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Invalid Relations: Queer Kinship in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*

By Dana Luciano, *Hamilton College*

If one aspires to play a pivotal role in a nineteenth-century novel, perhaps the best qualification that one can acquire is a mortal illness. This was self-evident throughout the century; it didn't take a Henry James to figure it out. Yet in the New York Edition preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, James defends the decision to make his heroine sick so *defensively* that one might imagine such a thing had never before been done. At the same time, he comforts himself by recalling that after all, such a thing *had*:

Why had one to look so straight in the face and so closely to cross-question the idea of making one's protagonist "sick?"—as if to be menaced with death or danger hadn't been, from time immemorial, for heroine or hero, the very shortest of all cuts to the interesting state. Why should a figure be disqualified for a central position by the particular circumstance that might most quicken, that might crown with a fine intensity, its liability to many accidents, its consciousness of all relations? (AN 289)

Illness is here seen as a boon to realist literature—if not to real life—because it does exactly what art should do: it takes the material of everyday living and puts an intriguing spin on it. James knows this, as he goes on to clarify, because he has done a decent job in the past with what he calls his "secondary physical weaklings and failures," most memorably Ralph Touchett from *The Portrait of a Lady* (AN 290). Ralph's job, as an "accessory invalid," was to help keep the novel running smoothly, and he acquitted himself admirably; James congratulates himself that he "had clearly been right in counting [Touchett's illness], for any happy effect he should produce, a positive good mark, a direct aid to pleasantness and vividness." Touchett's illness-inflected touchingness was, however, somehow at odds with his maleness, as James goes on to reflect:

The reason of this moreover could never in the world have been his fact of sex; since men, among the mortally afflicted, suffer on the whole more overtly and more grossly than women, and resist with a ruder, an inferior strategy. I had thus to take *that* anomaly for what it was worth [. . .].

If men make less appealing applicants for the position of literary invalid—because, aesthetically speaking, they simply don't do the dying thing well—then there is something less than manly about the accessory Touchett.¹ Yet in this situation, it appears, less is more.

It is precisely this narrative economy, whereby an invalid, anomalously-gendered “accessory” can be converted into the artistic successes of interest, intensity, and “happy effects,” that I wish to consider in this essay. By reading the novel through the relations surrounding the “secondary” invalid Touchett, a figure present from the first chapter to the second-to-last, I mean to highlight some of the lightly-sketched but intensely present alternative genealogies of kinship, inheritance, identification, and longing that enliven and trouble its conventional marriage-plot. My focus on this invalid and his relationship to the young woman who is the ostensible subject of the novel may require some explanation, since *Portrait* is, after all, not *about* Ralph Touchett; indeed, despite the fondness with which James surveys his creation in the prefaces to *Wings* and to *Portrait* itself, Ralph Touchett receives scarcely a mention. Rather, James asserts that insofar as he dedicated himself to tracing, in the novel, the development of Isabel's consciousness, he attempted to decenter the masculine perspective, placing “the [male] interest contributive only to the greater one [i.e., Isabel's]” (AN 51). Yet understanding the effect of the “interest” that accrues from the relationship between the two characters is, I argue, crucial to grasping a sense of the “affront” Isabel Archer poses to what James terms her “destiny” (48). The imaginative energies of dissident masculinity set into motion but do not wholly determine the sense Isabel comes to make of her own gender positioning.

Accordingly, I locate my reading of the novel between two influential critical traditions. One tradition, within feminist criticism, examines the ways James's realist writing exposes and critiques women's “destiny” in the guise of nineteenth-century constructs of gender and kinship, structured around laws and conventions regarding marriage, childrearing, and property (e.g., Allen, Walton). These critics consider the circulation of Isabel Archer within the narrative economies of *Portrait*, emphasizing, as Elizabeth Allen puts it, the way that she suggests “a freedom and spontaneity that never can be realized in the structures of power and manipulation that make up the social world” (82). A more recent critical tradition, dubbed “anti-homophobic inquiry” by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, works to unpack the richly complex erotics of the Jamesian canon, focusing frequently (though not always) on the suggestive relations between men in the novels and tales.² These two traditions emphasize different aspects of the workings of power in the Jamesian text, the former corresponding to the configuration dubbed by Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, the “deployment of alliance” and the latter to the “deployment of sexuality,” which is “linked [. . .] with an intensification of the body—with its exploitation as an object of knowledge and an element in the relations of power” (106–07).³

I contend that the liminal space of invalidism provides the novelist with an ideal opportunity for examining the deployment of power as it articulates itself through both the familial systems designed to ensure the regular transmission of bloodlines and property and the diagnostic rubrics that govern sexuality. This convergence offered James, through the invalid Touchett and his imagined relationship to Isabel Archer, the spectral fantasy of disarticulating both modes of power through the construction of a regime ordered by affective exchange. Put into motion by the fractured spatio-temporal relation that the invalid holds to himself, these ghosted possibilities imagine a way of living other than the inherited reproductive/familial patterns which specify, but never fully manage to occupy, the space upon which they so adamantly insist—a way of living otherwise that is held open as a potential explanation for Isabel’s seemingly unaccountable return to Rome after Ralph’s death. My re-evaluation of the possibilities offered Isabel Archer at the novel’s conclusion proceeds from a reading of the way this portrait of a lady is affected by the shadow of a man who falls across her.

