plot, I wish to return briefly to Joseph Boone's definition of the courtship narrative in order to see in what other ways James departs from these plotlines. Boone argues that authors who followed Austen such as George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte developed other versions of the courtship narrative in which "an initial courtship and "bad" marriage…forms a preparatory stage for the rewards of true love" (Boone 97). Boone cites George Eliot's *Middlemarch* as an example of such a text, noting that Dorothea's suffering in her unhappy marriage to the domineering Casaubon is ended when Casaubon dies and she is able to enter a happy union with Ladislaw. Boone argues that this story line,

> in which an ill-used wife receives her reward in the form of a truly devoted second husband…held particular appeal as a way of responding to the strained literary realism of presenting all married life as one happy end, as well as a way of giving recognition to the growing public discourse on the legal and psychological abuses perpetuated by real-life marriage. (Boone 98)

Once again, *The Portrait of a Lady* does not fit into this alternative mold of the courtship narrative, as Isabel's suffering is never rewarded, nor is she granted a situation in which she is relieved of Osmond through his sudden passing, allowing her to marry a suitor who truly loves and appreciates her. In fact, James toys with this alternative courtship narrative or the "double-suitor convention" as Boone dubs it, by allowing Caspar Goodwood to remain in the picture until the very end of the novel, reminding us of the courtship narrative. Goodwood's appearance in the final scene of the novel, and his passionate entreaties for Isabel to seek a new life with him offers Isabel an escape from her miserable marriage, and reminds us of the double suitor convention in *Middlemarch* where Ladislaw is offered as a sort of recompense for the suffering Dorothea endured during her marriage to Casaubon. Goodwood's presence in this final scene offers him as an option for Isabel, but one that she will not choose due to her realization that she has already made a choice—a promise to her husband and to her step-daughter—and her recognition that she has the courage to face the consequences of that choice.

The courtship narrative reaches completion with the union of two figures who were meant to be together from the beginning of the novel. The final words in *Pride and Prejudice* are "uniting them"—words which allow the story to end now that the goal of the novel has been achieved:

> Once the possibility of a straight line between the romantically attracted protagonists has been established and "two" become "one," the plot in effect returns to the one-dimensionality from which it arose; hence the appropriateness of the final words of *Pride and Prejudice*, "uniting them," in which the verbal signifier of union is made to coincide with the cessation of all narrative movement. (Boone 81)

The straight line between the protagonists that Boone mentions is not a feature of James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. For Isabel, there is no straight path; she is confronted with an array of eligible suitors, a new fortune, and has only herself to guide her decisions. The absence of a straight path along which James guides Isabel is not reflective of his indifference towards Isabel or some sort of desire to see her fail, but an illustration of how James allows Isabel to break away from the mold of the courtship narrative by endowing her with choice and agency. Rather than cruel, manipulative, or indicative of James's alleged misogyny as some critics have argued, James's refusal to administer a straight path for Isabel liberates her in a way that is distinct from female characters in nineteenth century literature because it endows Isabel with an agency that is entirely her own. What James has done with his creation of complicated suitors and the societal expectations which follow their proposals of marriage, has allowed Isabel a truly unique position as a woman who is given real, complicated choices and the ability to confront them without the guidance of other characters or devices employed by James to direct her towards happily ever after.

The opening line of *Pride and Prejudice* presents us with a conventional maxim that sets the entire novel in motion: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (Austen 1). This courtship narrative progresses onward, following a formula in which the characters of a finite social world interact with one another, and are rewarded by marriage after successfully ridding themselves of those characters who are unquestionably categorized as insufficient husband material and therefore wrong as suitors. Elizabeth, Jane, and Charlotte Lucas yield to social expectations by marrying above their social classes in their limited social community and advancing their situations in life.

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James conceives a world where suitors follow a script that allows the heroine and the reader to categorize them as either adequate or insufficient, and thus creates challenging, yet realistic choices the protagonist must face on her own. Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood, and Ralph Touchett provide Isabel the opportunity to exercise her free will, while their complexities enhance the plot by challenging courtship narrative that traditionally aid the heroine in categorizing these men as wrong or right choices for a husband. James's subversion of the courtship narrative imagines that Isabel has the agency to shape her own destiny rather than relying on predictable plotlines and easily categorized suitors to guide her in the right direction. In doing so, James distinguishes himself as an author not interested in happy endings, but realistically depicting a world where marriage is not synonymous with eternal happiness by considering the story of a woman who experiences suffering during her marriage. Instead of limiting or weakening Isabel as so many critics have argued, her marriage illustrates James's understanding that choice is accompanied by the susceptibility to fail. By overlooking this aspect of the novel and instead choosing to focus on how James has failed his heroine, these critics themselves become guilty of limiting Isabel by denying her the freedom that James has paradoxically granted her. James's understanding that endowing his heroine with free will and agency raises the possibility that she may in fact use this free will to make disastrous choices enables us to view him as a perceptive author invested in realistically depicting a woman capable of mistakes, but more importantly, capable of accepting the consequences of these mistakes.

Chapter One

The English Aristocrat

Much of the criticism that seeks to portray Henry James as an author who expresses anti-feminist views through his portrayal of women is shallow in its articulation of what else James may possibly wish to say about women, and about their role in nineteenth-century middle-class society at large. I will argue that James was so intensely aware of the obstacles and limitations women faced, so interested in their situation, that he was not interested in piecing together a novel where conflict is resolved and the heroine lives happily ever after. Using the model of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, I will examine how *The Portrait of a Lady* presents us with a reading of what happens when a intelligent, vivacious, beautiful woman makes a wrong decision and must come to terms with the consequences of her actions. This plot allows James the opportunity to explore the scope of women's problematic situation in his culture, and to do so by varying the courtship narrative in fiction. Through Isabel's experience, we are able to gauge the limitations and freedoms of women in a novel where the typical courtship plot is pushed a step further by examining what happens when the heroine refuses the Mr. Darcy of the novel—the epitome of the perfect man, and instead marries the perfectly detestable, perfectly wrong man.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is the perfect embodiment of the typical courtship narrative—a novel in which the heroine overcomes a series of obstacles and finally secures a happy ending through marriage to the epitome of a gentleman. Boone's *Narrative Structure in the Marriage Tradition* asserts that, for readers of *Pride and Prejudice*, "there is figuratively little space left to doubt the success of Elizabeth and Darcy…Elizabeth's lively intelligence…bolsters one's conviction that she is Darcy's equal in all but social status" (Boone 90). This disparity between social standings is but one obstacle or source of concern to the

reader—and one that is eventually resolved as the novel ends with the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy. As readers, we have no reason but to assume that Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy live happily ever after. What James does with *The Portrait of a Lady* that is different is to push the limits of the courtship plot further in his examination of what happens when an Elizabeth Bennet-like character has Mr. Darcy at her feet, and instead of accepting him, chooses to marry someone who proves to be the antithesis of Darcy—a vile, cruel, social climber. Whereas *Pride and Prejudice* closes with the marriage of two characters who will presumably lead a full and happy life together, James intentionally places Isabel's and Osmond's marriage in the beginning half of the novel so that he might explore with the remainder of the book what happens when the heroine makes a mistake that she cannot undo. To James, more important than an Austen-like happy ending was exploring what a woman does when she cannot have a happy ending—when her own choices and promises have put her on a trajectory to experience suffering and pain. Rather than anti-feminist writing, then, James's novel must be read as a serious endeavor which seeks to realistically convey a woman who despite her intelligence is capable of error and limited scope, and whose resulting circumstances allow James to consider the questions a woman faces when her life does not fit the mold of a novel.

James's variation of the typical female plot is emphasized in his ability to create characters that are not unlike those in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and place them in the world of *The Portrait of a Lady.* Isabel reflects Austen's heroine Elizabeth Bennet in a number of ways. Bennet is bold, admired for her intellect, fond of her liberty, beloved by nearly all of the characters in the novel, and refuses Mr. Collins's proposal of marriage because she is confident he could never make her happy, completely disregarding the financial situation the marriage would secure, and her mother's urging to accept him. As Juliet McMaster suggests in "The

Portrait of Isabel Archer," Isabel also is "ardently engaged in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (McMaster 50). Indeed, Isabel is passionate about these ideals, and early in the novel James provides the reader with a portrait of Isabel which emphasizes her intellect, propensity to learn, and her natural curiosity to experience the world. Isabel is thought to be the "intellectual superior" (James 44) within her family, and her reputation for being well read is widespread—so much so that the men who come to court her "had a belief that some special preparation was required for talking with her" (James 48). James continues his depiction of Isabel as a force of intellect and practically spells out for us her boundless curiosity and desire to learn: "She had a great desire for knowledge, but she preferred almost any source of information to the printed page; she had an immense curiosity about life and was constantly staring and wondering" (James 49).

Isabel, like Elizabeth Bennet, seems to be the ideal woman, and in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* it seems fitting that the heroine is united with the perfect gentleman by the novel's end. Though misunderstood by Elizabeth initially, Mr. Darcy proves to be the model of a caring friend and dignified man. In our first description of him, he is at a ball with other gentlemen who are described in flattering terms. However, Mr. Darcy stands out as the perfect gentleman:

> Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien, and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year. The gentlemen pronounced him to be a fine figure of a man, the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening. (Austen 7)

Darcy is an aristocrat—a wealthy, well connected man who, though well admired by others, initially repels Elizabeth who is indignant over his snobbish behavior. Darcy's proud airs, his opinion of Elizabeth's family, and Elizabeth's own prejudices against Darcy are all contributing obstacles that must be overcome before the characters can be united. Isabel also presumably should be granted am ideal gentleman—her own version of Mr. Darcy. James seems to deliver this in the form of Lord Warburton. Warburton is the epitome of an English gentleman and is almost irritatingly perfect—so much so that we expect Isabel will be unable to refuse such charm. Our initial description of Lord Warburton is flattering to say the least. Lord Warburton "had a certain fortunate, brilliant exceptional look—the air of a happy temperament fertilized by a high civilization—which would have made almost any observer envy him at a venture" (James 21). Particularly becoming is the description Mr. Touchett lavishes upon Warburton as he candidly reveals to Isabel his thoughts on his aristocratic friend:

