Henry James's Jane Campion: Portraits of Connoisseurs

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Jane Campion's adaptation of Henry James's masterpiece, *The Portrait of a Lady*, has attracted mixed reactions – a few raptures, some very harsh criticism and only tepid academic support. Reviewer William Shriver gives both the film and Campion supreme praise: the film is 'startling visual poetry' and Campion 'a filmmaker of the highest order'.[1] But Anthony Lane in *The New Yorker* has dismissed the film as 'boring'[2]; Don Anderson in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, as the 'Portrait of a boot sniffer'[3]; and Stella Bruzzi in *Sight and Sound*, as trapped by its own superficiality.[4] Academic discussion is gentler, but very conditional. For instance, in 'Responses to Jane Campion's *The Portrait of a Lady*', gathered together in *The Henry James Review*, Nancy Bentley states: 'Campion attempts a far-reaching idea of what it means to observe a woman in film, an idea that would hold in mind the confluence of a conscious watching with a complex visual portrait of a woman's desire and feeling'. She avoids sweeping praise and concludes: 'For me, these aspirations alone make for compelling entertainment'.[5] Virginia Wrexman's views are similarly tempered and tentative: 'Had Campion limited herself to a more conventional interpretation of James's novel, she might have pleased audiences and critics better. Instead she has attempted to represent the way in which Victorian society shaped women's bodies into prisons and their psyches into temples of sexual inhibition, a more ambitious project, but one less easily realised'.[6] Dale Bauer concludes with again conditional and very tempered praise: 'The opening sequence in which young contemporary women offer comments and meet the camera's eye signal Campion's take on James: she refuses to play Isabel to

Henry James's Osmond. As James himself writes, Osmond has "the hand of the master", and Campion has her own hand in refiguring James's mastery'.[7]

Academic response may be less harsh and longer cogitated than the reviews, but it is rather faint praise, even though it is generally considered that Campion fulfills some desiderata of the contemporary feminist phase of James scholarship. This tentativeness, even amongst feminist scholars, is an occupational hazard of scholarly interpretation and does not carry much weight in the debate with the reviewers.

However, the editor of the 1990 *New Essays on 'The Portrait of a Lady'*, Joel Porte, welcomes it:

> Readers of this collection may want to consider how these fresh interpretations reactivate some of the concerns of earlier critics of the novel, but in a different key. That transposition helps us to figure the work of interpretation as an ongoing symphony which does not repudiate its previous movements but rather develops them, from the same germ, into rich new forms. One hopes that Henry James himself would approve of this continuing process of critical revision and exfoliation.[8]

Scholarship can go on revising, but Jane Campion cannot. As a director with time limits and a budget, she must make up her mind as to the interpretation she will embody in order to begin her film. Scholars and reviewers might bear this in mind in criticising adaptations. Scholarship has time on its side. And so, too, might it be borne in mind that Campion is as free as scholars are: to interpret and to avail herself of scholars' interpretations. Her decidedly feminist re-interpretation of Isabel accords, after all, with much contemporary James scholarship, some of which is cited above. Isabel's sexual fantasy scene which so distressed reviewers is prepared for by recent scholarship itself, obsessed as it is with Isabel's sexuality.[9] Campion's interpretation is not alone.

There is yet another freedom that reviewers and critics might bear in mind; and that is that, in translating from one medium to another, the adapter has to treat the source novel in such a way as to make it into a good film, viewable, susp-

enseful, moving, and sellable; and this requires some liberties. Not all elements of the verbal medium of the novel can be simply transposed to film, as Brian McFarlane's recent *Novel to Film* definitively shows.[10] Certain freedoms are necessary in this process. For instance, film favours action, and often an inner crisis must be exteriorized in action and gesture. Campion does this in two scenes that upset the critics: the scene where Osmond breaks into violence against Isabel, and the scene where Isabel strikes Ralph. It is a bold liberty that Campion took in these scenes of inner crisis, but exteriorization requires more than a voice-over (which makes one feel one is being read to) or more than Jamesian gestures, too subtle to be seen and interpreted in the rapid medium of film.

But however much Campion availed herself of legitimate freedoms in her adaptation, her film remains true to James's deep themes: connoisseurship, good and evil, and its consequences. Whatever one makes of the novel's or the film's ending or of Isabel's sexuality, both obsessions with critics, connoisseurship and its link with egotism is James's concern. One might call connoisseurship 'aestheticism', but I prefer connoisseurship as a term as it suggests both appreciation and appropriation. I recognize that I am offering an interpretation and will be comparing my interpretation of the novel, only one of many possible, to only one of many possible interpretations of the film. Why I feel this is permissible is that connoisseurship accounts for more of the novel and the film than other interpretations I have encountered, and certainly it accounts for more of the novel than the interpretations that focus on Isabel and her sexuality.

The very first paragraph enunciates the theme of discriminating appreciation, of connoisseurship, of living according to one's taste for the beautiful. James in the voice of the first person narrator uses the *precieux* vocabulary of connoisseurship to discriminate between the perfect and the less perfect moments of the afternoon for the taking of tea: 'The implements of the little feast had been disposed upon the lawn of an old English country-house, in what I would call the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon. Part of