The Trouble with Ralph Touchett

In *Portrait’s* nineteenth chapter, Madame Merle delivers an impromptu speech identifying Ralph as symptomatic of the displaced Anglo-American male:

But the men, the Americans; *je vous demandez un peu*, what do they make of it over here? I don’t envy them, trying to arrange themselves. Look at poor Ralph Touchett: what sort of a figure do you call that? Fortunately he has got a consumption; I say fortunately, because it gives him something to do. His consumption is his career; it’s a kind of position. You can say, “Oh, Mr. Touchett, he takes care of his lungs, he knows a great deal about climates.” But without that who would he be, what would he represent? “Mr. Ralph Touchett—an American who lives in Europe.” That signifies absolutely nothing—it’s impossible that anything should signify less. (182)

Merle’s reflections on Ralph follow her earlier observations suturing bourgeois gender identity to nationality and then exempting women from this requirement—for women, she believes, have “no natural place anywhere” (181), and need to attach themselves forcibly (through marriage, their wits, or their skills) if they are to make one. Men, however, are required to stand for something in themselves, yet to do so they too need a place in the social structure, a name, a position, a career—all of which are difficult to come by for American men in Europe. Ralph Touchett, a figure Merle doesn’t know quite how to name, is exempted from this requirement by virtue of his weak lungs. If Ralph can’t have a regular career because of his lungs, he can still have an alternative career, a “kind of” career, *in* his lungs. The very condition, then, that most unmanly Ralph (by depriving him of a career, by making him vulnerable, by emphasizing his dependency) is also the single factor that protects him from unmanliness. His “fortune” appears as *lack*, not surplus—not, that is, as the immense amount of inherited wealth that shields him from the need to work for a living, but as the

fatal flaw in his most inalienable possession, his male body. As Merle concludes, Ralph is “very lucky to have a chronic malady; so long as he doesn’t die of it” (182).

Those American characters most invested in the ideology of work—the journalist Henrietta Stackpole and the banker Daniel Touchett—are less sanguine than Merle in their assessment of Ralph’s fortune. According to Henrietta Stackpole, Ralph’s real problem is having had too much money, too much Europe, and consequently too little reality. His attraction to “foreign parts and other unnatural places” (114) and his disinclination to marriage are, far more than his illness itself, expressive of the flaws in his character for her; Ralph is never “serious,” she charges, simply because he has never needed to be. Henrietta’s clearcut vision of the responsibility of American nationality includes labor both productive and reproductive; she encourages Ralph to return home and do something for his country and to marry, a ritual she believes is every citizen’s duty to perform. Like Henrietta, Daniel Touchett insists that marriage is part of the normative life trajectory; he sees Ralph’s bachelorhood as not an effect but a cause of his illness and believes that marriage will remove him from the realm of pathology. “All you want is to lead a natural life,” he insists while advising Ralph to marry (169). In keeping with this naturalization of Ralph’s desire, Daniel suggests that he propose marriage to Isabel; Ralph, of course, counters by persuading his father to leave Isabel half of the fortune that would have been his own.

Though he accedes to his son’s request, Daniel Touchett doesn’t quite see its point, since, as he puts it, “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. You have scruples that I shouldn’t have had, and you’ve ideas that I shouldn’t have had either” (171). Behind the generational distinction that Daniel makes between his own desires and his son’s strange new scruples and ideas lies the continuing expectation that men’s feelings for women ought always to take an erotic direction. That is to say, the difference between the sexes should, in his account, overpower merely historical differences between fathers and sons. Indeed, women are the very principle of atemporality for Daniel; the “best of them,” he argues, will not change, and any man who feels himself threatened by history should “make up to a good one and marry her” (12). Heterosexuality, in his view, is part of the “natural” social order, which conveniently endows men with the ability to transcend history by providing suitable channels for reproduction and the transmission of property. Hence his persistence in pressing the imperative of marriage in general—and the possibility of Ralph’s marriage to Isabel in particular—on what is soon to be his own deathbed.

Ralph’s relation to his “fact of sex” is problematized by his invalidism, his penchant for excess, his apparent unproductiveness, and his distance from heterosexuality. So troubling are these multiple deviations that a number of readers have been led to class Ralph’s gender identity as pathological. For instance, Alfred Habegger has argued that Ralph’s illness creates a “melodramatic” distraction from the realism of the novel, one that ultimately reveals James’s repressed homoerotic inclinations, which caused him to disguise his own attachment to powerful female figures (167). Henry Jr. refuses, in this reading, to openly challenge the patriarchal Victorian attitudes preached by his father and

brother William and instead beats the insufficiently manly Ralph to death in order to mask his own gender transgressions. Habegger supports this claim by noting that the loving father-son relationship between Daniel and Ralph Touchett is simply too idyllic to be true and therefore must mask James's repressed rage at his own father. The disconnection between the father and the son is exemplified, for him, in Ralph's failure to follow in his father's capitalist footsteps. James's depiction of Ralph as loving to watch his banker-father's mind at work is thus deemed implausible, since there is no reason that Ralph should be interested in his father's *thinking* if he is not interested in his *business*. Yet to see an *implausible* connection between the banker whose success is predicated on getting the best of all deals and Ralph's "interest" in watching his practical father's mind work assumes an economy which requires "interest" to be concretely productive—or, more to the point, it ascribes a necessarily *mimetic* reproductivity to that productivity. That is to say, Habegger makes the same mistake that Daniel Touchett does when he questions Ralph's pleasure in looking at a woman he is not interested in marrying. Though Mr. Touchett insists upon Ralph's heterosexuality, while Habegger acknowledges James's homosexuality, both assume that affective investment must take one of two distinct and mutually exclusive forms, identification *or* sexual desire, and both read the desire to have it both ways as a sign of immaturity.

It is, of course, precisely this kind of sexual sorting that marks the "successful" navigation of the Oedipal plot for the heterosexual male subject. Yet despite the vehement advocacy of this psychosexual teleology by the very father himself, as he lays dying, it seems, in *Portrait*, scarcely to come through as a model at all. This "failure" is so pronounced in Jamesian fiction as to call insistently for explanation. One critical tradition, of which Habegger's work forms part, accounts for the apparent contradiction by asserting that James was "confused" about his own deviant gender and sexual affinities and yet persistently betrayed them in his fictions.⁴ Though critics working within this tradition often claim to accept and even affirm James's homosexuality, their methodology works against this claim. As Sheldon Novick, in a recent biography of James, has argued, such readings tend to rely upon "a rather old-fashioned, Freudian view of 'homosexuality' as a kind of failure," which James could only imperfectly repress (xii). Even when they do not overtly endorse the psychoanalytic developmental narrative that situates phallic heterosexuality as the singular telos of masculine growth, critics who read James's queer characters as evidence that the author's Freudian slip is showing end up re-inscribing that very teleology.