> Lord Warburton is a very amiable man—a very fine young man. He has a hundred thousand a year. He owns fifty thousand acres of soil of this little island and ever so many other things besides. He has half a dozen houses to live in. He has a seat in Parliament as I have one at my own dinner-table. He has elegant tastes—cares for literature, for art, for science, for charming young ladies. The most elegant is his taste for the new views…His views don't hurt anyone as far as I can see; they certainly don't hurt himself. They wouldn't touch him, they'd leave him as he is: he's too much liked. (James 87)

Mr. Touchett's flattering remarks regarding Warburton only begin to convey the sense of awe he inspires in others. As if Warburton's qualities are not enough to recommend him, the admiration he generates from his circle of acquaintances speaks volumes for his outstanding

reputation. It seems that even members of his family cannot find a fault within this gentleman. His sisters, the Misses Molyneux are entirely devoted to their older brother and dote on him relentlessly. When one of his sisters escorts him to the Touchett's home, she attentively follows her brother throughout the day: "Miss Molyneux—as if [Lord Warburton] had been Royalty—stood like a lady-in-waiting" (James 147). Furthermore, when Henrietta hints that perhaps Warburton does not return the favor by doing as his sisters would like, Miss Molyneux exclaims: "Oh, Warburton does everything one wants" (James 147). Besides being impressive to his own family, the relationship Warburton shares with Isabel's relations only furthers his case as the proper husband for her. Warburton is a dear and trusted friend of Mr. Touchett and Ralph—both individuals whose opinions Isabel holds in the highest esteem. When Isabel has told her uncle that she means to refuse Warburton's proposal of marriage, Mr. Touchett remarks: "He's a very fine man" (James 127), and is described as saying this "in a tone which might have passed for that of encouragement" (James 127), clearly indicating that he would not mind if Isabel were to reconsider her decision. Ralph too, is surprised and initially disappointed at learning of Isabel's refusal of his good friend. Isabel mentions to Mrs. Touchett prior to telling Ralph of her decision that "I'll do whatever Ralph says is right…I've unbounded confidence in Ralph" (James 152). Ralph's unwavering, almost brother-like admiration for Lord Warburton further depicts an image of Warburton as the perfect suitor:

> Warburton's such a thorough good sort; as a man, I consider he has hardly a fault. And then he's what they call here no end of a swell. He has immense possessions, and his wife would be thought a superior being. He unites the intrinsic and the extrinsic advantages. (James 162)

Here I pause to reflect on the significance of Ralph's words. Throughout the novel, Ralph exhibits nearly impeccable judgment in his assessment of the other characters--distrusting Madame Merle and abhorring Gilbert Osmond. If we are to view Ralph as a sort of barometer with which we can measure integrity, one can do no better than Lord Warburton. Upon hearing that Isabel has refused Warburton, Ralph admits: "I was very sorry for him…[Warburton] is such an honest man" (James 161). Indeed, Warburton is seemingly flawless in the eyes of Mr. Touchett and Ralph, presenting him as a man who must be contended with and considered as a serious suitor both by Isabel and by the reader.

However perfect Warburton may appear, there are aspects to his character which question his supposed perfection and complicate his status as a Darcy-like figure. There is something a bit simple about Warburton—a characteristic that nearly passes undetected in his eagerness to please Isabel. Fearful that Isabel's reluctance to accept his proposal of marriage has something to do with the climate at Lockleigh, he gallantly offers to give up residence at his country estate in England for one which is better suited to Isabel's liking, offering:

> You know, if you don't like Lockleigh—if you think it's damp or anything of that sort—you need never go within fifty miles of it. It's not damp, by the way; I've had the house thoroughly examined; it's perfectly safe and right. But if you shouldn't fancy it you needn't dream of living in it. There's no difficulty whatever about that; there are plenty of houses. (James 123)

Though this gesture allows us to easily become impressed by Warburton's vast wealth, as well as the wealth of devotion and feeling he displays towards Isabel, the passage also elucidates an important characteristic of Lord Warburton—namely his simple-mindedness and limited understanding of the true reasons Isabel has refused him. Warburton is not simply a love-sick

man desperate to win the heart of the woman he loves—the poor man actually attributes Isabel's hesitation to some sort of concern over material shortcomings that he believes can be readily rectified. In *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James,* Dorothea Krook tackles what she views as James's subtle, but intentional characterization of Warburton as something of a sap. Krook remarks: "Lord Warburton is exceedingly likeable; and easily the most likeable feature of his character (we are soon made to see) is his complete and perfect simplicity" (Krook 28). Krook views Warburton as certainly a pleasant man, but also a man who is not Isabel's intellectual equal, as evidenced by his inability to understand her reasons for refusing him:

> In the end Lord Warburton is seen to be not only touchingly simple-hearted, but also (alas) simple-minded…it is the quality of this blankness, this remarkable incomprehension, of Lord Warburton's that James renders with the finest dramatic economy and the nicest sense of its comic incongruity in the scene of the proposal. (Krook 29)

So willing is Warburton to entertain Isabel's every whim that he promises to abandon his beloved Lockleigh if she finds it the slightest bit uncomfortable despite his confidence that it is "perfectly safe and right" (James 123). Isabel herself becomes exasperated at Warburton's limited understanding of her rejection. She begs him not to take offense to her decision, and when he persists, Isabel shows a hint of annoyance as she tells Warburton: "I'm afraid I can't make you understand" (James 122). Warburton endeavors to make Isabel help him understand, but again fails to recognize that Isabel's concerns have nothing to do with her physical surroundings as he tells Isabel: "You ought at least try. I've a fair intelligence. Are you afraid—afraid of the climate? We can easily live elsewhere, you know. You can pick out your climate, the whole world over" (James 122). Warburton exasperatingly continues to chatter on about his

array of estates, missing the point entirely, and the exchange between Warburton and Isabel becomes nearly comical as he continues his attempt to persuade Isabel that a simple re-arrangement of his properties might lead to her happiness, ending their conversation with this exchange:

> 'There are plenty of houses. I thought I'd just mention it; some people don't like a moat, you know. Goodbye.'
>
> 'I adore a moat' said Isabel. 'Goodbye.' (James 123)

Warburton's gibberish about his moat comes off as a bit ridiculous, somewhat humorous, and even a little charming given the context. Perhaps Krook sums up Warburton's characterization best in her observation that Warburton possesses "ignorance and innocence and incorruptible good nature" (Krook 30). Yet, one cannot help but notice that Warburton's constant referral to his estates and resources proves him incapable of imagining that Isabel needs more than a favorable climate or a sprawling home in order to be completely at ease. Though Warburton might lack such an understanding, even he is aware that Isabel does not. Warburton's admittance to Isabel that he is intimidated by her own cleverness only augments the disparity between the two when Warburton asks Isabel: "Do you know I'm very much afraid of it—of that remarkable mind of yours?" (James 123). As he utters these words, Warburton is described as being in a state of extreme agitation as his hands give "short nervous shakes to his hunting crop" (James 123). Here, Warburton is depicted as a trifle pitiful with his shaking hands, his fear of Isabel's "remarkable" mind, and the growing uneasiness that he is losing a battle he wants desperately to win. Though no less of a good man, this scene presents Warburton as somewhat childlike and pitiable—characteristics James emphasizes again when Isabel and Warburton meet in Rome once she has refused his offer of marriage. Warburton is still in love with Isabel, and is

distraught by her newly formed acquaintance with Gilbert Osmond. Warburton resolves to leave Rome ahead of schedule, and hopes that his presence will be missed by Isabel. When Isabel hears the news and simply wishes him safe travels, Warburton whines: "'You're in a great hurry to get rid of me,' said his lordship quite dismally" (James 319). Instead of facing the facts like a gentleman and acknowledging that Isabel is not romantically interested in him, Warburton continues to feel sorry for himself as he pouts childishly:

> "You don't care what I do," he went on pitifully.
>
> Isabel looked at him a moment. "Ah," she said, "you're not keeping your promise!"
>
> He colored like a boy of fifteen. "If I'm not, then it's because I can't; and that's why I'm going"
>
> "Good-bye then."
>
> "Good-bye." He lingered, still, however. "When shall I see you again?" (James 319)

This dialogue is important because of what it tells us about Warburton. He is presented in extremely juvenile terms, described by the narrator as pitiful, and blushing like a boy of fifteen. That he continues to linger after Isabel has (for a second time) made it clear his romantic advances are not welcome, positions him as a nuisance and annoyance to Isabel. Warburton continues to remain devoted to Isabel, but this devotion begins to become tiresome rather than charming. Instead of a man with a sense of pride and the perceptiveness to know when to bow out gracefully, Warburton is unrelenting to the point of being aggravating and childish. Here again, Warburton's limited understanding of the uselessness of his entreaties, and his incessant pleading positions him as in some ways inadequate for Isabel. Moreover, this side of Warburton

allows the reader to view a side of Warburton that complicates his status as a perfect match for Isabel, or a Darcy-like figure. An additional factor that separates Warburton from being a Darcy figure is the later development of Warburton's potential attachment to Pansy, Osmond's daughter. His reappearance in Isabel's life later on—this time as a suitor to her step-daughter characterizes him as something of a simpleton who is being used by Osmond for his status—a trap that a man of Darcy's perception and sensibilities would likely never fall victim to.

Warburton's adequacy as a husband for Isabel is examined further by James's depiction of the stifling environment of his outdated lifestyle as an English lord—a stark contrast to the self-made American men who frequent the pages of the novel. In many ways, Warburton is as outdated as the relics that adorn his properties, heightening his unsuitability as a husband for Isabel. Dorothea Krook notes that beneath the exterior of Warburton's good breeding exists relatively little to speak of, arguing that Warburton's position "is somehow compatible with its being at the same time the product of a highly artificial form of social life—that secure and tranquil life…that had been lived for long generations by Englishmen of Lord Warburton's class" (Krook 29). Warburton himself seems aware of the meaningless nature of the aristocratic title he carries. After Henrietta has gone on one of her diatribes criticizing the existence of a privileged class and suggests that Warburton relinquish his title, he replies: "I do think of giving it up, the little there is left of it" (James 143). Warburton's juxtaposition with men like Caspar Goodwood and Mr. Touchett—self-starters who have made their fortunes and earned their places in society positions Warburton as a sort of outsider and a man whose time is past.