the afternoon had waned, but much of it was left, and what was left was of the finest and rarest quality'.[11] The discriminating narrator continues to view nature as at the service of taste: 'From five o'clock to eight is on certain occasions a little eternity; but on such an occasion as this the interval could be only an eternity of pleasure'. One of the partakers of the 'ceremony known as afternoon tea', an 'innocent pastime', is Daniel Touchett, the retired American banker and owner of Gardencourt: 'The old man had his cup in his hand; it was an unusually large cup, of a different pattern from the rest of the set and painted in brilliant colours'. Mr Touchett is an innocent connoisseur and the one James introduces first in the novel. The brightly painted large cup metonymically signifies his innocent discrimination. When he rests his eyes upon the 'rich red front of his dwelling', he does so out of a 'real aesthetic passion' for his home; but our discriminating narrator assures us that this has come after years of living in the house and buying it as a 'great bargain'; learning of its past which he delights in retelling, and of its beauties which he is eager to share: 'he knew all its points and would tell you just where to stand to see them in combination and just the hour when the shadows of its various protuberances – which fell so softly upon the warm, weary brick-work – were of the right measure' (pp.17-8). Mr Touchett's connoisseurship is only one aspect of his nature which is capable of delight and affection and sharing. (And not incidentally, Mr Touchett is capable of earning his living and earning his house.) He is a benchmark of innocent connoisseurship, of innocent aestheticism.

We soon learn that his son Ralph is a connoisseur as he contemplates the advent of his cousin from America, Isabel: 'If his cousin were to be nothing more than an entertainment to him, Ralph was conscious she was an entertainment of a high order. "A character like that", he said to himself – "a real little passionate force to see at play is the finest thing in nature. It's finer than the finest work of art – than a Greek bas-relief, than a great Titian, than a Gothic cathedral"' (p. 63). If this use of 'fine' seems too precious to to-day's reader, it was not to James's reader of either the 1881 edition

when aestheticism was avant-garde or the 1908 edition when aestheticism had flourished and was on the wane. But Ralph's aesthetic spectatorship is innocent like his father's. His connoisseurship is not exclusive. He has a large nature. He is capable of loving care to his father; loyalty to his friend Warburton; courage in his illness. While he admires Isabel's beauty, he is not foolishly indulgent; he tries to counsel her out of folly. He is generous; he wants to give her half his inheritance. He is loyal to Isabel, capable of a genuine selfless love of her and great compassion for her eventual suffering. He can exclude – on grounds of their character – two exquisitely contrived *objets d'art*: Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond. Ralph's aestheticism or connoisseurship, like his father's, is only one element of his sensibility. Of all the major characters, Ralph is closest to James's ethical aestheticism.

A slighter figure altogether, but capable of love, is Ned Rosier, a foil to Osmond. He too is a connoisseur, a collector. But to win Pansy whom he loves, he is willing to sell his collection of 'bibelots' (p. 438). Towards the darker end of the spectrum of connoisseurship is Mrs Touchett. She is closer to Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond in her neglect of the demands of human relations than she is to Mr Touchett and Ralph. She controls her relationships to her own ends. Rather than making a home with her ailing husband and son at Gardencourt, she lives separately, pleasing herself with a palazzo in Florence (p.31). Her kindness in taking up Isabel she admits is self-serving: 'I like to be well thought of, and for a woman of my age there's no greater convenience, in some ways, than an attractive niece' (p.47). She is, as it were, a connoisseur of herself in society, James making the link that he will bring out so strongly in Osmond's sensibility between egotism and harmful connoisseurship: 'she liked to receive [visiting cards]. For what is usually called social intercourse she had very little relish; but nothing pleased her more than to find her hall-table whitened with oblong morsels of symbolic pasteboard' (p.60).

Collector of fine porcelain and fine friends, a worshipper of 'appearances' (p.452) as Countess Gemini says of her, Madame Serena Merle is also a connoisseur and 'connoisseur of herself'. She has acquired a collection of 'beautiful things' (p.453), however mysteriously; and she appropriates the arts of living in order to make of herself an accomplished work of art. She is 'round and replete' (p.153), a harmonious drawing room accoutrement for the *beau monde* which she latches on to for profit and which she betrays for her own ends. She is so accomplished at appearances, she manages to live with Mrs Touchett (that is, live off Mrs Touchett), for several years without showing any irritation – a 'miracle of living' (p.329), James says rather drolly. While the misperceiving Isabel sees Madame Merle's countenance as bespeaking an 'amplitude of nature and of quick and free motions', the Jamesian narrator reads her another way: she is 'tall, fair, smooth' (p.153), and her 'grey eyes were small but full of light and incapable of stupidity – incapable, according to some people, even of tears' (p.153). She admits to Osmond to knowing how to use people (p.207). She does have retrospective moral compunction about Isabel (pp.434-7), but basically her aspirations are for living her life as 'fine art' and promoting herself as 'fine art'. Her affair with the chilling aesthete Osmond is explicable in this light.

Her former lover and collaborator, Gilbert Osmond, is James's most culpable connoisseur. With Osmond, James brings out patently the link between connoisseurship and an engrossing egotism. Osmond's 'taste' is impelled by his need for everything around him to enhance him, to make him appear the 'first gentleman of Europe' (p.360). Whether he finds himself enhanced by works of art or persons makes no difference. His daughter Pansy is raised to be a 'precious work of art' under his control and to his credit (p.442). He sees Isabel as a malleable means to his end too; she is 'handled ivory to the palm' (p.259). He sees her as the more qualified to 'figure in his collection of choice objects' (p.258) because she has rejected the proposal of an English nobleman. Everything in his surroundings and everyone are to be appropriated to his ego needs. Even someone else's

mind, Isabel's, is to be appropriated. In the language of connoisseurship, our narrator tells us: 'His egotism had never taken the crude form of desiring a dull wife; this lady's intelligence was to be a silver plate, not an earthen one – a plate that he might heap up with ripe fruits, to which it would give a decorative value, so that talk might become for him a sort of served dessert. He found the silver quality in this perfection in Isabel; he could tap her imagination with his knuckle and make it ring' (pp.295-6). In his endeavour to do what he counsels Isabel to do, live life as a work of art (p.261), Osmond appropriates everyone and everything to his narcissistic ends. Like Browning's Duke of Ferrara in 'My Last Duchess', Osmond is uncannily remorseless. With Osmond, James makes patent the link between culpable and exclusive connoisseurship and egotism.