While the reductive reading of homosexuality as failed masculinity that Novick terms "old-fashioned" was indeed common in James's day (as well as, unfortunately, in our own), it was not the only existing framework for understanding sexual deviance at the end of the nineteenth century. Accordingly, I wish to briefly consider the "third-sex" model for the ways that it highlights some of the implications of Ralph's own understanding of gender. The term "third sex"—adapted from the classics and deployed, in the first half of the century, by the novelist Balzac to describe male sexual deviants—denoted a combination of male and female elements in one body which explained homosexual desire.⁵ The

combination of gender traits supposed to be kept distinct is suggested, in *Portrait*, both by Ralph's character and, more important, by his worldview; he maintains, throughout the novel, an utter indifference to the hallowed norms of sexual difference. Among the many "queer theories" that his father and Lord Warburton attribute to him in the novel's first scene is a disbelief in the qualitative difference, romanticized as a complementary opposition, between the sexes that forms the cherished cornerstone of Victorian ideology; when Isabel, for instance, tells him that men are braver than women, Ralph insists that women are just as brave and that the only difference between the sexes is that men make a show of it. For Ralph, the opposition of the sexes is merely a matter of location: men tend toward exteriorizing aspects of the self and women toward interiorizing them, but the aspects themselves are roughly the same.⁶

It is this way of thinking that places Ralph close to the ideas of "third-sex" thinkers at the close of the nineteenth century.⁷ While the third-sex model did not openly challenge heterosexuality as the norm of desire, it argued, crucially, for the recognition of "sexual intermediaries" (*sexuelle Zwischenstufen*) as another norm, not a deviation.⁸ The third-sex movement diversified and disrupted the gender-sex configuration of normative heterosexuality by challenging the complementarity that was the very foundation of Victorian gender ideology. Some "intermediaries," indeed, openly embraced this disruption; they conceived the third sex as a sort of vanguard, exempted from the characteristic incompleteness of the traditional sexes. As Michael Moon has argued, moments of "sexual disorientation" are central to the representation of sexuality in James's oeuvre (16–17). These are moments where something analogous to third-sex desire, rather than establishing itself alongside heterosexuality as a neutral and non-threatening "alternative" erotics, troubles the logic of heterosexuality through its own challenges and its uncertain but determined efforts to locate itself. Moon argues that James's representation of male eroticism often reached, just as third-sex thinkers did, toward images and ideas from the distant past, not in order to characterize male homoeroticism as regressive *à la* Freud, but to find ways of imagining such relations that escape the classificatory constraints of the present.

Feminist critic Biddy Martin, however, finds the reiteration of the tendency toward "disorientation" within queer theoretical readings troubling; she charges that the late-nineteenth-century third-sex movement and late-twentieth-century queer theorists such as Moon alike participate in a politics of "radical antinormativity" whose effects, insofar as they ultimately dismiss all forms of attachment as "punitive and constraining because already socially constructed," are at odds with feminist goals. She laments that in much queer work "indifference to objects, or the assumption of a position beyond objects—the position, for instance, of death" takes precedence (67–69). Much of Martin's critique seems to emerge from the queer rejection of psychoanalysis, which in her view impoverishes queer criticism insofar as it disables it from understanding psychic life. Yet the debate with psychoanalysis results, as readings by Moon and other queer Jamesians demonstrate, not from a resistance to attachment *as such* but from an impatience with its failures of imagination around attachment—in particular, the inability to imagine a mature subject position that does not predicate the choice of sexual

object upon an irrevocable choice between the two mutually exclusive forms previously mentioned, identification or desire. Accordingly, its ability to represent the psychic lives of self-conscious dissonants from the sex-gender system is limited.

Though Martin is right to critique both third-sexers and some queer theorists for their “vanguardist” dismissal of feminist insights (a dismissal that parallels Ralph’s early misapprehensions of Isabel’s desires), the anti-normative “invalid” imagination itself serves a critical social function in *Portrait*, one that not only struggles against the constraints of the world in which the novel is located to the last but also, as we shall see, attempts to construct new structures that will enable more productive forms of attachment. Ralph’s illness befits him to serve as a figure for this form of desiring imagination, since his own form, while singular, is never single. Rather, Ralph’s invalid ontology reveals him to be always already multiple. The ex-centric nature of this figure becomes apparent in *Portrait*’s first scene. Declaring that he is “sick of life” during the novel’s inaugural teaparty, Lord Warburton complains that Ralph offers little consolation. Daniel Touchett defends his son by explaining,

It’s because his health is so poor. [. . .] It affects his mind, and colours his way of looking at things; he seems to feel as if he had never had a chance. But it’s almost entirely theoretical, you know; it doesn’t seem to affect his spirits. I have hardly ever seen him when he wasn’t cheerful—about as he is at present. (10)

Daniel’s description of Ralph’s high-spiritual stasis—his perpetual good humor—contrasts oddly with his theoretical “cynicism,” gloomy worldview, and morbidly affected mind. Such a combination in one person scarcely seems creditable, unless the spirit of Ralph has managed to separate itself from his body long before his actual death; this, perhaps, accounts for why Ralph immediately recognizes the speech as a “glowing eulogy.”

The onset of Ralph’s illness is described in precisely these terms of self-division: at the end of a year and a half spent disinterestedly working in his father’s bank, “he became conscious that he was seriously out of health. He had caught a violent cold, which fixed itself on his lungs and threw them into extreme embarrassment. He had to give up work and embrace the sorry occupation known as taking care of one’s self” (*PL* 37). Embarrassment accompanies and exposes one’s inability to be fully in control of one’s own significations (Litvak 199). Ralph’s “embarrassed” lungs here initiate his self-splitting, just as the phrase that marks his transition from “work” to this “sorry occupation”—which Merle later designates his “career”—figures a separation between the caring and the cared-for self. The course of his illness follows this direction, detailing an *askesis* both bifurcated and temporally displaced:

At first he was greatly disgusted; it appeared to him that it was not himself in the least that he was taking care of, but an uninterested and uninteresting young man with whom he had nothing in common. This

person, however, improved on acquaintance, and Ralph grew at last to have a certain grudging tolerance, and even undemonstrative respect, for him. Misfortune makes strange bedfellows, and our young man, feeling that he had something at stake in the matter—it usually seemed to him to be his reputation for common sense—devoted to his unattractive *protégé* an amount of attention of which note was duly taken, and which had at least the effect of keeping the poor fellow alive. One of his lungs began to heal, the other promised to follow its example, and he was assured he might outweather a dozen winters if he would betake himself to one of those climates, in which consumptives chiefly congregate. (37)

Coupled with his uninteresting bedfellow, Ralph seems, initially, to stand some chance of reproducing himself as one. Yet his recuperation itself becomes split: “One of his lungs beg[ins] to heal,” while the other shows only a willingness to follow the first, a delayed imitation that itself mimics the relationship our young man has with his invalid *protégé*. The convalescing Ralph is not quite himself, but only seems able to become himself again—to become, that is, that earlier self, a well-educated and wealthy young man who hasn’t actually done much of anything yet. His “promise” is to *become promising*, as he was before illness compromised his future.