As a suitor for Isabel, Warburton presents himself as a man with merits and flaws, characteristics which complicate his categorization as either suitable or unsuitable for Isabel. Though his simplicity and status as a man with a title appreciated in bygone years certainly

detract from Warburton's categorization as an ideal suitor, Warburton is otherwise a capital fellow who we are meant to see as genuinely steadfast in his love for Isabel. Filled out as more than a supporting character or passing annoyance as so many other suitors in courtship narratives are, James has created a presence in Warburton which emphasizes Isabel's agency in her ability to reject him. Warburton is completely devoted to Isabel in the most genuine sense, evident during his proposal of marriage to her. Warburton reveals:

> 'I don't go off easily, but when I'm touched, it's for life. It's for life, Miss Archer, it's for life,' Lord Warburton repeated in the kindest, tenderest, pleasantest yoke Isabel had ever heard, and looking at her with eyes charged with the light of a passion that had sifted itself clear of the baser parts of emotion—the heat, violence, the unreason—and that burned as steadily as a lamp in a windless place. (James 118)

Isabel is aware of the sincerity of Warburton's entreaty, and his genuine affection is not lost to her as she admits: "'I like you very much, Lord Warburton'…and at this moment she liked him immensely" (James 119). In fact, Isabel is overwhelmed by his offer, and likes and admires him in so many respects that after his appeal his words are described as:

> a breadth of candor that was like the embrace of strong arms—that was like the fragrance straight in her face, and by his clean, breathing lips, of she knew not what strange gardens, what charged airs. She would have given her little finger at that moment to feel strongly and simply the impulse to answer: 'Lord Warburton, it's impossible for me to do better in this wonderful world, I think, than commit myself very gratefully, to your loyalty.' (James 122)

Perhaps Juliet McMaster sums up Warburton's characterization best in her observation that *everyone*—Isabel, Ralph, Mr. Touchett, Mrs. Touchett, Henry James, and the reader included, perceives Lord Warburton as the model of perfection, the "Mr. Darcy" of the novel, and therefore the suitable husband for Isabel. McMaster concludes:

> In the figure of Warburton, it seems to me, James has taken pains to present a man whom we are to take as the right husband for Isabel…he and Isabel should match perfectly…Warburton's love for her would seem just the kind she would thrive on—not tyrannical and demanding like Goodwood's, or egoistic like Osmond's. (McMaster 52)

However, Isabel refuses Warburton's proposal despite her great admiration for him and her recognition that "nineteen out of twenty" women would jump at Lord Warburton's offer of marriage (James 124). As readers, we are made aware just how much Isabel's rejection of Warburton has resonated with her. During an interview with Caspar Goodwood, Isabel seems to revel in the glory of having refused such a proposal from an English lord. She relates to Goodwood: "It was a proposal many girls would have accepted; it had everything to recommend it…I was offered a great position and a great fortune—by a person whom I like extremely" (James 172). When Goodwood desires to know whether this suitor is an Englishman, Isabel is quick to correct him: "He's an English nobleman" (James 172). Isabel has reflected upon what she has just given up, and is aware not only of the material wealth and comfortable situation she has forfeited, but the sincere love of a man she describes as liking "extremely."

Isabel's ultimate rejection of Lord Warburton demonstrates not only her agency as a free thinking woman who defies the conventions of society and the opinions of those closest to her, but also her unique position as a female character whose path is not paved before her.

Warburton is a rounded, complicated character, and as such simply cannot be characterized as either appropriate or inadequate for Isabel. His flaws and his attributes contribute to his realness and also to the plausibility that Isabel's choice is one that is not orchestrated to be simple. James's construction of such a suitor not only subverts the plotline of the courtship narratives of his predecessors, but also rewrites it in such a way that allows Isabel to respond to the typical scenario of girl versus gentleman in an alternative way. Rather than an obstacle in Isabel's path, Warburton's many appealing qualities present him as a serious suitor whom Isabel must confront. James's depicts a woman who is not passively dragged along the trajectory of a conventional courtship narrative, but actively creates her own path as she challenges convention and the advice of those who are a part of her social world, and in doing so demonstrates a singularity and agency unlike that of an Elizabeth Bennet character whose path to an ideal husband is mapped out for her.

Chapter Two

The American

James's subversion of the courtship narrative through the variation of male suitors continues with the appearance of Caspar Goodwood. Once again, we are introduced to a suitor whose status is as complicated as Isabel's feelings towards him. Goodwood is another man desperately in love with Isabel, and just as Lord Warburton, James gives neither the reader nor Isabel an easy means of categorizing Goodwood as the "right" or "wrong" suitor. In Goodwood, James has yet again challenged what it means to be a male suitor in his depiction of a realistic suitor whose affection for Isabel once again allows her to demonstrate her agency. Isabel's rejection of another man who is presented as a plausible husband for her positions her as free to make her own choices and able to defy societal conventions rather than being guided along the trajectory of a courtship narrative where choice is limited to one worthy suitor. In fact, Goodwood's character is a continual reminder of Isabel's agency, as he does not simply evaporate after his initial rejection, but remains until the novel's end as a constant reminder of Isabel's ability to confront the difficult choices she faces.

In *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James*, Dorothea Krook contends: "In Caspar Goodwood, James desires to give us a type standing as nearly as possible at the opposite pole to Lord Warburton" (Krook 33). Caspar Goodwood is no Lord Warburton, yet, it is precisely for this reason that his character is so compelling. Though decidedly a non-Darcy character and lacking an aristocratic title, Goodwood is an alternative to the conventional English gentleman. If Lord Warburton struggles at times within his outdated role as a lord, and is too conventional a match for Isabel, the reader may initially venture to think that the self-made American character of Goodwood offers a refreshing alternative as a suitor for our heroine. Goodwood is everything

that Lord Warburton is not. His physical strength, athleticism, and generally aggressive nature cultivates the image of a man who does not necessarily have things fall into his lap, but eventually gets what he wants if he works hard enough. In *The Expense of Vision,* Laurence Holland notes that in Goodwood, James has crafted "a distinct combination of masculine vigor and the awkward and genuine assertiveness of the American businessman" (Holland 32). One can hardly read a description of Goodwood without receiving some sort of description of his physical strength and commanding presence. In the first passage in which Goodwood is described, we learn: "his physiognomy had an air of requesting your attention, which it rewarded according to the charm you found in blue eyes of remarkable fixedness" (James 50). Though he is a graduate of Harvard, Caspar "had gained renown rather as a gymnast and an oarsman than as a gleaner of more dispersed knowledge" (James 130), once again emphasizing his sheer physical strength and athleticism. While James does not devote much focus to Warburton's physical strength, instead tending to emphasize the magnitude of his kindness and material wealth, James's vastly different focus on Goodwood as a hyper masculine character distinguishes him as a male suitor of a different breed. Such variation in presentation of male suitors not only allows Isabel a wider scope of choice, but also advances the typical characterization of male suitors by imagining that women might desire more in a suitor than the customary English gentlemen-like characters who fill the pages of conventional courtship novels.

Goodwood's strong physical presence is not the only quality that distinguishes him from Warburton. He has been educated at Harvard, and though we are told that his stints as a gymnast and oarsman may have overshadowed his intellectual pursuits, Goodwood is no simpleton and proves himself to be as hard-working and clever as he is athletically successful. As the wealthy son of a cotton mill proprietor in Massachusetts, Goodwood does not allow himself to grow

indolent by a legacy handed down to him. Though Warburton's main occupation seems to be enjoying the riches to which he is heir, Goodwood expands on his father's success as he throws himself full force into his business, inventing a cotton-spinning process which is so widespread and useful that it is known by Goodwood's name. It seems as though Goodwood is successful in all his endeavors:

> he liked to organize, to contend, to administer; he could make people work his will, believe in him, march before him and justify him…it struck those who knew him that there was nothing cottony about Caspar Goodwood, and his friends took for granted that he would somehow and somewhere write himself in bigger letters. (James 130)

James draws a marked distinction between the physically capable American Goodwood who is able to make a place for himself in the world through hard work, and the gentle, yet simple Englishman who is enveloped in an older, antiquated world which Isabel does not understand. Their differences become even more salient in their reactions to Isabel's refusal to accept their proposals of marriage. Whereas Warburton continues to pester Isabel with minute details about his various estates and trembles helplessly as he admits he is terrified by Isabel's cleverness, Goodwood remains forceful throughout, and instead of attempting to convince Isabel that he can make her happy, focuses on his own contentment: "I don't care a cent for your admiration—not one straw, with nothing to show for it. When will you marry me? That's the only question" (James 170). Though Isabel appears to have the upper hand in her confrontation with Lord Warburton, sending him away a defeated man, she loses her composure with Goodwood and becomes distraught as their conversation becomes heated, crying out in a "trembling voice" (James 170), as she begs him to accept her decision as final. Isabel becomes agitated with

Goodwood's determination—a trait that distresses her and rouses her to rebuke him: "you ought to know when to let one alone" (James 168). Though a few days earlier Warburton evidently does not know when to let Isabel alone, she does not rebuke him as harshly as she does Goodwood because Warburton's relentless entreaties stem from his inability to understand Isabel's reasons for refusing him. Goodwood, however, possesses a domineering, overbearing demeanor and continues to petition Isabel despite his understanding of her true feelings. This subtle difference between the two suitors emphasizes Goodwood's aggressive, competitive nature. He does not care that the woman he loves does not love him back, nor does he mind that she does not admire him in the least. Goodwood is an athlete, a competitor, and a man who is not easily defeated.

Isabel harbors conflicting feelings for Goodwood which once again allows us to see that James has not created a typical suitor who can be either accepted or dismissed on a trajectory towards a happy ending, but instead has fashioned a character who elicits complex feelings from the heroine—in turn presenting her with a difficult decision for which there is not a solution provided by the plot. Our narrator relates:

> [Goodwood] was the finest young man she had ever seen, was indeed quite a splendid young man; he inspired her with a sentiment of high, of rare respect. She had never felt equally moved to it by any other person" (James 50).