But is Isabel a connoisseur and egotist, this 'young woman affronting her destiny' (p.8), as James says in the 1908 Preface? She is an egotist, however vulnerably so: 'Her nature had, in her conceit, a certain garden-like quality, a suggestion of perfume and murmuring boughs, of shady bowers and lengthening vistas, which made her feel that introspection was, after all, an exercise in the open air and that a visit to the recesses of one's spirit was harmless when one returned from it with a lapful of roses' (p.56). And she is also a connoisseur, an aesthete, although a mere beginner compared to the other characters. Again in the language of preciosity, the narrator describes her appreciation of Gardencourt. It shows Isabel has a demanding degree of discrimination; the true connoisseur's sensibility. Gardencourt seems to her 'a place where sounds were felicitously accidental, where the tread was muffled by the earth itself and in the mild air all friction dropped out of contact and all shrillness out of talk – these things were much to the taste of our young lady, whose taste played a considerable part in her emotions' (p.57).

Her incipient connoisseurship, her untutored aestheticism, leads her to such bumptious fatuities as 'I should delight in seeing a revolution' (p.71); or 'I adore a moat!' (p.100); or thinking Schubert might make her dying uncle feel better

(p.151) – a naïveté that Madame Merle suavely corrects. But, naïve or not, Isabel is a connoisseur and her connoisseurship is related to her egotism, her self-connoisseurship.

In her early acquaintance with Madame Merle, she perceives only aesthetically. She is transported by Madame Merle's taste and accomplishments and *manière* without the moral alertness to look at depths. She sees her as if through art – as Juno or Niobe (a little irony James shares here with his reader). She sees her as a baroness, a countess, a princess (p.154). And most ominously, Isabel sees her as the 'lady' she would like to be: 'I should like awfully to be so!' (p. 165). In meeting Madame Merle, she sees what she wishes for her own self-development. As usual, her thoughts are of herself. Her aestheticizing and her egotism are linked. Only later when travelling with Madame Merle in the East does she start to judge her morally – she detects in her a 'flash of cruelty', 'a lapse from candour' (p.275). She surmises that Madame Merle's 'conception of human motives' had been acquired in some 'kingdom in decadence' (p.275). But Isabel manages to deny these insights, especially when Madame Merle shows 'remarkable intelligence' (p.275).

As a connoisseur she also perceives Osmond aesthetically – through art and as art. When she first sees him, she thinks him 'as fine as one of the drawings in the long gallery above the bridge of the Uffizi' (p.213). She passes no judgement on what might be within. When she sees him in his own villa, Isabel again is the connoisseur: 'She had never met a person of so fine a grain' (p.225). Later in analyzing her woeful marriage and her initial attraction to Osmond, she reflects in the language of connoisseurship and appropriation: 'The finest – in the sense of being the subtlest – manly organism she had ever known had become her property' (p.358).

Just as she responds to an aesthetic quality, an apparent harmoniousness in Madame Merle, she responds to it in Osmond: 'He had consulted his taste in everything ... that was what made him so different from everyone else. Ralph had something of this same quality, this appearance of thinking that life was a matter of connoisseurship; but in Ralph it was

an anomaly, a kind of humorous excrescence, whereas in Mr. Osmond it was the keynote and everything was in harmony with it' (pp. 224-5). Ralph's perception of Osmond, not Isabel's, is the astute one; and because he perceives morally, not just aesthetically, he sees the link between Osmond's taste and his egotism: 'To surround his interior with a sort of invidious sanctity, to tantalise society with a sense of exclusion, to make people believe his house was different from every other, to impart to the face that he presented to the world a cold originality – this was the ingenious effort of the personage to whom Isabel has attributed a superior morality' (p.331).

Her aesthetic perceiving in relation to Osmond is related to her egotism, her pride in her own superior sensibility, what critics call her narcissism and James calls with affectionate irony her 'sin of self-esteem' (p.53).[12] Isabel has a deep need for self-appreciation, especially as to her mind, of which she has been proud since her adolescence. Osmond plays on this. James makes his courtship of Isabel markedly different from that of Warburton or Goodwood. Right away, Osmond flatters Isabel's mind: 'It polishes me up a little to talk with you – not that I venture to pretend I can turn that very complicated lock I suspect your intellect of being!' (p.221). Isabel is impressed by the 'beauty and the knowledge' she receives when he shows her his collection (p.225); she enjoys the fact that Osmond can develop her. She is later to tell Ralph that she likes Osmond because he 'wants me to know everything' (p.289). She even becomes afraid that she seems not intelligent enough for Osmond. Unlike her presumptuous treatment of Ralph, Warburton, and Goodwood, her relations with Osmond are lacking in self-confidence; she is careful not to seem inferior or show 'possible grossness of perception'. With Osmond, she is 'more careful than she had ever been before' (p.226). Her high opinion of herself is at stake.

Osmond appeals to her vanity. He tells her to make her 'life a work of art' (p.261). When she wants to travel after she has met him, he tells her to 'Go everywhere ... do every-

thing; get everything out of life. Be triumphant' (p.259). This prescription for developing herself she is eager to follow. He flatters her sense of herself as someone beautiful: he says that she does not lose her temper; she finds it and that must be 'beautiful' (p.263); there must be 'great moments to see' (p.263). With cunning confessional frankness he tells her that she will 'always be the most important woman in the world' for him (p.264). The narrator continues: 'Isabel looked at herself in this character – looked intently, thinking she filled it with a certain grace' (p. 264).