Ralph’s identity, as an invalid, is inferred rather than specified; he is etiologically associated with “consumptives,” but the narrator always stops just short of making a direct grammatical equation. Though his illness appears as obvious, diagnostically speaking, as Milly Theale’s, in *The Wings of the Dove*, is obscure, it is, nonetheless, rarely spoken aloud; even after he dies, the narrator will only mention his having died of “the malady of which he died” (536). The resistance to referentiality underlines the complications associated with Ralph’s invalid subjectivity: a form of existence that exposes the uneasy cohabitation of the literal and the figurative. Even his ostensible diagnosis straddles both a historical and a linguistic contradiction, since, as Jean-Christophe Agnew notes, the term “consumption,” at the time *Portrait* is being composed, denoted two opposing meanings: both “disease and cure” (73–74). Of the limitations of his invalid’s existence, the narrator remarks that “Living as he now lived was like reading a good book in a poor translation—a meagre entertainment for a young man who felt that he might have been an excellent linguist” (37). The compensatory development the invalid makes is, however, to multiply the means by which this “poor translation” of life can be represented, struggling with the limitations imposed by the present tense and refusing, in his play upon language, to limit himself to the definitive. His “gubernatorial” mother chides him for this: “[Y]ou use too many figures of speech; I could never understand allegories. The two words in the language I most respect are Yes and No” (298). As his mother complains, Ralph’s “figures of speech” do not respect the “law” of language, by denoting, defining, or specifying; they accumulate rather than select meanings, ultimately seeking to refashion the terms of expression themselves.

That Ralph’s linguistic tendencies parallel those of the novel’s author is a fact that has not escaped critical attention. James’s own stylistic exuberances have been identified, by a number of queer critics, as a canny strategy linked to his own

status as a sexual dissident; Leland Person, for instance, argues that James deliberately employed multivalent language and intentionally encoded a number of possible erotic meanings within the narratives, allowing readers so inclined to uncover homoerotic connotations, while those who would prefer not to could simply overlook them. Yet while Ralph's tendency toward lexical multiplicity suggests a correspondence to *Portrait's* author, his characteristically split position must also be recalled: as a translator of life, Ralph operates as both writer and reader simultaneously. And as his translations of Isabel's potentialities reveal, while there is, in the Jamesian text, more than one possible way of getting it right, there is always, as well, the possibility of getting things wrong.

Invalid Relations

Ralph's liminality allies him with a protagonist who is also caught between dissatisfying and incompletely articulated alternatives. Like Ralph's younger self, Isabel is all promise and potential, matching a hyperactive imagination with an indefinite—indeed, scarcely definable—future. Ralph's unconventional ideas about gender allow him to recognize in Isabel—who, he believes, has not internalized the ideology of gender—a kindred spirit, which prompts him to begin setting his experience against her own. In their first conversation, he probes her attitude toward composition, wondering whether she likes others to “settle things” for her; Isabel responds, “Oh yes, if they are settled as I like them” (19). Initiating what is to become a habit of trading her subject-pronoun with his own, Ralph replies, “I shall settle this as I like it.” He then proceeds first to persuade his mother to extend Isabel's visit from “three or four weeks” to several months, and, later, his father to enlarge Isabel's share of his fortune from five to nearly seventy thousand pounds. In place of the contraction implied in “settling,” Ralph “fixes” things for Isabel by expanding them, revealing his attraction to the kind of investment outlined above in which meanings and possibilities proliferate laterally rather than producing a singular, forward projection.

Readers of *Portrait* have traditionally accepted one of two positions regarding Ralph's relation to Isabel; that he (as his father asserts) deceives himself when he claims not to be in love with her, a self-delusion which adds to his invalid pathos, or that he has renounced the idea of object-love entirely because of his illness and instead passively identifies with her. Both positions, however, distort the nature of Ralph's “Platonic” attachment to Isabel, which refuses to choose between identification and desire and thus moves in a different direction than heteronormative desire.⁹ This redirection is revealed in the way he sutures his desire to Isabel by splitting his own inheritance and thus multiplying its effects. As he tells his father, he wishes not to marry Isabel but to “make her rich.” When his father asks him to explain himself, he clarifies, “I call people rich when they are able to gratify their imagination. Isabel has a great deal of imagination” (170). Later, after his father agrees to his request but doubts “what good you are to get of it,” he responds, “that of having gratified my imagination” (172). Ralph's telling subjective alternations in this conversation reveal a crucial aspect of his attachment to Isabel. He shifts from the generic abstraction “people,” a generali-

zation designed to make his argument more broadly persuasive, to the definite referent “Isabel,” who is, after all, the subject of the conversation, and then later, claiming to repeat himself, he revises “Isabel” to “I,” the subject of desire. This linguistic transposition accompanies and effects his deployment of money as a means of translation; the Touchett fortune is useful not only because it will shield his relatively impoverished cousin from the need to marry to ensure her own financial security, but also because it will enable her—and therefore, him—to materialize the imaginary. His money in her hands, that is, will allow him to see his “theories” put into practice.