Furthermore, Goodwood permeates Isabel's thoughts even before she has officially rejected Warburton's proposal. After telling Mr. Touchett that she means to reject Warburton's offer, her thoughts turn to Goodwood and her reflection is as follows:

> Sometimes Caspar Goodwood had seemed to range himself on the side of [Isabel's] destiny, to be the stubbornest fact she knew; she said to herself at such

> moments that she might evade him for a time, but that she must make terms with him at last—terms which would be certain to be favorable to himself. (James 129)

However, Isabel exhibits the same marked determination to refuse Goodwood's entreaty to marry her as she did Warburton's. She is more disgusted than impressed that Goodwood has followed her across a continent in order to be near her. Rather than flattered, Isabel expresses her frustration that Henrietta Stackpole has intervened on Goodwood's behalf and led him to her. While Isabel remains firm in her mandate that Goodwood leave her alone for at least two years, it is important to note that she has left him with the hope that in two years time his patience might be rewarded. Furthermore, a Warburton-like expression of love delivered by Goodwood moves Isabel to feel emotions for him. Goodwood proclaims: "I'm capable of nothing with regard to you…but just of being infernally in love with you. If one's strong one loves only the more strongly" (James 169). Upon hearing this, "indeed our young lady felt the force of it—felt it thrown off, into the vast of truth and poetry, as practically a bait to her imagination" (James 169).

Though Goodwood may not be a Darcy-like character, he is nonetheless a serious suitor to be contended with due to his unwillingness to see Isabel unhappy. Despite his flaws, Goodwood remains entirely devoted to Isabel, and this forces the reader and Isabel to view him as a plausible husband. Again, I will restate my argument that such a characterization of a complicated male suitor prevents him from being categorized as wrong for Isabel, and this enables Isabel to guide herself rather than relying upon the narrative structure to categorize her suitors for her. In her time of greatest need, Goodwood is the constant in Isabel's life—an almost "knight in shining armor" who can rescue her from her trouble, but is never allowed to. During Goodwood's first trip from America to England to be at Isabel's side, she refuses to

marry him, effectively preventing him from saving her from the mistake she makes in marrying Osmond. Again, after Isabel has married Osmond, Goodwood journeys to Rome to be near her after being told by Henrietta that Isabel is suffering in her marriage. And of course, the final chapter of the novel features Goodwood yet again, steadfast in his desire to rescue Isabel from her sorrows. In *The Portrait of a Lady: Maiden, Woman, and Heroine,* Lyall Powers notes that regardless of whether Isabel commands Goodwood to leave her, he continues to reappear throughout the novel—a constant in Isabel's life. Powers notes: "Ralphs's stirring Emersonian exhortation to her to live as she likes best, to spread her wings and rise…have yet made Isabel ponder her destiny once again. Inevitably, it seems, that involves Caspar Goodwood, who when all else is gone will remain" (Powers 68). It seems that Goodwood is never quite absent from Isabel's life, whether physically present, or present in her thoughts. Goodwood is a part of Isabel's world before and during her marriage, and in the interim when Isabel has returned to England to care for the ailing Ralph. Additionally, he is often not far from Isabel's thoughts. When Isabel returns to Gardencourt before Ralph's death, she stands in the house's gallery, but she is not focusing on any of the pictures. Instead, "she was wondering whether if her aunt had not come that day in Albany she would have married Caspar Goodwood" (James 590).

James's depiction of Goodwood does more than allow our heroine to prove her agency in determining not to marry a reasonable choice of husband. Goodwood, much like Warburton allows Isabel the ability to defy social convention by disregarding the advice and desires of those around her. Though her family's great esteem for Warburton enables Isabel to prove her singularity by rejecting a man who would further her position in life, James sets up a similar situation with Goodwood, and allows Isabel the opportunity to freely oppose a conventional alliance by refusing a man who "was supposed by the world in general to wish to marry her"

(James 50). It is no accident that Goodwood is wealthy, hardworking, ardently attached to Isabel, and also a fellow countryman. These ought to be attractive qualities to a woman in Isabel's position, and Isabel is not ignorant to this fact, due in part to the constant badgering of Henrietta Stackpole. If Mr. and Mrs. Touchett and Ralph were desirous of a union between Isabel and Warburton, Henrietta is equally adamant that Isabel ought to fulfill what Henrietta claims is Isabel's duty and marry this fellow American who seems to be nearly the only man in the novel Henrietta approves of—a remarkable feat in and of itself. Henrietta contends that Goodwood is "the only man I have ever seen whom I think worthy of Isabel" (James 136), and is relentless in her attempts to unite the two. Henrietta takes the liberty of encouraging Goodwood's affections for Isabel by inviting him to Gardencourt unbeknownst to Isabel, who later remarks, "You must be very fond of me, Henrietta, to be willing to be so aggressive" (James 180). Henrietta acknowledges her genuine fondness for her friend: "I love you intensely, Isabel" but also warns that in rejecting Goodwood, "You're drifting to some great mistake" (James 180). Isabel's realization that a friend whom she respects exceedingly is invested in her union to Goodwood emphasizes Isabel's absolute independence as she fails to heed Henrietta's advice in her refusal of Goodwood's proposal of marriage.

Though Goodwood and Warburton share statuses as suitors who are fortunate to have won the admiration of those closest to the woman they are desperate to woo, James again takes pains to distinguish the men by endowing Goodwood with another characteristic that he fails to bestow on Lord Warburton—a sexual presence prominent throughout the entire novel. James's hyper phallic representation of Goodwood again positions James as an author challenging the boundaries of a suitor's role in the courtship narratives of his predecessors. Goodwood is "distinctly a manly man" (Krook 34), and the distinction of this status is related to us in

sexualized and phallic language. Besides the obvious sexual connotation of his surname, Goodwood is described as "tall, strong, and somewhat stiff" (James 50), and Isabel finds that there is a "strong push, a kind of hardness of presence, in his way of rising before her" (James 128). Lyall Powers notes that Goodwood is unique as a suitor because of the "one other dramatic, gripping, and evidently puzzling feature of Goodwood's appeal—its blatantly sexual quality" (Powers 71). Poor Lord Warburton, who is portrayed as boy-like, trembling, and blushing in Isabel's presence, pales in comparison to Goodwood, as do Ralph Touchett and Osmond for that matter. Though described in phallic terms throughout the entire text, Goodwood's existence as an object of sexual desire for Isabel culminates at the novel's end during his plea for Isabel to make a life with him. Though the reader has previously seen Isabel keep Goodwood at bay, Powers argues that in this final scene "the evidence would seem unmistakable that she is attracted rather than repulsed by [Goodwood's sexual appeal] (Powers 71). When Goodwood begs her to stay with him rather than return to her husband in Rome, Isabel is caught in a moment of temptation:

> …she had never been loved before. She had believed it, but this was different; this was the hot wind of the desert, at the approach of which the others dropped dead, like mere sweet airs of the garden. It wrapped her about; it lifted her off her feet, while the very taste of it, as if something potent, acrid and strange, forced open her set teeth. (James 610)

Powers notes that this scene not only allows us a rare glimpse of Isabel's sexual attraction to Goodwood, but once again distinguishes him as being able to offer Isabel something none of the other male characters have been able to.

The above passage does more than differentiate Goodwood as a male character with sexual appeal—it reminds us that Isabel too is attracted to a man who loves her, who cares for her deeply and who is pleading to take her away from her suffering. He reappears continually, as if to remind Isabel and the reader that despite his flaws, he remains a man willing to go to any length to make Isabel happy, and who himself agonizes over the suffering he sees her encounter. He may not be the man Isabel chooses to marry, yet James depicts him as someone who would not have been a bad choice—again doing away with the conventional custom of creating only suitors with flaws who can easily be written off by the heroine. Goodwood remains until literally the very end of the novel--a painful reminder to Isabel of what could have and perhaps should have been. If we are to view Ralph as an adept judge of character and a man whose perceptions of people are correct, his deathbed entreaty to Goodwood is not something to be taken lightly. Ralph commands Goodwood: "Do everything you can for her; do everything she'll let you do" (James 609). Ralph identifies Goodwood as a trustworthy man who is capable of ending Isabel's suffering and able to guide her away from her manipulative husband. It certainly seems as though Ralph could not have chosen a better man to carry out his wishes, as Goodwood until the very last desires to save and defend Isabel from the suffering she endures in her marriage. Goodwood's rousing speech illustrates his continued devotion to Isabel:

> 'You don't know what to do—you don't know where to turn. It's too late to play a part; didn't you leave all that behind you in Rome? Touchett knew all about it, and I knew it too—what it would cost you to come here. It will have cost you your life? Say it will'—and he flared almost into anger: 'give me one word of truth! When I know such a horror as that, how can I keep myself from wishing to save you?' (James 609)

The thought of the punishment Isabel might experience upon her return to Rome is as contemptible a thought to Goodwood as it was to Ralph. When Goodwood makes this speech to Isabel, Ralph is no longer alive, Lord Warburton has recently married, but Goodwood remains by Isabel's side, presenting himself as a means of escape—an answer to Isabel's question of where she should turn. Isabel may have reached her darkest moment by the novel's end, but her life is not over. In Goodwood, James offers Isabel a means of escape, a man devoted to her in every sense and willing to overlook her past mistakes so that she might experience a happy future.

What then, are we to do with the figures of Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood? James presents us with two gentlemen who are so devoted, so in love with, and so willing to make sacrifices for this woman as to heighten our awareness (as well as Isabel's) that Osmond was a grave mistake. Interestingly, after Osmond's love for Isabel has diminished and she is sure that he hates her, Warburton and Goodwood seem to continue loving this married woman with fervor. Until nearly the end of the novel both men have not married, almost as if they are unable to move forward, perpetually transfixed by Isabel. Though Warburton does marry at the end of the novel, it has taken the man who was at one time ready to marry Isabel after knowing her for the briefest period of time nearly five years to marry another woman. Goodwood, true to Powers' assertion of his steadfast nature, remains continuously devoted to Isabel, having never married and awaiting an opportunity to come to Isabel's rescue. James is challenging what it means to be a male suitor in a courtship narrative as his suitors neither back down, nor do they function as obstacles that are eventually discovered to be unworthy of Isabel and crossed off a list of possible husbands. On the contrary, they are realistic in their strengths, in their flaws, and in their feelings for Isabel. As a result, Isabel is not guided along a trajectory which guarantees a

happy ending, but is given the agency to confront her suitors on her own and to face the consequences of these decisions.