Of course Isabel is not, as Osmond is, merely a connoisseur and egotist. James repeatedly shows her potentiality as magnanimous, idealistic. She does think that 'people were right when they treated her', as a young girl in Albany, 'as if she were rather superior', but she also has a 'nobleness of imagination'. With her confidence at once 'innocent and dogmatic', she reflects on right and wrong: 'On the whole ... she was in no uncertainty about the things that were wrong. She had no love of their look, but when she fixed them hard she recognised them. It was wrong to be mean, to be jealous, to be false, to be cruel' (pp.53-4). As her marital woes increase and she comes to suspect Madame Merle, she wants 'to hold fast to justice' – not to fall into 'petty revenges'. 'Her poor winged spirit', James says, 'had always had a great desire to do its best' (p.340). Osmond knows how to play upon her idealism. In trying to prevent her going to the dying Ralph, he appeals to her sense of honour in relation to marriage; and this appeal, seeming so 'transcendent and absolute' (p.446) makes her falter. Only after discovering the treachery and the hypocrisy of Osmond and Madame Merle does she get the moral confidence to go to Ralph.

As her suffering and her temptation to do 'wrongs' increases, she grows in moral self-reflection. Looking hard at her husband's hatred of her and how Madame Merle and Osmond have betrayed her, she still struggles for justice in her many self questionings; and she still believes in 'chastity' and 'decency' (p.362); her husband's traditions make her 'push back her skirts' (p.362). She can even feel sorry for

Madame Merle (p.452). She pities Pansy and pledges to help her (p.462). Having once compared Ralph unfavourably with Osmond, she comes, through the insight she has acquired in her suffering, to compare Ralph favourably with Osmond. Ralph is 'generous'; Osmond is not. Ralph makes her feel 'the good of the world'. Isabel's 'act of devotion' to Ralph is magnanimously not to distress him with knowledge of her sorrow (pp.363-4). Eventually, and at great personal cost, she rushes to his bedside to comfort him and to tell him sincerely she loves him in a moment that is 'deeper' than pain (p.478).

In other words, Isabel's pride goes before a fortunate fall; she moves towards the character that is the Jamesian ideal, Ralph; she becomes the Jamesian ideal herself: noble in both the ethical and aesthetic sense of that term. However, connoisseurship and its accompanying egotism are a profound driving combination in the younger Isabel and in her relations with other characters; it prompts the deepest suffering of the novel and its deepest moral criticism. As James's biographer, Leon Edel, says: 'Isabel and Osmond are ... for all their differences, two sides of the same coin, two studies in egotism'. [13]

While I defend Jane Campion's freedom to interpret as scholars ever do and to alter the source novel as adapters ever do, I nevertheless think it is high praise of Campion that her film in its essentials stays true to James's profound intention – the judging of connoisseurship, innocent to evil. Her fidelities to the novel are more important than the liberties she takes. Her Ralph is closely modelled on James's Ralph. He is the moral benchmark in the film as much as he is in the novel. When he tells Isabel that she has been brought down by Osmond, a 'sterile dilettante' (p.292), for which she slaps him, we acknowledge the right moral – Jamesian – judgement of Ralph on Osmond.

Ralph's language in this scene in both the novel and the film mixes the vocabulary of aesthetic perceiving and of moral perceiving. In the film, as in the novel, Ralph is never a mere connoisseur and Campion grants him the same poetic justice as James does: Isabel's flight to him and her honest

admission at last of her troubles and her love for him. Regardless of what one thinks of the dramatic but unexpected *Liebestod* that Campion grants Ralph, Ralph is as deserving of some form of poetic justice in the film as in the novel. Campion retains Ralph as the Jamesian ideal of an ethical aestheticism, the open-faced warmth and responsiveness of the actor, Martin Donovan, easily manifesting Ralph's large nature. (This is quite a deeper rendition of Ralph than that of the 1961 BBC TV version with Richard Chamberlain as a cynical, cool Ralph.)

Gilbert Osmond is the opposite of Ralph. Played with eerie finesse by John Malkovich, Osmond is clearly the film's villain connoisseur. But Campion's Osmond is as subtle and complex as James's.[14] Her Osmond is attractive: his skull back lit at times, is as perfect as any item in his collection; his clothes often blend with his sophisticated surroundings; his physical movements suggest suave control; his hand gestures a sensuality and power. Yet his toneless epicene voice suggests a passionlessness. Osmond is bewilderingly enticing and repulsive. If we witness him with mixed feelings, with a kind of edgy admiration, that is what Campion intended and what Isabel feels. In key scene after scene Campion stays close to James's revealing dialogue. She maintains James's incremental revelation of Osmond as egotistical, ruthless, manipulative, outwitting and entrapping with uncanny coldness yet of aesthetic appeal – a 'charismatic narcissist', as Dianne Sadoff says.[15]

Some of Campion's strategies in the key scenes have upset the reviewers and critics, but film must be instantly intelligible. It must economically and swiftly clarify feelings and clarify motives, the latter being a subtle task with any Jamesian character and difficult to do in film. As a failed dramatist, James would appreciate, I feel, how Campion overcame the disadvantages of putting to film Jamesian inner life – and without voice-over. Campion's controversial innovations in the 'declaration of love' scene (innovations not in the Laura Jones script) suggest Osmond's and Isabel's feelings but also clarify Isabel's motives in her move towards

her marriage with Osmond. Osmond stalks her as the camera stalks her. He appropriates her parasol and twirls it to accompany his suave wooing. The twirling of the parasol increases in speed and eventually the twirling parasol nearly fills the screen in a medium shot, blocking our view and separating Isabel from us, the viewers, who have come to care about her and now feel helpless, watching her go to her doom. Like a magician, Osmond has her in his power and for the same reason in the film as in the novel: Osmond begins by appealing to her vanity and at the same time he makes her unsure of herself, stalking her and keeping her parasol.