Ralph’s alignment of his imagination with Isabel’s indicates that his motive in arranging the transfer is not simple benevolence or charity, a point which is not lost on some observers within the narrative. Suspecting that Ralph has convinced his father to change his will, Madame Merle hints as much to Lydia Touchett, who tells her that Ralph is “not in the least addicted to looking after number one.” “It depends upon whom he regards as number one!” Merle replies (179). As Merle suggests, Ralph’s legacy to Isabel comprises an imaginative extension of himself through another—or, more accurately, the creation of yet another “number one,” the inclusion of one more subject in the multiplicity of selves that comprises Ralph. The addiction to looking after “number one” is conventionally understood as narcissism, a diagnosis that many characters in *Portrait* apply to Ralph; for instance, Henrietta Stackpole, annoyed by his mocking flirtation, informs him, “You are in love with yourself, that’s the other!” (111).

Ralph’s narcissism has been read by William Veeder, in his essay “The Portrait of a Lack,” as a self-protective gesture (95–121). Following Freud’s writings on narcissism, Veeder observes that engagement with others is inherently threatening for the subject, who can deny death most effectively by turning away from others and toward the self. Veeder’s focus on the operations of narcissism and the death drive, with which it is aligned, enables him to highlight the way the testifying invalid shadows the wedding-plot, thereby denaturalizing heterosexuality and exposing it as a masquerade. Yet “The Portrait of a Lack” reads *Portrait* as if it were, in essence, an allegory of the death drive; Veeder’s attempt to uncover the dynamics of negation leads to a version of the novel in which everything other than negation is obliterated—or, more accurately, in which everything is reduced to “nothing,” thus simplifying the novel’s proliferation of erotic and affective possibilities by limiting them to two irreducible principles, “all” or “nothing,” positions analagous to Lydia Touchett’s rigid insistence on “Yes” or “No.”

This reduction is problematic because it is, as I have argued, the very *resistance* to reduction and classification that marks both Ralph’s invalid character and his relationship with Isabel; while this resistance rightly connects to its characterization as narcissistic, that does not mean that his queer longing is non-productive or aligned with negation.¹⁰ Self-oriented narcissists (a pathology Freud understands as intrinsic to both femininity and male homosexuality) may take, for their erotic object, either themselves, their past selves, someone who was once part of themselves, or someone they would like to be, whereas the anaclitic (other-oriented) type is limited to the conventional Oedipal choices: “the woman who tends [or] the man who protects” (Freud 114). That Freud should exclude from

the anaclitic category object choices which seem obviously other to the desiring subject—since a person one would like to be, an ego-ideal, is clearly *not* the self but a hypothesis of selfhood lived otherwise—seems curious; this injunction, however, is meant to reinforce the bar between identification and desire that marks the “proper” resolution of the Oedipal crisis.¹¹ Yet Freud’s earliest studies on narcissism also outline a third possibility. While narcissism, as opposed to other-directed desire, is understood as a morbidly regressive pathology, it may, in different contexts—especially in the sick—emerge as something different altogether, becoming a healthy survival mechanism. The latter context sidesteps the otherwise problematic understanding of narcissism as a failure of normal sexual development, which depends crucially on the normalizing belief in gender polarity.

For Ralph to both desire and identify with Isabel is to refuse a conventionally anaclitic object-orientation—the very sort that the gender conservative Daniel Touchett attempts to urge upon him. Yet his attachment to Isabel is based on the belief that she is not like most women—that she, like himself, occupies her gender unconventionally. Moreover, this attraction to his ego ideal does not enclose Ralph, regressively, within himself. The conflation of the other-one-would-like-to-be with the self-as-object-choice in Freud’s reading insists upon a rigidly inflexible reproduction of conventional genders at the expense of a more nuanced understanding of how eros works to both confirm and extend the self. As Michael Warner observes, “[I]t is not so easy to explain any erotic attachment as merely the reflexive attachment of a self to itself [. . .]. When the subject chooses another on the basis of a desired ego ideal, he or she is already engaged in dialogue with others and in multiple perspectives on self” (194). Ralph’s attachment to Isabel works precisely along these lines; narcissistic and concerned with self as it may be, it nevertheless brings him out of himself and into the world he had all but forsworn.

The imaginary productivity of this attachment becomes apparent in the cousins’ conversation in London. When Isabel attempts to locate Ralph’s desire for her by asking him whether he is thinking of proposing to her, Ralph promptly replies, “By no means. From the point of view I speak of that would be fatal” (138). Yet Ralph does not mean precisely that marriage would kill him; as he goes on to explain, “I should kill the goose that supplies me with my golden eggs.” The endangered goose to which he refers turns out to be not himself, but Isabel—or more precisely, *his own fantasy of Isabel*, that other “number one.” And the “eggs” produced are the imaginary pleasures—the pleasures of imagination itself—that watching Isabel’s progress will bring him. Deploying this “once upon a time” metaphor in order to assure his continued interest in life, Ralph phantasmatically gives birth to his own imaginary investments.

Queer Futures

Ralph’s traditionalist father misunderstands his relation to Isabel as unproductive because of its voyeuristic association with passivity (“just looking”). Yet Ralph’s scopophilic tendencies, like his narcissism, operate to rekindle the epistemophilia that has heretofore kept him alive. His observational tendencies, cited

by critics (and indeed, by himself) as a sign of loss, the best a wounded male figure can do in the sexual line, do not substitute for another loss but actually work to defer *their own* loss: “With the prospect of losing them, the simple use of his faculties became an exquisite pleasure; it seemed to him that the delights of observation had never been suspected,” Ralph reflects after a particularly dangerous episode in his illness (38). The “delights of observation” are precisely what draw him to Isabel; the expectation that she will *do* something, the sense of Isabel as bearer of a wholly (and appealingly) indefinite futurity, centers Ralph’s interest in her: “Isabel’s originality was that she gave one an impression of having intentions of her own. ‘Whenever she executes them,’ said Ralph, ‘may I be there to see!’” (59). This prospect carries a concomitant expectation of survival, a belief that he, as observer, will also continue. The locution of the statement, “Whenever she executes them, [. . .] may I be there to see,” forms a wishful contract, invoking not a crudely appropriative scopophilia but what I would call an erotics of survival. Implicated in this pleasure of looking and imagining is a pleasure of *being*—the very *there-ness* of being “there to see.”