Chapter Three

The Unlikely Suitor

"The best thing you can do, when I'm gone, will be to marry" (James 194). So begins Daniel Touchett's conversation with his son Ralph one afternoon as they discuss Mr. Touchett's imminent death. Though Mr. Touchett's dying wish is to see his son married, it is not a matter of Ralph's marrying merely anyone. Just as Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood have found Isabel irresistibly charming and the perfect potential wife, so too has Daniel Touchett whose fondness for Isabel is manifested in his desire to see his son Ralph married to her. Mr. Touchett does not attempt to conceal his hope, as he tells Ralph: "I know she likes you. She has told me how much she likes you…she's the most charming young lady I've ever seen. And she would be good to you. I have thought a great deal about it" (James 195). Mr. Touchett is not the only person who has thought a great deal about this union. In fact, Ralph admits immediately that a marriage to Isabel has crossed his mind as well. Mr. Touchett probes his son further, asking Ralph whether he is indeed in love with Isabel. Ralph responds: "No, I'm not in love with her; but I should be if—if certain things were different" (James 195). Ralph is a sick man—dying in fact, and he is of the firm conviction that "people in an advanced stage of pulmonary disorder had better not marry at all" (James 196).

Ralph's status as yet another man in love with Isabel places him on par with Warburton and Goodwood. Yet, he is separated from this world of would-be courtship due to an illness which overshadows his own desires and seemingly places Isabel out of his reach. Many critics have failed to consider Ralph as a viable suitor for Isabel, dismissing him as Laurence Holland does: "Unlike Ralph, who has renounced the prospect of marriage, his friend Lord Warburton, young Ned Rosier, and Caspar Goodwood find their place as suitors in the novel's action" (Holland 29).

I wish to make the argument that Ralph is just as much of a suitor in the novel's action as any of the aforementioned men, but is purposely limited; and moreover that this enables James to redefine what constitutes a male suitor. Though Ralph's illness places him on the sidelines and his sense of failed masculinity prevents him from actively pursuing Isabel, he works vicariously through other characters to demonstrate his devotion to Isabel. In doing so, Ralph distinguishes himself as an alternative suitor whose love for Isabel is manifested subtly rather than outwardly, relying upon the intercession of the novel's two other prominent suitors—Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood—and challenges the ideal of masculinity embodied by many of the other men in the novel.

Ralph's physical feebleness complicates his status as a suitor because his frailty places him beyond the scope of archetypal masculine characters and offers an alternative to the masculine suitors typically encountered in the courtship narrative. In stark contrast to the stately figure of Warburton or the athletically successful Goodwood, Ralph is described in terms of fragility:

> Lean and long and loose-jointed; an accidental cohesion of relaxed angles…his hands had fixed themselves in his pockets; he shambled and stumbled and shuffled in a manner that denoted great physical helplessness. (James 354)

In fact, Ralph believes his illness and physical infirmity prevents him from assuming a role as a sexual interest for Isabel**.** Our awareness of Ralph's self-enforced celibacy is heightened by his father's remark regarding Ralph's refusal to make a proposal to Isabel: "Young men are very different from what I was. When I cared for a girl—when I was young—I wanted to do more than look at her" (James 198). Yet, despite this seemingly limiting characteristic, James does not use it as grounds for dismissing Ralph as a suitor. Instead, Ralph is a self-sacrificing suitor—a man whose own lost opportunity for happiness will not prevent him from endeavoring to secure

the happiness of the woman he loves, even if he cannot share this life with her. Such altruism distinguishes Ralph as a unique suitor who does not profess his love outwardly, but expresses his devotion to his cousin through means that are more indirect.

Ralph's self-sacrificial attributes are manifested in his interview with his father as he declares he will not subject Isabel to his true feelings for her because of his physical condition. Ralph refuses to be swayed by his own father's encouragement, despite Daniel Touchett's affirmation that: "It is a great deal more natural to marry a pretty young lady that you're in love with than it is to remain single on false principles" (James 196). Instead of pursuing his own desires, Ralph attempts to ensure that Isabel's contentment comes before his own as evidenced during his discussion with his father. Ignoring his father's appeals to gratify his own desires, Ralph requests Mr. Touchett to leave half of Ralph's inheritance to Isabel as a means of securing her freedom and therefore, as Ralph reasons, her happiness:

> I should like to put it into her power to do some of the things she wants. She wants to see the world for instance. I should like to put money in her purse…If she has an easy income she'll never have to marry for a support. That's what I want cannily to prevent. She wishes to be free, and your bequest will make her free. (James 197)

Ralph constantly looks out for what he believes is Isabel's well-being, and seeks no recognition for his benevolence. In fact, he is determined that Isabel is not aware of his appeal to his father, telling Mr. Touchett: "I should like it simply to be a clause in your will, without the slightest reference to me" (James 198).

Although Ralph's insistence that the money he wishes his father to grant Isabel is solely for her benefit, Ralph's actions are not entirely altruistic. There are troubling aspects to Ralph's

behavior—notably that he is not only looking out for Isabel's best interests, but considering his own desires to be a witness as Isabel's life plays out. When Mr. Touchett hints that Ralph is endowing Isabel with a fortune for his own amusement, Ralph admits: "So it is, a good deal" (James 198). Ralph persuades his father that leaving Isabel a significant fortune will allow her to meet the requirements of her imagination, yet after Mr. Touchett has agreed to divide Ralph's inheritance with Isabel, Ralph remarks: "I wished to put into Isabel's reach—that of having met the requirements of my imagination" (James 200). So here we have a man who is not entirely without motives when it comes to his generosity. This "gift" for Isabel is not simply for her own benefit, but for Ralph's benefit as well. In *Professions of Taste,* Jonathan Freedman notes that this troubling side of Ralph allows readers to make a connection between Ralph and Osmond, as both men seek in objectify Isabel in some way—essentially meeting the requirements of their own imaginations. Freedman asserts:

> [Ralph] subtly but unmistakably metamorphoses her into that which he had previously claimed she transcended—a work of art. By so doing, he begins inadvertently to show Osmondian characteristics. . .he attempts imaginatively to collect her. For after he has mentally transformed Isabel into a particularly beautiful but nevertheless static portrait of a lady, the next logical step is to hang her on the wall of his mental portrait gallery. (Freedman 154)

Ralph's gift, then, is one that he believes will enable Isabel's agency, but also his imagination. His passivity begins to redefine itself here as Ralph takes an active role in affecting Isabel's life. He may not be able to have Isabel as a wife or lover, but the bestowal of his inheritance upon her enables Ralph to still take some sort of possession over the woman he loves.

This disturbing dimension to Ralph's character is worthy of consideration because it allows us to conceptualize Ralph as capable of error and misjudgment, and therefore a more realistic character. Yet, Ralph is also and simultaneously capable of acting solely out of love for Isabel with no regard to himself, and his clandestine undertakings to aid Isabel extend beyond his conversation with his father, allowing us to recognize the magnitude of his deep concern for Isabel. James is challenging us to conceptualize another type of suitor whose love does not translate directly to professions of passion, but is so genuine it allows him to put others' happiness before his own. Though in love with Isabel himself, he allows himself to recede into the background, ignoring his own feelings as he relies on Warburton and Goodwood to provide Isabel the contentment he believes his health prevents him from administering. In a conversation with Warburton, we are able to see how Ralph relies on characters other than his father to protect Isabel from discontentment. Though he had hoped that Isabel's infusion of wealth would make her less susceptible to marriage, while in Rome Ralph becomes uneasy by the increasing intimacy between Osmond and Isabel. He reacts by confiding in Warburton, imparting his disdain for Osmond and hinting that measures must be taken in order to prevent an alliance between Isabel and Osmond in the following colloquy:

> "His name's Gilbert Osmond—he lives in Florence," Ralph said,
>
> "What is he besides?"
>
> "Nothing at all. Oh yes, he's an American; but one forgets that—he's so little of one."
>
> "Has he known Miss Archer long?"
>
> "Three or four weeks."
>
> "Does she like him?"
>
> …"Do you mean will she accept him?"

> "Yes," said Lord Warburton after an instant; "I suppose that's what I horribly mean."
>
> "Perhaps not if one does nothing to prevent it," Ralph replied
>
> His lordship stared a moment, but apprehended. "Then we must be perfectly quiet?"
>
> "As quiet as the grave. And only on the chance!" Ralph added. (James 314)

This conversation places Warburton in the role as confidant to Ralph, who candidly allows Warburton an insider's status on Isabel's affairs. This shared information creates camaraderie between the two men, and a shared hope that they can prevent an unfortunate alliance between the woman they love and a man whose status as a competitor is nearly as contemptible to them as his questionable nature. Ralph makes certain that Warburton is aware of his affection for his cousin, and his longing to see her taken care of. One evening at the opera, Warburton suggests that Ralph ought to head home since all his other acquaintances have deserted him with the exception of Isabel and Osmond who have a private box to themselves. Ralph is incredulous that Warburton could suggest such a thing, responding: "And leave my young lady in this sad place? Ah no, I must watch over her" (James 315). Once again, we are aware of Ralph's double role as a participant and a witness to Isabel's life—something of a passive observer who refuses to take an active role, yet nonetheless administers directions to those he believes can save Isabel from disaster so he orders Warburton: "you're different. Go to the box and stay there while I walk about" (James 316). The "you're different" articulation gives Warburton the needed push to interrupt Isabel's and Osmond's tête-à-tête, as well as the mutual understanding between the two gentlemen that Warburton might be capable of removing Isabel from Osmond's grasp.

Though I wish to reveal the ways in which Ralph demonstrates his sincere devotion to Isabel by vicariously aiding her through other characters, by no means am I denying Ralph's own pronounced profession of love to Isabel. Ralph is completely frank with Isabel during one

confrontation: “I’ve said what I had on my mind—and I’ve said it because I love you!” (James 363), he tells Isabel during his attempt to convince her not to marry Osmond. When Isabel alleges that his love for her prevents him from being indifferent to the man she has chosen to marry, Ralph assures her: “I love you, but I love without hope” (James 363). Unlike Warburton and Goodwood, Ralph does not profess his love in order to make Isabel his own, but to save her from misfortune. Ralph’s confession, then, is not in consideration of personal fulfillment as he expects nothing from Isabel in return for his efforts. Rather, it is again a reminder of Ralph’s selflessness and his attempts to protect Isabel from grave error: “I told you last year that if you were to get into trouble I should feel terribly sold. That’s how I feel today” (James 365). When Isabel demands whether he thinks her in “trouble,” Ralph replies: “One’s in trouble when one’s in error” (James 365). Not only does this episode illustrate Ralph’s affection for Isabel and solidify his status as a suitor; it again places Isabel in a difficult situation as she is forced to choose between two paths. Though Ralph is not a choice for Isabel in the way that Warburton and Goodwood are, his declaration of sincere love for her along with his supplication that she renounce her plans to wed a man who Ralph argues will put her in a cage only heightens the significance of Isabel’s actions. She can follow her own convictions and marry Osmond, but doing so entails a direct opposition to a man she loves and respects immensely, and whose own sincere love for her is incontestably manifest in this scene. Yet again, James challenges his heroine to choose between a good man who loves her dearly, and her own desire to see herself as capable of defying conventional expectations in order to demonstrate singularity. Ralph’s utter devotion to Isabel commands the reader to sympathize with him, while simultaneously emphasizing the reality that Isabel is not easily guided to the right husband as the plot unravels, but must decide on her own, once again illuminating her agency.