Campion retains Osmond as destabilising, attractive in his adroitness, even awesome in his uncanny lack of conscience. Isabel is under a spell, as it were. James is unequivocal about this. When she recalls her attraction to Osmond, she reflects that: 'She had had a more wondrous vision of him, fed through charmed senses and such a stirred fancy!' (p.351). She realises: 'she had seen only half his nature then, as one saw the disk of the moon when it was partly masked by the shadow of the earth'. (In the 'declaration of love' scene Campion has Osmond at first hidden in the shadows.) 'She saw the full moon now – she saw the whole man ... Ah, she had been immensely under the charm!' (p.357).

The twirling parasol strategy is repeated in the sequence of Isabel's travels to the East, as is Osmond's whispered 'I'm absolutely in love with you'. This black and white sequence, a very risky strategy on Campion's part, seems parenthetical – not a part of the 'real' action, but perhaps a fantasy. Kathleen Murphy calls it a 'radical stylistic trope' and so it is. I think it a successful and successfully disconcerting sequence. It signifies that the most important action is in Isabel's mind: her persistent thoughts of Osmond wherever she goes and in spite of what marvels she sees always supervene. As Kathleen Murphy says of Isabel's plight in this sequence: 'the nature of Isabel's stupefaction is sexual, moral and aesthetic'.[16] Campion's treatment of the declaration of love scene and of Isabel's travels are faithful to James's

notion of Isabel as enchanted, under the charm – her senses and fancy stirred.

Another controversial scene is that of Isabel's and Osmond's confrontation over Warburton's intentions to Pansy. Campion has Osmond manhandle Isabel. In the novel, when Isabel analyzes the disaster of her marriage, she reflects there had been no 'physical suffering' (p.360) – 'for physical suffering there might have been a remedy' (p.360). Her suffering is mental, caused by Osmond's annihilating and remorseless narcissism: 'Under all his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, under his good-nature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers' (p.360). However, Campion's choice to employ violence in this scene is to exteriorise the profound inner crisis Osmond is facing, to make it instantly intelligible. They have already had words on the subject of Warburton and Osmond has thrown down his book – as James permits him to do in the novel (p.354). In their second confrontation Osmond is feeling humiliated and is full of accusation. Campion precisely indicates Osmond's crisis by having him manhandle Isabel in highly probable actions: he picks Isabel up as an object to be plopped on a pile of his opulent cushions; and as his anger mounts over the humiliation, the wound to his ego, he strikes her. In the novel Isabel realises Osmond has a 'morbid passion' (p.402) about his Warburton ambitions. In the novel and in the film, Osmond is being tried to the limit. The violence is the cinematic indicator of the depth of Osmond's egotistic rage and could not be done as succinctly or dramatically by the strategy of voice-over or by Isabel's later reflections on the scene. It also makes this scene an instantaneous crisis, compelling greater feeling for Isabel and greater suspense as to what she will do. James's more slowly accumulating suspense is too novelistic for film.

The next crisis between Osmond and Isabel is the scene where Isabel asks permission to go to visit the dying Ralph. Campion's treatment of this makes for another controversial scene. In the novel, Isabel's resolve wavers before Osmond's appeal to her as his wife; she feels caught 'in a mesh of fine

threads' (p.446), a somewhat subtle state. In the film Isabel bangs her head when Osmond outploys her. This is the cinematic indicator of her entrapment and helpless frustration. Osmond's mastery of her in this scene is not just that he tries cleverly to appeal to honour and the marriage bond, as he does in the novel, but that he touches her face tenderly and tries to protect her forehead when she bangs it. This scene makes manifest how dangerous Osmond is – not more domestic violence on his part, but tender care. This certainly recaptures the Jamesian Osmond of infinite finesse. Campion's Osmond is complex, capable of ingenious new tactics, deployed, regardless of Isabel's suffering, always for his own ends; and Isabel, visibly hurting herself, is helplessly in his toils. In both the novel and the film it is only Countess Gemini's revelations about Osmond and Madame Merle that delivers Isabel from her suffering scrupulosity. In spite of her feminist inclinations, Campion stays very close to the feelings of the novel's scene, Osmond's finesse and Isabel's helplessness.

The Campion/Malkovich Osmond is Jamesian, simultaneously the attractive connoisseur and the remorseless egotist. She makes this patent and intelligible. He is the character in the film, as in the novel, of profoundest moral failing. More problematic is Campion's Isabel. Does her decidedly feminist interpretation skew James's Isabel? Campion's Isabel is not the faultless woman or the hapless girl or the free spirit of feminist myth. Her Isabel is as much an egotist as James makes her. Campion retains scenes in which Isabel is rude to her aunt, self-deluding in her explanations of her feelings, insensitively frank and even arrogant. In yet another controversial scene – a scene that I think could easily have been omitted – where Isabel fantasizes being made love to by Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood, watched by Ralph, Isabel is shown as egotistical. If this scene signals the erotic awakening in a Campion-orchestrated sentimental education for Isabel, it also signifies Isabel's narcissistic desire to be totally desired.