The productive impact of this prospect of companionate self-continuity is emphasized in Ralph’s conversation with Isabel in London. After Isabel has told Ralph that he is a part of her future, not her American past, he jokes, “Very good, since your future is seated here beside you. Capital thing to have your future so handy” (135–36). Ralph’s representation of himself as Isabel’s future (a revision of her own more partial characterization of him as *for* her future) reveals both the material and linguistic aspects of his narcissistic self-reconstruction. His description of this circumstance as a “capital thing” suggests the inheritance he will soon arrange to transfer, thus altering her future. He also constructs an altered temporality by bringing the “future” into the present and setting it beside them: creating, in effect, the future present. That this tense is technically impossible in English underwrites the “utterances too vague for words” with which the conversation itself winds up:

“You have answered my question,” said Ralph at last. “You have told me what I wanted. I am greatly obliged to you.”

“It seems to me that I have told you very little.”

“You have told me the great thing—that the world interests you and that you want to throw yourself into it.”

Isabel’s silvery eyes shone for a moment in the darkness. “I never said that.”

“I think you meant it. Don’t repudiate it; it’s so fine!” (139–40)

Isabel’s attempt to get up and move on to the next part of her evening is arrested, just before this exchange, by Ralph’s refusal to displace himself; he maintains his position as future present even at the cost of momentarily positioning Isabel’s future behind her. It is within this queer temporal annex that Ralph accomplishes his translation, using the speaking sight of this passage to resolve an indefinite—indeed, an unspoken—exchange into “the great thing”—a distillation of under-expressed intentions into the expression of intentionality. Isabel’s “interest,” for

Ralph, will offer a more than adequate return on his own investment, in enabling him to imagine what a young woman not bound by the constraints of compulsory heterosexuality might do with the world.

In an essay that has strongly influenced my own reading of *Portrait*, Jonathan Warren has analyzed Isabel's character as promising but unfulfilled; her "queer temporal allegiances," in his assessment, balance an inclination toward the future with a "peculiar attachment to the past" (1). Warren argues that *Portrait*'s dominant mood of suspended time is exemplified by Isabel's refusal to "actualize" herself (15), to project herself into the future, by fulfilling the promises she makes. Yet Warren's conflation of the aura of promise carried by a character into the *text* of specific promises ultimately requires a reduction of the novel's multiple textual and temporal directions, such that the past (represented for him, most vividly, by Ralph Touchett, whom he sees as having no future) is always static and morbid, and a promise can only bespeak a singular futurity. While, as Warren notes, to act in accordance with a promise is to fulfill the promise of identity, it is also to limit the self to the unsatisfactory terms offered by the social world—the very temporal predicament of identity, and one that the "queer temporal annex" created by Ralph is intended to resist.

Ralph's imaginary description of Isabel's future revolves around a metaphoric of illimitable flight: sailing, "going before the breeze" (171), soaring, flying. Precisely as his early actions on her behalf substituted enlargement of her prospects for "settling," Ralph's rendition of her "career" moves outward, eschewing direction in favor of breadth. These translations are, in a sense, flirtations with what Isabel terms her "destiny"—explorations of a series of contingent selves, of potentials for being that, in their refusal to correspond to linear narrative, refuse the stasis that will result from definitive motion toward a conventional life-path.¹² Ralph believes that money will conquer the limitations of convention itself. He tries to persuade his mother that Isabel is safe from her latest suitor, Gilbert Osmond, by appealing to this pattern:

She had wanted to see life, and fortune was serving her to her taste; a succession of gentlemen going down on their knees to her was by itself a respectable chapter of experience. Ralph looked forward to a fourth and a fifth *soupirant*; he had no conviction that she would stop at a third. She would keep the gate ajar and open a parley; she would certainly not allow number three to come in. (253)

Despite Lydia's impatience with Isabel's habit of refusing proposals from eminently eligible bachelors, Ralph argues that she is not deferring experience by refusing to marry, but participating in another kind of (imaginative) experience enabled by her (share in his) "fortune." Yet Lydia's affiliation with the world of alliance (for Isabel, if not entirely for herself) causes her to see Isabel as going nowhere fast, an opinion she extends to Ralph by looking at him, in response to this speech, "as if he had been dancing a jig" (253).

Ralph's expectation that Isabel's life will go on expanding, rather than narrowing and traditionally "progressing," is expressed in the protest with which

he greets her announcement that she is to marry “number three.” Ralph’s sense of this misfortune is expressed in an extension of the flight metaphor:

“You seemed to me to be soaring far up in the blue—to be sailing in the bright light, over the heads of men. Suddenly some one tosses up a faded rosebud—a missile that never should have reached you—and down you drop to the ground. It hurts me,” said Ralph, audaciously, “as if I had fallen myself!” (318)

Ralph’s imagination of the violence of this event sees Isabel’s grounding as a shattering of potential, a termination of her career: a marriage that, in essence, equals death. Ralph’s willingness to place himself in the position of the “fallen woman” implies a recognition, even a willful (if pained) claiming of his part in these events; he suspects (rightly, as it turns out) that it is not Isabel’s character but her money that has made her attractive to the ultra-conventional, and more or less openly necrophiliac, Osmond. In the end, it proves prophetic; like that other Jamesian fallen woman, Daisy Miller, Ralph ends up dying of the aftereffects.

Having witnessed the effect of his attempt to use money as a means of empowering the imagination and escaping conventional forms of alliance, Ralph turns, after this scene, to a quest for *knowledge* as an alternative form of capital, one that will enable an analysis of the failure of his first attempt. He spends Book Two of *Portrait* trying to find out how things stand between Isabel and her husband, even at the cost of staying too long in Rome and wrecking his health beyond repair. Yet while his fate might be understood, and has often been read, as the narrative’s punitive reminder of the limits imposed by power, Ralph, even in the act of dying, manages to imagine a way around these limits, giving substance to Osmond’s cynical prediction that “[h]e was dying when we married; he will outlive us all” (493). As Osmond’s comment suggests, Ralph inhabits the future present even on his deathbed; Isabel arrives to find him “already the figure and the pattern of death” (528), although he is still alive and will not die for several days more. His last words also suggest that temporal annex, as he emphasizes the non-termination that death represents: “I don’t know why we should suffer so much. *Perhaps I shall find out*” (532, emphasis mine). The dying Ralph unsettles the function of death itself as the referent of finitude, asserting that it is not only no bar to knowledge, but a superior means of access to it. Here, death suggests the utopic possibility of knowledge without loss, a possibility for which loss is the paradoxical prerequisite; death becomes not termination, but yet another point of departure.