Ralph's interview with Isabel fails to elicit the desired outcome, as Isabel defies this advice in her resolve to marry Osmond. However, even after Isabel's marriage, Ralph never ceases to care for her or to imagine ways in which he can save her from the bleak life she has assumed since her marriage. Even on his deathbed, Ralph is as insistent as ever that although he can neither love Isabel nor save her from her sorrowful circumstances, he can petition the help of another man. Caspar Goodwood is also present at Gardencourt during Ralph's final days, and as we are to learn, has been entrusted by Ralph to ensure that Isabel is relieved of her suffering. A few days after Ralph has passed, Goodwood confronts Isabel with her cousin's dying wishes:

> [Ralph] was a good man, a fine man, one of the best; he told me how the case stands for you. He explained everything; he guessed my sentiments. He was a member of your family and he left you—so long as you should be in England—to my care…Do you know what he said to me the last time I saw him—as he lay there where he died? He said: 'Do everything you can for her; do everything she'll let you.' (James 609)

Not even the thought of death which looms in Ralph's near future prevents him from thinking of the woman he loves during his final days. His commitment to Isabel does not end with the cessation of his life; rather, it endures through Ralph's appeal for Goodwood to care for Isabel and provide her a happiness that Ralph is unable to.

James's depiction of Ralph, then, allows us to conceptualize a suitor who does not disappear into the background despite our early knowledge that he and Isabel will never be husband and wife. Once again we are forced to realize that there may be more than one—sometimes many suitors who are appropriate choices for the heroine. James is subverting the traditional courtship narrative by challenging the reader to visualize suitors who are neither black nor white, but rather

colorful, complex, and capable of misjudgment and error. His representation of Ralph only furthers the imaginative scope of the courtship narrative by illustrating how even a physically infirm male who fails to conform to conventional ideals of masculinity and who is prone to selfish behavior in order to satisfy whims, nevertheless has a place in the courtship narrative as a suitor.

I wish to conclude this chapter by returning to Ralph's desire for Isabel to gratify the expectations of his imagination through the gift of half of his inheritance. Ralph's desire makes him neither wicked nor contemptible, but does, however, elucidate the supposition that his imagination and Isabel's are the same, and the important realization that for Ralph's gift to be meaningful, it must be Isabel's to decide what she will do with—even if it opens up the possibility of failure. Though Ralph presupposes that his gift is synonymous to agency, and agency synonymous to a happy existence, James is indicating that agency or free will implies the possibility of error and disastrous choices. Freedman highlights this reality:

> Ralph thinks he can respond to Isabel as he would to a work of art, with the energetic detachment and consummate disinterestedness. But he is forced to discover that this is impossible, for she is neither a painting nor a bas-relief but only an extremely naïve human being—prey, like all humans, to making ill-considered decisions. . .in one of the bitterest ironies of this endlessly ironic book—she will exercise this freedom by marrying the one man who attempts what Ralph only imagines: to turn her into a beautiful but static and immobile work of art. (Freedman 155)

James is making a statement about agency—allowing us to realize that for his heroine to truly demonstrate her free will, she must be allowed to make a grave error and face the consequences

of her decisions. As we will see in the following chapter, her marriage to Osmond allows Isabel two varieties of agency; one that allows her to act on her own convictions as she enters a disastrous marriage, and a second form that is manifested in her ability to learn from and bear the consequences of this choice.

Chapter Four

The Husband

When Isabel receives word in Rome that Ralph is on his deathbed and her presence is requested back in England, she immediately goes to Osmond to tell him of her plans to see her cousin one last time. Entering Osmond's study, she finds him seated at a table carefully replicating a picture of an antique coin. As Isabel relays the news, Osmond does not even glance at his wife, but continues sketching indifferently. When at last he speaks, we are confronted with the chilling remarks of a man who controls his wife's affairs and neither cares that Ralph is dying, nor wishes Isabel to attend to him on his deathbed:

> 'I dislike, from the bottom of my soul, what you intend to do. It's dishonorable; it's indelicate; it's indecent. Your cousin is nothing whatever to me, and I'm under no obligation to make concessions to him…I've an ideal what my wife should do and should not do. She should not travel across Europe alone, in defiance of my deepest desire, to sit at the bedside of other men. Your cousin's nothing to you; he's nothing to us.' (James 556)

This scene is the culmination of Osmond's hatefulness and greed. Completely devoid of sympathy, continually obsessed with money as evidenced by his meticulous coin sketching, and persistently a domineering presence in his wife's life, James has delivered the "villain" of the novel—the man we love to hate, and a man who unfortunately doubles as Isabel's husband. Yet, Osmond's role as the manipulative, narcissistic husband of the heroine is not the first encountered in nineteenth century literature.

Osmond shares a striking resemblance to the tyrannical Henleigh Grandcourt, the cruel and calculating husband of Gwendolen Harleth in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda.* Grandcourt's

emotional abuse of his wife precedes in literary terms the manipulation Osmond displays to Isabel, yet an important distinction exists between these horrific husbands. Eliot's construction of the tyrannical Grandcourt begins to tackle the important question: "What happens when an unsuspecting woman finds herself married to a man more terrible than she could have imagined?" Eliot only begins to grapple with this question, but resolves the dilemma herself when she takes all agency out of her heroine's hands and relieves Gwendolen of her lesser half in a boating incident. James picks up where Eliot leaves off. James refuses to grant Isabel the luxury of a dead husband killed off in rather unlikely circumstances, as Osmond and his cruelty remain alive and stronger than ever until the very end of the novel. Yet, rather than evidence of a desire within James to see Isabel suffer and become dominated by a manipulative husband, he has challenged his readers to look beyond the scope of the ubiquitous happily-ever-after novels in his consideration of what happens when a smart woman makes a foolish decision and must bear to live with the consequences of her choices. Though Isabel's rejection of Warburton, Goodwood, and Ralph, and subsequent acceptance of Osmond causes her suffering, it more importantly allows her to test her strength and confront decisions with an agency that is entirely her own. Isabel is neither hindered nor guided by Henry James; instead she is set into motion in a world that is often cruel, but realistic, and asks us to consider the story of a woman for whom there is no happy ending.

When the reader is introduced to Isabel after her marriage to Osmond, a number of years have elapsed, and she is now referred to by the narrator as "Mrs. Osmond," perhaps as an indication that some aspect of the lively, spirited woman in the first half of the novel has become a shell of her former self having become Gilbert Osmond's wife. We are immediately made aware of how the dynamics in the marriage stand during Edward Rosier's interview with the Osmonds.

Edward Rosier is in love with Gilbert Osmond's daughter Pansy, and comes to the Osmond villa determined to convince Osmond that he can properly care for Pansy. Rosier remarks to Isabel that her husband is obliging, and she responds: "No, he's not—to me" (James 386). When Rosier asks Isabel whether she might arrange an interview between Pansy and himself, Isabel tells him she is unable to help him. If her disclosure that her husband is not obliging to her is not troubling enough, this scene indicates that Isabel is part of a marriage where control is not shared, but controlled by a husband who allows his wife no part in the decision-making process for her stepdaughter.

Again, I return to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as a means of contrasting James's plot with a widely read novel that is representative of the courtship narrative genre. Upon Darcy and Elizabeth's marriage, Darcy's younger sister Georgiana is amazed by the egalitarian relationship Elizabeth and Darcy share. Initially, Georgiana "often listened with an astonishment bordering on alarm at [Elizabeth's] lively, sportive manner of talking to her brother…by Elizabeth's instructions she began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband" (Austen 335). And so the novel ends assuring its readers that Elizabeth has not compromised any of her spunk or spirit having become Darcy's wife, and as readers we can confidently set down the book believing that Darcy and Elizabeth are perfectly paired to enjoy a long and fruitful life together. Whereas Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy allows her to take "liberties" with her husband, Isabel experiences exactly the opposite in her relationship to Osmond. As Isabel reflects on her marriage during her late night reverie it becomes heartbreakingly apparent that Isabel's marriage has nothing in common with those of typical courtship narratives. She comes to the realization that although Osmond "was not violent, he was not cruel; she simply believed he hated her" (James 445). Furthermore, her marriage has forced her to accept Osmond's terms

of living which demands a loss of who Isabel is. Unlike Darcy who marvels at his wife's liveliness and intellectual capabilities, Osmond is appalled by Isabel's ideas—by her whole being in fact, and is quick to warn her that she must abandon them: "He said to her one day that she had too many ideas and that she must get rid of them…he had really meant it—he would have liked her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearance" (James 447). Osmond would prefer Isabel to become a pretty object to look at—another artifact to adorn his villa and his treatment of her is such. Isabel understands to her own horror that "the things she had said were answered only by [Osmond's] scorn, and she could see he was ineffably ashamed of her" (James 451).

This passage makes it clear that we are encountering a narrative in which the heroine has chosen the absolute worst candidate for a husband. What then, does James hope to accomplish in his portrayal of a woman made to experience suffering? Again, I will reiterate my argument that Isabel's choice of Osmond, while inducing her to suffer, is nonetheless her choice alone. Isabel is not given the luxury of suitors who are readily cast into the "good" or "bad" categories we see Elizabeth's suitors inhabit. There is not a mapped out path that guides Isabel to a man who will give her happily ever after—instead she has only herself to guide her decisions, and James's conception of such a scenario has enabled his heroine absolute agency despite—or precisely because such agency brings with it the potential for a disastrous choice. Rather than focusing on how marriage to Osmond limits Isabel, I wish to explore ways in which this marriage scenario allows her two sorts of agency—one she exhibits in her refusal to heed the advice of friends and family when she consents to become Osmond's wife, and a second variety that she demonstrates after her marriage becomes a painful experience—an agency that is

manifested in her ability to accept the consequences of her choice and essentially the promises that accompany that choice.