In yet another controversial scene, the scene of Ralph's frank moral counselling that I have already alluded to, Isabel slaps Ralph. As in the novel, Ralph calls Osmond a 'sterile dilettante' and a fraught Isabel defends Osmond as 'the gentlest, kindest, lightest spirit' that she knows. Ralph fulfils this description, not Osmond; but Isabel is at her blindest and is as far away from Ralph and real insight as she gets in either the film or the novel. Campion signals this by a long shot with Ralph disappearing from Isabel's sight and ours into the darkness. The slap is indicative, making Isabel not a feminist victim of Osmond, but a proud and wilful woman under the threat of Ralph's telling her the truth. James has her run through quite a few negative emotions: she is arrogant and insensitive to Ralph; she even tells him he will suffer for making his opinion of Osmond known to her. In turns, she is exalted; then 'cold'; then majestic. She feels both 'angry pain' and – very significant to any interpretation of this scene – 'wounded pride' (pp.289-93). The slap is the exteriorization of her wounded pride, an unmistakable and cinematic crisis of her character for her, her friends and the audience.

Is Campion's Isabel a connoisseur? Certainly she is eager to see the museums and galleries of Italy; to travel to the East; to follow out her self-culture, which Osmond, with his impressive rooms and knowledge of the arts, assists. And to make Isabel's connoisseurship quite obvious, Campion retains the scene from the novel where Mrs Touchett declares that Isabel is capable of marrying Osmond for the 'beauty of his opinions' or his autograph of Michaelangelo (p. 235). Campion does not alter the essential Jamesian characterization of Isabel's egotism, her connoisseurship and their interrelation. And she retains the narrative pattern that James leaves unaltered in both the 1881 edition and the 1908 edition: that of pride going before a fall.

It is obvious that Campion adds a more patent sensuousness to Isabel's sensibility and motivation than does James. He merely hints at this in, for instance, Isabel's reference to Antinous and the Faun (p.258). James keeps the focus on

Isabel's mind and her pride in it. But Campion does not merely substitute her Isabel for James's. In the most fundamental ways she retains the Jamesian Isabel, even to the suggestion of priggishness about which Isabel questions herself in the novel. Campion's Isabel wears a high tight collar at times and appears rather 'organised' with notes to herself on her wardrobe. These notes may also indicate her capricious learning that James dwells on, as well as being a prolepsis of a choice before her in the temptation scene with Goodwood (one of the notes says 'Nihilism' and another 'Probity'). Even in the erotic scene between Isabel and Ralph when he is dying, Campion has much more occurring than Isabel's acknowledgement that she loves Ralph other than as a 'brother' (p.479), which is what she acknowledges in the novel. Campion retains the scene as Isabel's honest and humble confession and explanation of her sorrows and of her actions toward Ralph. In other words, Campion retains the direction James makes for Isabel – a movement from pride to humility and to greater moral stature, a Jamesian fortunate fall. Certainly the eroticism of the scene is patent. Ralph gets at last to express his love, which Isabel can reciprocate in humility, and at long last, with insight and tenderness. The scene is the climax of Isabel's sentimental education that Campion runs as a sub-interest. But it is only a sub-interest. The pattern of the 'fortunate fall' is retained. Isabel, now with humility and insight, comes to new moral stature, manifested in Ralph's death bed scene and soon to be tested in the 'temptation scene'.

The tempting of Isabel is, as in the novel, the final scene between Caspar Goodwood and Isabel. Goodwood declares his love and offers Isabel a way of escape with him. Campion adds greater erotic interest as, significantly, James does in the revisions of the 1908 New York edition; but Campion even has Isabel initiate the kiss with Goodwood. Perhaps Campion is using this as Isabel's indicator to Caspar that she knows she has been truly loved, which she acknowledges to herself in the novel. Isabel is also in a bewildered, unprotected and undecided state in this scene and has undergone the traumatic loss of Ralph. While it may seem a disloyalty to Ralph to have

Isabel initiate the kiss with Goodwood – while it may seem Campion simply got her algebra wrong – Campion does offer complex extenuating circumstances; and she does not alter the ending, Isabel's flight. Isabel's flight to the door of Gardencourt away from Goodwood, then her turning to face the camera and straightening up, are affirmative,[17] whatever her next step will be – back to Osmond, as in the novel, or away with Goodwood or just facing whatever the future may hold. But any of these possibilities are beyond the film's ending. James chose to have Isabel flee Goodwood's offer and decidedly return along 'the very straight path' (p.490), possibly fulfilling, critics argue, her sense of honour and her pledge to Pansy. In Laura Jones's script, the final scene is Isabel's return to Pansy with their clutched hands filling the scene. Campion chose to leave Isabel's future more ambiguous: we see only that she has passed through a crisis and is strong at the end. There is no conflict between James's ending and Campion's. Both fulfil the pattern of the fortunate fall into greater moral growth.

Throughout the film, Campion's more erotically motivated Isabel is not a denial of James's Isabel as connoisseur and egotist, or as the 'gracious lady' that Ned Rosier sees (p.309), or the 'fine lady' that Ralph sees (p.331), or as the matron who can finally break out of Osmond's psychological entrapment and go to Ralph. The eroticism is supplementary (and perhaps superfluous). Campion never skews the basic plot of pride going before a fall and that fall as fortunate, a far deeper theme than the sexual awakening of Isabel, but not in conflict with it. Scholarship will go on debating James's ending and now Campion's too, but Campion could not. She had to take a stand; and the stand she takes completes Isabel's psychological and spiritual growth and leaves her at a point of affirmation. So, too, James's ending.