Ralph’s deathbed suggestion recalls his earlier projection of himself into the future, as a spectator of Isabel’s unfolding. But at this point, it is appropriate to question what share Isabel has had in this re-imagining of the possibilities of the social world through her life. Feminist readers of *Portrait* have exposed the way Isabel is manipulated throughout the novel according to others’ ideas of what value a woman should have; for many of them, Ralph is akin to the other men in the novel, insofar as he too attempts to appropriate and define her experience.¹³

Though Ralph casts his relationship to Isabel as liberatory, in opposition to her other suitors who want to construct her as wife and mother, it appears, in these readings, as merely a kinder, gentler appropriation: “[D]eep down, Ralph wants to have Isabel in his power. [. . .] He doesn’t want to marry her body, it’s her soul, her imagination he wants to use” (Porat 136). Isabel herself suggests as much in London when she declares, in response to Ralph’s translation of her interest in the world, “I don’t know what you are trying to fasten upon me” (140). Here, Isabel implicitly recognizes that Ralph is not at all disinterested and predicts the burden that his transference will create.

Without wishing to exonerate Ralph entirely from this charge, I would emphasize that his error is not “appropriation” as such, which is as impossible to avoid as attachment in the construction of psychic life. Rather, appropriation becomes linked to domination and exploitation only when the possibility of exchange is foreclosed. Ralph’s mistake, in this light, is revealed to be twofold. First, he assumes an *identity* between his desires and Isabel’s, which explains his failure to realize that she will, once endowed with an inheritance, fall prey to the seductive fortune-hunter Osmond, and, second, he wishes to shield Isabel not only from compulsory heterosexuality but from all forms of suffering and thus from the knowledge that suffering can bring. In the second part of the novel, however, Ralph comes to understand the need for reciprocal exchange. Both characters, at the opening of *Portrait*, reflect on this lack of exchange as it impedes their growing intimacy; Ralph’s frustration at being excluded from Isabel’s “innermost consciousness,” so frequently cited by critics as evidence of his desire to “appropriate” her experience, is replicated exactly—down to the very architectural terms in which consciousness is depicted—by Isabel, who laments the “perpetual fiddling” that keeps her shut out of his private thinking (56). Their imaginative relations begin to move toward reciprocity when, in Rome, Ralph claims to experience Isabel’s “fall” himself. Though their conversation creates an outward rupture between the cousins, this break transforms Ralph’s understanding of their relationship, creating a degree of permeability between their imaginations, a movement toward a mutually beneficiary form of exchange.

The development of this new psychic economy first becomes apparent in the novel’s celebrated forty-second chapter, which features Isabel “motionlessly seeing” the relations around her (AN 57). Near the end of the chapter, Isabel moves from a consideration of her marriage to Osmond into a reevaluation of her relationship to Ralph, as she decides that Osmond’s dislike of her cousin issues from the recognition that “Ralph was generous and [. . .] her husband was not” (PL 400). She then determines to reciprocate Ralph’s generosity by continuing to pretend to him that her marriage is a happy one, even as she concedes his foresight in predicting that it would not be. As she comes to this resolution, the narrator unexpectedly, and without explanation, offers a glimpse of Ralph’s response: “Ralph smiled to himself, as he lay on his sofa, at this extraordinary form of consideration; but he forgave her for having forgiven him. She didn’t wish him to have the pain of knowing that she was unhappy; that was the great thing, and it didn’t matter that such knowledge would rather have righted him” (401). Ralph’s appearance within Isabel’s reflections emphasizes not only his clearer understand-

ing, at this point in the novel, of her manner of thinking, but also the way her generosity replicates his own mistaken attempt to spare her suffering. Though the content of this gesture is in error, its affectionate form is recognized and accepted as a sufficient substitute for the knowledge Ralph has sought. His acceptance of caring as a substitute for knowledge is crucial here, since the logic of imaginative exchange does not require an identity of thought; Ralph and Isabel continue, through the end of the novel, to maintain different perspectives and divergent analyses of the world. The security of knowledge, with its pretensions to absolute authority, gives way, in this economy, to the possibilities generated by affective exchange.

The wishfully contractual form of these imaginative exchanges is persistently linked with suffering and pain, exposing the illusion of freely contracting oneself—the mistaken notion that one may independently choose the terms of one's exchanges. Warren's analysis of *Portrait* emphasizes the way that the vexed temporal structure of the contract influences the dynamics of promising in the novel. Drawing upon Paul de Man's reading of the *Social Contract*, Warren observes that the incommensurability between the text of the law and any particular enactment of it, which in de Man's reading precipitates a *social* crisis, appears within the novel as a "crisis in [Isabel's] self-definition" (10). In order to grasp the contractual logic of intersubjective exchange as it contributes to "self-definition," however, a fuller account of the psychological dimensions of the contract will be useful. Such an examination is provided by Gilles Deleuze in his examination of the centrality of the contract to the practice of heterosexual male masochistic identity, which is premised, in his account, on a resistance to the limitations imposed by the traditional genders. Although both heterosexuality and masculinity are problematic categories as far as Ralph is concerned, his character has much in common with Deleuze's masochistic subject. For Deleuze, male masochism involves a temporal suspension of the conventional symbolic, one that allows the subject to disavow the laws of gender, including the forced choice between paternally-directed identification and maternally-directed desire. Notably, Deleuze argues that the male masochist protests women's location as "an object in the partriarchal system" through "the identification of the law with the image of the mother" (92, 91). This identification parallels Ralph's observation that Lydia Touchett is the figure who lays down the Law in the Touchett household: "his mother [. . .] was paternal, and even, according to the slang of the day, gubernatorial" (34–35). Ralph's desire to take on Isabel's suffering also indicates a masochistic aspect to his relationship with her. For Deleuze, masochism is a consensual relation, and as such founded upon the contract; but the masochistic contract, crucially, *parodies* contractual relations by exposing the imbalances of power that the illusion of free will works to mystify (92).