This first agency—Isabel's capability to form her own conclusions and act upon her inclinations is manifested in her ability to look beyond the scope of suitors that her limited social world offers her, and imagine the possibility of marriage to a man who is beneath her in social status and below the good graces of her friends and family. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet is part of a limited social world where options for a husband are limited to individuals who her immediate circle of friends and family are connected to. Elizabeth is naturally expected to marry any one of the gentlemen she comes into contact with frequently, and in the world where Netherfield, Rosings, and Pemberley exist, Elizabeth's constant interaction with Mr. Darcy whether or not she wishes to be in his company illustrates the finite social world she is a part of. Isabel's consideration of Osmond as a husband places her outside of such a narrative where only immediate friends and acquaintances are expected to be considered as marriage partners. She sets her sights on a partner beyond the conventional choices that have been offered to her, refusing the stately English lord who frequents the Touchett home, as well as the choice American entrepreneur whose company she can scarcely escape, and instead fixes on an unlikely match in terms of social position and relationship to Isabel's family and friends. Isabel is determined to make her own decisions independently of the expectations and desires of others, and her disregard for the warnings of Ralph, Mrs. Touchett, and Henrietta Stackpole allows us to identify another way in which James distinguishes Isabel as a woman free from the constraints of a novel in which the heroine eventually gratifies social expectations. Isabel is aware of her family's disdain for Osmond prior to their nuptials. Ralph, Henrietta, and Mrs. Touchett are particularly open in their criticism of Isabel's decision due largely to their apprehensions about

Osmond's character and suitability for Isabel. Before Isabel has the opportunity to break the news of her engagement to Osmond, Mrs. Touchett informs Isabel that she already knows: "Mrs. Touchett gave a little jump and looked at [Isabel] almost fiercely. 'You needn't tell me; I know what it is" (James 350). When Isabel wonders how Mrs. Touchett could possibly know what she is about to tell her, Mrs. Touchett responds: "The same way that I know when the window's open—by feeling a draught. You're going to marry *that man*" (italics my own, James 350). That Mrs. Touchett likens the news of Isabel's impending marriage to a draught and refuses to call Isabel's future husband by his name forces Isabel to realize the extent of her aunt's disgust for the man she has agreed to marry. Mrs. Touchett's criticism does not end with Osmond. She denounces Madame Merle for interfering in the matter, insinuating that Madame Merle is responsible for purposely orchestrating this union and even scolds Isabel for what she sees as a complete lack of judgment: "Others at their wildest moments never wanted to marry [Osmond]. There's nothing *of* him…do you think you're going to be happy? No one's happy, in such doings, you should know" (James, 351). Isabel is not immune to such criticism, and understands the full extent of her family's disappointment regarding the man she has selected to marry, as well as the marriage prospects she has forfeited. During a conversation with Ralph Isabel admits: "Your mother has never forgiven me for not having come to a better understanding with Lord Warburton, and she's horrified at my contenting myself with a person who has none of his great advantages—no property, nor reputation, nor brilliant belongings of any sort" (James 364).

The responses Isabel receives from Ralph and Henrietta only reinforce the conflict she is grappling with. Henrietta's reaction to the marriage is not surprisingly one of disgust. We learn that Henrietta will not attend the wedding ceremony due to her work which takes her back to America. Her "regrets" at not being able to attend the wedding are entertainingly lukewarm as

her letter intimates that "had she been able to cross the Atlantic, she would have been present not only as a witness but as a critic" (James 408). Though Mrs. Touchett's and Henrietta's reactions to the union are those of evident displeasure, their criticisms are tame in comparison to Ralph's. Ralph's aversion to Osmond is explicit, and he spares Isabel none of his opinions in an attempt to convince her to reconsider her decision. Ralph likens a marriage to Osmond to being put in a cage and warns his cousin: "I haven't facts and items to prove [Osmond] a villain. But all the same I can't help feeling that you're running a grave risk" (James 360). Though Ralph is a friend Isabel has come to depend on for warmth and affection, he spares neither Isabel nor her fiancé denunciation, expressing his despair over the woman Isabel has become: "You must have changed immensely. A year ago you valued your liberty beyond everything. You wanted only to see life" (James 358). For Ralph, Isabel's marriage to the "sterile dilettante," as he calls Osmond, is tantamount to the termination of Isabel's freedom. Though Ralph's words are intended to help rather than harm Isabel, she becomes defensive and her ensuing speech unveils a chief motive for Isabel's decision to marry Osmond as she demands: "Do you complain of Mr. Osmond because he's not rich? That's just what I like him for. I've fortunately money enough; I've never felt so thankful for it as today" (James 364). Isabel continues to elaborate on this particular characteristic of Osmond which makes him so attractive to her, relating that because Ralph's father has left her a fortune, he has essentially "put it into my power to marry a poor man—a man who has borne his poverty with such dignity, with such indifference" (James 364).

Osmond's failure to fit within the mold of a gentleman of fortune or position is appealing because it distinguishes him in Isabel's eyes as a man who can be assisted--and most importantly, assisted by Isabel. Here again James has endowed his protagonist with an exceptional quality that differentiates her from the heroines of James's predecessors. Whereas

Elizabeth Bennet and Gwendolen Harleth reaffirm the socially gendered roles of women who rely upon marriage to improve their status, Isabel demonstrates her singularity as she restructures the expectations of the social world she inhabits in her resolve to marry a man beneath her in terms of property. Paul Seabright's "The Pursuit of Unhappiness" argues that Isabel's primary reason for marrying Osmond as opposed to the other gentlemen stems precisely from his impecunious circumstances; essentially, his status as a man in need of something Isabel can actually provide seals the deal for her. Seabright argues that Isabel's reason for refusing Goodwood and accepting Osmond "lies principally in that Osmond is poor and would like to be rich, while Goodwood is rich and does not much care whether he is or not" (Seabright 319). Indeed, James's juxtaposition of the ambitious, yet impecunious Osmond with the financially sound likes of Warburton, Goodwood, and Ralph introduces an interesting facet of Isabel's character as she seeks to be for Osmond what the others have desired to be for her. Ralph once asked his father to leave Isabel an inheritance that would put wind in her sails, and now Isabel wishes to become the catalyst that enables Osmond to do great things:

> She would launch his boat for him; she would be his providence; it would be a good thing to love him…there was no charitable institution in which she had been as much interested as in Gilbert Osmond. He would use her fortune in a way that would make her think better of it and rub off a certain grossness attaching to the good luck of an unexpected inheritance. (James 446)

Yet it would be erroneous to pretend that Isabel's actions are solely altruistic. While she certainly wishes to provide Osmond with something he lacks, it is important to consider what Isabel receives. Isabel does not wish to be desired in the way that Warburton or Goodwood desire her, but to be *needed*—to bring something besides herself to a marriage: "As she looked

back at the passion of those full weeks she perceived in it a kind of maternal strain—*the happiness of a woman who felt that she was a contributor, that she came with charged hands*" (italics my own, James 446). It is not enough merely to put wind in Osmond's sails; Isabel wishes to distinguish herself as more than a pretty ornament or dutiful wife by the side of her husband. Isabel desires to redefine what it means to be a wife, and assume the role of enabler instead of enabled.

Despite these exceptional qualities, which function to illustrate the independent facet of Isabel's character and her hopes for varying traditional expectations of a wife, the final confrontation between Isabel and her husband before she leaves to see Ralph establishes the painful reality that there is a disconnect between the married life she imagined and the life she finds herself a part of. Isabel is treated as though she is a child who must face severe consequences if she disobeys her husband's orders. Osmond warns Isabel: "Let me be clear. If you leave Rome today it will be a piece of the most deliberate, the most calculated, opposition" (James 556). Osmond then proceeds to lecture her on her marital duties:

> 'I assure you that *we, we,* Mrs. Osmond, is all that I know. I take our marriage seriously; you appear to have found a way of not doing so. I'm not aware that we're divorced or separated; for me we're indissolubly united…You don't like to be reminded of that, I know; but I'm perfectly willing…because I think we should accept the consequences of our actions, and what I value most in life is the honor of a thing!' (James 557)

The "honor of a thing" Osmond refers to is something Isabel does not take lightly, as evidenced by her return to Rome at the end of the novel. Despite Osmond's hateful nature, despite Isabel's decision to defy him by returning one last time to Gardencourt, she ultimately

chooses to return to Rome, to her husband, and to her marriage—a controversial decision assailed by some critics who argue this act is the ultimate character assault by James. Alfred Habegger writes: "To make Isabel marry Osmond, and then go back to him once she knows better, was to be unfair and illiberal to the memory of a free spirit. It was to insist that even the American girl, the freest woman of all, finds freedom too much of a burden" (Habegger 26). Patricia Stubbs chooses to focus on the sexual implications of Isabel's decision, asserting that James purposely limits Isabel's sexuality in her flight from the passionate embrace of Goodwood to the suffocating folds of her marriage. Immediately after Goodwood's passionate kisses and entreaties, we learn Isabel has made up her mind: "She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path" (James 612). According to Stubbs, "[James] is also endorsing [Isabel's] rejection of passion, her denial of her whole sexual nature…the sexlessnesss...is a handicap which James inflicts on his women" (Stubbs 165).

I wish to disavow such claims by suggesting that these arguments which insist Isabel is a victim or pawn who is manipulated by James are absurd because such readings of the novel neglect consideration of broader cultural implications James may be exploring. Critics' failure to consider Isabel's promise to return to Pansy, the social stigma attached to separation and divorce, and the importance of attaining an inner freedom are often overlooked motives for Isabel's return, and the refusal to address such considerations diminishes the validity of these critics' arguments. Ruth Yeazell astutely points out that "to read *The Portrait of a Lady* as if external circumstance alone defined Isabel's fate is not only to deprive James's text of much of its meaning; it is finally to weaken the feminist cause as well" (Yeazell 33). Osmond may be a manipulative husband and the source of Isabel's suffering, but marriage to him allows Isabel an

opportunity to assert her independence—to be the free American girl, and demonstrate her agency in refusing to adhere to anything or anyone besides her own conscience.