Campion has also adhered to James's attitude towards Isabel – an indulgent tenderness, a compassion. Her lingering close-ups, sometimes in soft focus, of Nicole Kidman's delicate beauty and fragile edginess repeatedly manifest this

tenderness. As James says after depicting Isabel's youthful confusion of vanity and magnanimity:

> Altogether, with her meagre knowledge, her inflated ideals, her confidence at once innocent and dogmatic, her temper at once exacting and indulgent, her mixture of curiosity and fastidiousness, of vivacity and indifference, her desire to look very well and to be if possible even better, her determination to see, to try to know, her combination of the delicate, desultory, flame-like spirit and the eager and personal creature of conditions: she would be an easy victim of scientific criticism if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant (p.54).

In her close-ups, Campion stays close to this vulnerable but admirable Isabel (with the help of the fine and sensitive underacting of Kidman) and close to James's tenderness.

Her interpretations of the major characters in her film – Ralph, Isabel, Osmond and Madame Merle (whom I have not dwelt on as she is uncontroversially similar to James's depiction and superbly played by Barbara Hershey) – attest to how much of Campion's film, with all its contentious 'liberties', is Jamesian in the deepest essentials of each character as connoisseur, innocent or compromised. I would say more: that Campion serves the Jamesian critique of connoisseurship in her settings, light, camera angles, close-ups. She offers the settings of the characters' life styles as ambiguous – as if there were a 'serpent in the bank of flowers'. She displays the enticements of wealthy, leisurely aestheticism, the rooms, for instance, teeming with sumptuousness, rich textures, shapes and colours, as somewhat disconcerting. The objects and their settings are not a mere backdrop to a psychological drama; they are foregrounded and are impervious circumstances, surrounding the characters, imposing on them and on us, often blocking a character from our view.

Her strategy of dim lighting throughout adds to the audience's disconcerted perceiving. The dimness – so unlike the pastel airiness of the 1961 BBC-TV version – is not just a sombre accompaniment to a story of pathos. It serves to

baffle the viewer in certain scenes: in Osmond's opulent rooms in Florence, for instance, the viewer cannot see clearly. There seems something present not yet revealed, something furtively present as one searches the frame for further evidence of his exquisite taste. Even in the superb formal compositions of a sequence, such as Isabel's walking in the rain near Gardencourt with Madame Merle, the viewer's wonder at such a scene is crossed by dull light and the dull palette Campion imposes and by Ralph's appearance at a rain spattered window, looking out at the twosome with misgiving, an inauspicious beginning for Isabel's friendship with Madame Merle. The extraordinary accomplishment of Campion's frame composition is never allowed to be an unalloyed pleasure. Something ominous always intervenes.

Nor is the viewer ever to indulge in the simplicity of sentimental prettiness, whether of Isabel's face or of a cathedral or garden. Isabel's physical beauty is never an end in itself, but is always expressive of inner life and her troubled thought, caught as she often is by odd camera angles or boxed in by, say, a stairwell or a crowded room. We first see Osmond's villa from an unusual angle. The Baptistery in Florence is viewed as if one had to crane one's neck; it is not presented in a sentimental, nostalgic shot that a tourist might relish or which a movie audience, with a taste for costume drama and Merchant Ivory settings, might have come to expect. At no point in Campion's film is perceiving merely simple or simply pleasure. Perceiving is admixed with fretfulness, anxiety, wariness. This strategy *enacts* the Jamesian threat in aestheticisation.

Campion's strategy of copious and lingering close-ups also manifests much of the inner drama. Although the dialogue, so remarkably faithful to James's, does carry much of the meaning and although Campion uses patent gestures such as Osmond's manhandling and Isabel's slap, the viewer needs to study the faces, as for the most part the characters say less than they mean. The viewer needs to study as many faces as possible to negotiate the moral critique of the film – to establish Ralph's warmth and selfless, loyal love; Rosier's

sincerity; Madame Merle's suave duplicity but genuine, belated remorse; Warburton's and Goodwood's intensity of feeling and genuine hurt; Osmond's lack of conflict and his uncanny coldness; Isabel's vanity; Isabel's grief; Isabel's conflict; Isabel's love; Isabel's strength. As James says in 'The Art of Fiction': 'It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out at you in a certain way ... At the same time it is an expression of character'.[18] Campion's close-ups and her actors' subtle undertreatment make the turn of a head, the brightening of an eye, the shift of a hand instantaneous signifying gestures, full of moment and not to be missed. One longs for her to have attempted, with Kidman's subtle acting, the great scene among the ruins of 'old Rome' (p.430), where Isabel's pride becomes humility and she feels part of the suffering of humanity. With her skill at drawing the viewer in to watch the merest suggestions of a drama taking place in the depths of a character, drama that James usually gives to the narrator to expound and analyze, Campion could have done this scene in its essence and without voice-over.

Of course Campion's close-ups are not only of faces: she uses detail shots of objects, like the metonymical hornet trapped under a glass or the telling movement of hands, for instance. She uses close-ups of Osmond's hands to hint of his threatening, ruthless egotism. When Osmond is holding Pansy, his hands are shown to be both fondling her and containing her, as he covers her hands in his. As he fondles Madame Merle when she has satisfied his ego and he feels erotically towards her, his large hands, in confident gestures, take possession of her smaller recumbent body. With no response from her Osmond persists in his disconcerting, suave presumption. He even tilts her head so as to get a good angle of her face as if she were an *objet d'art* that he can freely arrange for his aesthetic pleasure. Osmond's gestures are metonymic of his ruthless appropriation of persons as objects. Nothing could be closer to the Jamesian Osmond. Madame Merle also rests her hand on Pansy; but while her black gloved hand on Pansy's abdomen is an appropriating gesture, the reluctance of Madame Merle to take her hand

away manifests what we are later to know, that she is Pansy's sorrowful mother, forced to live in disguise and make occasions and excuses to see Pansy. Campion also uses shots of Isabel's hands – long, white, delicate and gentle, as, for instance, in the scene where she holds the mould of her dead baby's hand, as she sits alone in darkness. Her hands, so sensitive to what she is touching, suggest her capacity for tenderness, her fragility and her private, lonely grief; and are in noticeable contrast to Osmond's insensitive and appropriating gestures.

Hands are also one of the motifs in the black and white prelude to the film (which incidentally is in Laura Jones's script). There is a sequence of shots of young women, often directly eyeing the camera, enjoying spacious movement in the open air, and talking of being kissed. Finally a hand is outstretched with the film's title on it before a cut to a red-eyed, fraught Isabel, agitated by Warburton's proposal. It is here that I feel forced to discuss this controversial sequence and reluctantly to criticize it. It is certainly contentious. While Kathleen Murphy calls it a 'hypnotic prelude' of 'lovely Mirandas',[19] Brian McFarlane calls it 'downright silly'.[20] If there were a liberty among the many liberties that Campion takes that is of dubious gain, it is this prologue, however ingenious and interesting it is. It is misleading. While it sets up a contrast Campion obviously intended between the uninhibited modern girls and the tense Isabel, it seems also to be promising a narrow focus on Isabel's sexuality.

Fortunately Campion's film is not so shallow nor so skewed. Isabel's sensuous and sentimental education is in the film and figures in key scenes; but it is contributory only. It supplements and does not conflict with what James was trying to portray in Isabel – feelings finally deeper, self-transcending, the greater maturity that will see Isabel through life after Ralph's death. With sensitivity and clarity and without voice-over, Campion depicts all this too. With her extraordinary talents and her extraordinarily talented team and with all the daring liberty she takes, Campion has stayed with James's major plot strategy, pride going before a fortunate fall; and

with James's profound concern: the moral world of the connoisseur.

FILMOGRAPHY
The Portrait of a Lady
Director: Jane Campion
Screenplay: Laura Jones
Director of Photography: Stuart Dryburgh
Music: Wojciech Kilar
Cast: Nicole Kidman as Isabel Archer; John Malkovich as Gilbert Osmond; Barbara Hershey as Madame Merle; Mary Louise Parker as Henrietta Stackpole; Martin Donovan as Ralph Touchett; Shelley Winters as Mrs Touchett; Richard E. Grant as Lord Warburton; Shelley Duvall as Countess Gemini; Christian Bale as Edward Rosier; Viggo Mortensen as Caspar Goodwood; Valentina Cervi as Pansy Osmond; John Gielgud as Mr Touchett.
1996 USA/UK release.
Time: 144 minutes.

NOTES

1 Cited in David Kelly, 'Two Portraits by Henry James and Jane Campion', *Sydney Studies in English* 23 (1997-8), p. 93. A version of this paper appeared in Devika Brendon (ed.), *'Gladly wold she lerne and gladly teche': Felicitation Volume for Professor Yasmine Gooneratne AO, D.Litt.* (London: Argus, 1999) and is here reprinted by kind permission of the editor. I would also like to thank my colleagues David Kelly and Don Anderson for their helpful discussion.

2 'Immaterial Girls', *The New Yorker*, January 6, 1997, p.75.

3 'Portrait of a boot sniffer', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 22, 1997, p.10s.

4 'The Portrait of a Lady', *Sight and Sound*, March 1997, p.60.

5 '"Conscious Observation of a Lovely Woman": Jane Campion's *Portrait* in Film', *The Henry James Review* 18 (1997), p.179.

6 'The Portrait of a Body', *The Henry James Review* 18 (1997), p. 186.

7 'Jane Campion's Symbolic Portrait', *The Henry James Review* 18 (1997), p.196.

8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.27.

9 For a summary of recent views of Isabel's sexual nature, see, for instance, Kurt Hochenauer, 'Sexual Realism in *The Portrait of a Lady*: The Divided Sexuality of Isabel Archer', *Studies in the Novel* 22.1 (1990), p.19.

10 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

11 Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Robert D. Bamberg, second ed. (New York: Norton, 1995), p.17. Hereafter cited in the text by page number. This edition is the 1908 New York edition and includes a Textual Appendix of the revisions, pp.495-575.

12 See, for example, Dennis O'Connor's discussion of Isabel's narcissism in 'Intimacy and Spectatorship in *The Portrait of a Lady*', *The Henry James Review* 2 (1980), pp.25-35.

13 Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Conquest of London 1870-1881* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), p.426.

14 David Kelly in 'Two Portraits by Henry James and Jane Campion', p.99, sees Osmond as a Gothic villain in the film. I agree; but he is also a complex villain, carefully and deeply individuated by James.

15 Dianne F. Sadoff '"Intimate Disarray": The Henry James Movies', *The Henry James Review* 19 (1998), p.290.

16 Kathleen Murphy, 'Jane Campion's Shining: Portrait of a Director', *Film Comment* (Nov-Dec, 1996), p.33n.

17 I realize that the ending of the film is as contentious as the ending of the novel. Two recent views of the film's ending are in total disagreement. David Kelly sees Isabel frozen in 'wretched indecision' ('Two Portraits by Henry James and Jane Campion', p.98) and Doug Anderson sees Isabel with her spirit restored, able to 'resume control of her emotional destiny' (Pay TV Guide, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 July 1998, p.110). Because Isabel straightens up at the end and looks not at Goodwood but into the far distance (the future?), I take the ending to be affirmative.

18 Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Morris Shapira (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p.88.

19 Kathleen Murphy, 'Jane Campion's Shining: Portrait of a Director', p.29.

20 Brian McFarlane, 'In Review: *The Portrait of a Lady*', *Cinema Papers* 115 (1997), p.3.