Besides failing to notice the inner strength Isabel displays throughout the novel, the critics who bemoan the fact that Isabel does not run off into the sunset with Goodwood ignore the very implausibility of such an act. Separation or divorce was so stigmatized in nineteenth century Europe that, as Lawrence Stone relates, "death was virtually the sole agent for dissolving marriage…both sexes were told that marriage was a sanctified and indissoluble contract, and women were taught that it was God's will that they should obey their husbands" (Stone 2). Furthermore, "there were the harsh facts that it was virtually impossible for all but a handful of the very rich to obtain a full divorce…and a separated wife faced exceptionally severe penalties" (Stone 4). James's critics are not the only ones to overlook the social consequences of divorce. Juliet McMaster points out that a dissolution of marriage is "strenuously urged as the best course for Isabel within the novel, by her own friends and countrymen" (McMaster 64). Not surprisingly, none of Isabel's friends or family have changed their opinion of Osmond during the course of her marriage to him. In fact, her palpable unhappiness only makes her family and friends bolder in their criticism of Osmond. On his deathbed, Ralph tells Isabel: "You wanted to look at life for yourself—but you were not allowed; you were punished for your wish" (James 598), and is incredulous at Isabel's suggestion that she still might return to Osmond. Goodwood also ruthlessly attacks Isabel's husband: "You're the most unhappy of women, and your husband's the deadliest of fiends" (James 609), and in a defiant opposition to social conventions of the time, assures her that she has no obligations to a man who has caused her such suffering regardless of whether he is her husband: "I swear, as I stand here, that a woman deliberately made to suffer is justified in anything in life—in going down into the streets if that will help

her!" (James 611). Henrietta's hopes that Isabel will not return to Osmond are flagrant—so much so that when Isabel muses she might find a reason to return, Henrietta chidingly remarks: "You'll certainly never find a good [reason]" (James 586). However, Isabel remains consistent in her refusal to be influenced by the opinions of those around her—a quality she retains throughout the entirety of the novel. Evaluating these individuals as respectable friends and family members who love and care for Isabel deeply, it seems Isabel has been granted a quasi social permission to cut ties with Osmond entirely. Yet, as we observe friends and family implore her to seek her own happiness, Isabel is unable to escape the echoes of Osmond's didactic harangue regarding the duties of one's marriage. His insistence on accepting one's deeds and "the honor of a thing" are truths that resonate deeply with Isabel, and though she has obtained the clearance of nearly everyone in her life to flee from her promises, she does not have permission from herself, declaring to Henrietta: "One must accept one's deeds. I married him before all the world; I was perfectly free; it was impossible to do anything more deliberate" (James 508).

It is not merely Isabel's marriage vows that hinder her escaping Osmond; she has promised Pansy she will return, and an exchange between Henrietta and Isabel regarding this particular promise elucidates an important facet of Isabel's character. Henrietta remarks: "I don't see why you promised little Miss Osmond to go back" (James 586), upon which Isabel responds that her having promised Pansy is as good a reason to return as any. This scene allows us a broader understanding not only of Isabel the fictional character, but of James the author. James is indicating that this promise between two women is a bond as strong as any other promise Isabel makes, and in doing so distinguishes James as an author genuinely invested in exploring bonds that join female friends. Judith Fetterley's "Henry James's Eternal Love Triangle" examines the

role of female friendship in James's literature, and notes that similar to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James's *The Bostonians* features a female character whose desire is to "make her primary commitments to other women" (Fetterley 152), a recurring theme in James's works which posits him as an author capable of imagining that his female characters are bound not only to their marital obligations, but to their obligations to each other as well.

Though Isabel's promise to Pansy may not be the only reason for her return, this promise to her step-daughter is certainly a primary consideration. Her "having promised," as she tells Henrietta, is reason enough to return to a young woman who Isabel has come to realize is being manipulated in much the same way that Isabel once was. Again, we see this second variety of agency emerge as Isabel accepts her promises and her duties as a step-mother by returning to Rome in an attempt to actively defend another innocent woman from the callous designs of Osmond. James is distinguishing Isabel as capable of understanding something that those around her simply cannot grasp, and in so doing, emphasizes again the singularity and strength of his heroine. James has set Isabel apart in a world where the advice from those around her is motivated by a vague idea what defines happiness. Oaths, promises, and wedding vows are profoundly meaningful to Isabel, and the failure of Ralph, Goodwood, and Henrietta to understand Isabel's deep commitment to her promises differentiates Isabel as possessing a greater understanding of commitment. Isabel is not afraid of unhappiness; it is being unable to keep her word that truly frightens her, a truth that is evident in her remark to Henrietta that "I don't know what great unhappiness might bring me to; but it seems to me I shall always be ashamed" (James 508)—indicating that she can bear anything except the notion that her words and actions are inconsistent.

Isabel may be physically able to escape Osmond and her promises, but emotionally such an abandonment of her promises would pain Isabel more than enduring an unhappy marriage. Returning to Osmond grants Isabel an inner freedom which may not resonate with Isabel's friends or James's critics, but nonetheless provides Isabel a final opportunity to demonstrate that neither her agency nor her singularity have waivered—she remains consistent to the very end of the novel. As Yeazell summarizes so perfectly: "we can still recognize in her decision [to return to Osmond] a metaphor for the acceptance of responsibility and the attainment of inner freedom" (Yeazell 36). James produces a heroine who possesses a profound understanding of herself and her promises, and is brave enough to trust this insight she has above all other allurements. Isabel's return to Osmond is neither self-sacrificial, a rejection of her sexuality, nor a calculated effort by James to make a statement about the eventual outcome of an independent, unconventional woman. Isabel's return signifies more than a return to her husband—it is a return to her promises, to her step-daughter, and elucidates the deep level of one woman's commitment to her promises in a world where personal contentment is valued above responsibility to others.

Conclusion

The Portrait of a Lady opens on the setting of an English country-side during the "perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon" (James 19). The reader first encounters three men enjoying this lazy afternoon; Lord Warburton, Daniel Touchett, and his son Ralph. These men are roused from their routine afternoon tea—and their routine lives by the sudden interruption of Isabel Archer who is immediately characterized by these men as "confident," "pretty," "independent," and "interesting." Isabel's arrival during the customary English taking of tea infuses this otherwise ordinary afternoon, and her vivaciousness brings a new energy to the antiquated aristocrat and the two dying men who are her relations. It also sets a precedent for the remainder of the novel. Isabel is meant to stand out in her surroundings, and James's initial presentation does her justice. From the opening chapter where she jolts her three new acquaintances from the banality of their day to day lives, to the closing pages of the novel where her defiant decision leads her down an indiscernible path, James distinguishes Isabel as a singular figure and an extraordinary woman.

James emphasizes Isabel's singularity by endowing her with an agency that is manifested in her ability to defy social conventions, and the bravery to trust herself when all others doubt her decisions. James heightens our awareness of this agency by providing Isabel with suitors who are complicated, realistic, and demand careful consideration from Isabel. Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood, and Ralph Touchett cannot be easily cast into categories as right or wrong suitors for Isabel, and as a result of the complexities James has endowed them with, he has subverted the courtship narrative by allowing Isabel complete agency as she evaluates the suitors and decisions that confront her. Connected to this agency of course, is the possibility of failure, and Isabel's disastrous choice of Osmond as her husband illustrates James's understanding and

insistence that free will is associated with the capability to err, while simultaneously allowing his heroine the ability to demonstrate courage through accepting the repercussions of her decision.

I have referenced works by Jane Austen and George Eliot in order to provide historical predecessors of quintessential courtship narratives that James was familiar with, and responds to by challenging representations of marriage, ideals of acceptable suitors, and social conventions encoded within these texts. Typical courtship narratives allow the heroine only one ideal husband who she is eventually guided to through the narrative structure and plotline rather than by her own decisions. Because only one ideal suitor exists in these narratives, other suitors are characterized as annoyances and obstacles that the heroine must transcend on a guided path towards her husband. My thesis examines how James subverts the courtship narrative through his provision of Warburton, Goodwood, and Ralph whose assets, flaws, and complexities redefine what it means to be a male suitor in a courtship narrative while simultaneously enabling the heroine agency in confronting the choices that these suitors present her with. Rather than obstacles who must be dismissed in order for Isabel to be united with an ideal husband, James's suitors cannot be viewed in one-dimensional terms. They must be seen as worthy marital prospects and exceptional alternatives to the man Isabel does in fact marry.

I have additionally argued that Isabel's marriage to the most malicious character in the novel and the subsequent suffering she endures is not a manifestation of James's antipathy for free thinking or independent women. Though some critics have inculpated James as an anti-feminist author due to his heroine's return to her harrowing marriage, James is paradoxically empowering Isabel by granting her choices, and illustrating his understanding that agency and free will—though an essential part of Isabel's existence, realistically must be accompanied by the possibility of mistakes. Isabel may be capable of making unwise decisions, but James is also

enabling us to see that she is courageous enough to accept the responsibilities that these decisions have rendered. As a result of this acceptance, a second type of agency emerges—not one grounded in innocence or impetuousness, but rather an agency that prompts Isabel to acknowledge responsibilities. Isabel recognizes the significance of her responsibilities—especially her responsibility to others, and a sense of the importance of working within, rather than outside of social expectations as she returns to her promises, to her marriage, and to fight for and protect Pansy from enduring the manipulation of Osmond that Isabel knows too well.

The Portrait of a Lady is important because it is bold in what it demands of its readers. James asks us to step away from courtship narratives that assume marriage is synonymous with enduring happiness, and challenges us to consider the life of a woman for whom this convention does not hold true. The pretty, intelligent, independent woman James introduced us to at the beginning of the novel has suffered intensely when we encounter her for the final time. Yet, despite her suffering, Isabel never waivers in her ability to hold fast to her convictions even when the world around her demands that she act against her conscience. In Isabel, perhaps we can all recognize something of ourselves. Whether or not we agree with Isabel's decision to return to Osmond, we can appreciate the courage with which she faces the consequences of her actions, and we can understand the universal dilemma of choosing between doing what is easy, and doing what is right. Ultimately, James is indicating that what matters is not whether Isabel returns to Osmond, but that she *chooses* to do so. Isabel Archer will return to Rome, but more importantly, she will return to and accept the responsibilities that accompany the decisions she has made.

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