The romantic/democratic belief in the ability to freely choose one's own identity without constraints from past or present is troubled by the existence of inheritances, which dominate the narrative economy of *Portrait*. Despite the attempts of characters to free themselves from the past, inheritances determine the limiting fates of nearly every character in the novel: Ralph, who suffers from an illness believed, at the time, to be inherited; Lord Warburton, who suffers from

the guilt of holding a hereditary title in which he doesn't believe (and whose radicalism, as his sister points out, is itself inherited: "[O]ne ought to be liberal [. . .]. We have always been so, even from the earliest times" [72]); and, of course, Isabel, who suffers from the conflict created by her dual inheritance—Ralph's fortune and Madame Merle's position. The figure who suffers least from inheritances in the novel is Ralph's mother. Lydia Touchett has no need of inheritances; when her husband leaves her a house in London, she immediately sells it because she already has a better one; and when Ralph leaves her very little in his own will, she declares that she has no need of being left anything anyway. As the embodiment of the Law, Lydia Touchett presses for definition, regulation, and predictability, ordering the social contracts that determine the fates of the other characters. The queer temporal annex that her son inhabits has nothing to do with her own understanding of the actual: "One either did the thing or one didn't, and what one would have done belonged to the sphere of the irrelevant, like the idea of a future life or the origin of things" (298).

Her son, however, manages to conflate the contractual and the "irrelevant" in his final, post-mortem act, the completion of the promise that frames the novel. This action—Ralph's conversion of himself into the famed ghost of Gardencourt, the only fully materialized ghost to appear in this realist novel—both completes the exchange required in the new economy he has established with Isabel, by converting *him* into a figure of *her* imagination, and probes the limits of the contract itself, since the fulfillment of this promise occurs both *after* and *through* the death of one of the contracting parties. The ghost-ification of Ralph can, indeed, be seen as the completion of the masochistic contract par excellence—the affirmation of one's subjectivity through the ultimate relinquishing of power. The spectral contract is formed on Isabel's first night at Gardencourt. She inquires, while walking with him in the portrait gallery, whether the house possesses a ghost, adding that such a romantic house ought to have at least one. She promises to befriend him if he shows it to her, yet Ralph demurs:

"I might show it to you, but you would never see it. The privilege isn't given to every one; it's not enviable. It has never been seen by a young, happy, innocent person like you. You must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge. In that way your eyes are opened to it. I saw it long ago," said Ralph, smiling. (45)

Ralph's familiarity with the ghost implicitly references his knowledge of his own impending mortality; he tells his cousin he wishes she could be prevented from similar suffering: "I hope you will never see the ghost!" Yet the narrative turns, inevitably, on the completion of his reluctant promise, which happens at the moment of his death. After Isabel has left Ralph, she lies expectantly awake, until she is greeted by a specter:

She heard no knock, but at the time the darkness began vaguely to grow grey she started up from her pillow as abruptly as if she had received a summons. It seemed to her for an instant that Ralph was standing

there—a dim, hovering figure in the dimness of the room. She stared a moment; she saw his white face—his kind eyes; then she saw there was nothing. She was not afraid—she was only sure. (533)

Ralph's appearance indicates that for him, suffering (although perhaps not the acquisition of knowledge about it) is over. He desires this state for Isabel as well—as he tells her on his deathbed, “I wish it were over for you” (530)—but he now understands it is not his place to decide for her when it has been achieved. Whether the appearance of the ghost signifies *sufficient* suffering or simply *noteworthy* suffering had been left unclear in the earlier conversation; Ralph claimed only that one must trade pain for knowledge. At the beginning of the chapter in which the ghost appears, however, the narrator recalls the spectral contract by noting that “[Ralph] had told her, at their first meeting, that if she should ever live to suffer enough, she might some day see the ghost with which the old house was duly provided. She had apparently fulfilled the necessary condition [. . .]” (533). Ralph's ghost, as it appears to Isabel, is—as per usual for this invalid—an ambiguous sign, since it is unclear whether suffering “enough” means that her suffering is over as well or simply that she is now able to see beyond the limiting conventions of realism.

If the knowledge offered by the ghost is unclear, however, its affective resonance is unmistakable. The “kind eyes” which are the last Isabel sees of Ralph's ghostly form emphasize, again, the contrast between their relations and the “ghastly form” (PL 543) of her marriage. That Isabel will not, like Ralph, escape worldly suffering by dying has been established before she arrives in London; traveling by train across Europe, she comes to the realization that “[i]t might be desirable to die; but this privilege was evidently to be denied her. Deep in her soul [. . .] was the sense that life would be her business for a long time to come” (517). The way that Isabel decides to undertake that “business” in the novel's ambiguous conclusion has long been a subject of critical debate. Readers have attempted to explain her return to Rome by positing that she is unwilling to abandon the conventional protections of marriage, that she believes in the necessity of upholding her end of the contract even though Osmond has deceived her, that she can find no better way to continue her habit of flight from Caspar Goodwood and all he represents, or that she feels a responsibility to Pansy, whom she has left immured in a convent. Such readings invite the conclusion that the novel provides closure by reintroducing Isabel into one or both of the dominant deployments of power—alliance and sexuality—explicated by Foucault. Isabel's flight from Caspar, for instance, might be understood as a hysterical rejection of his phallic sexuality, a rejection that nevertheless renders her perfectly intelligible within nineteenth-century sexological frameworks. Interpreting her decision as seeking to uphold the terms of her marital contract, conversely, locates her within the framework of alliance. Yet as feminist critic Priscilla Walton has aptly observed, though the realist novel attempts to effect closure, “readers do not have to follow the overt codes. [. . .] Rather than closing the text and eliding the paradoxical nature of freedom within its ideologically constructed world-view, readers can open it out and refuse to abide by its stated rules” (64).

Accordingly, I read the ending as one that confirms the affective economy Ralph and Isabel have constructed as a means of expressing their dissidence from these dominant frameworks. The “very straight path” (544) that Isabel sees before her as she pauses on the doorstep of the Ralph-haunted house, Gardencourt, is not so straight after all, insofar as it takes her back, not to Osmond, but to Pansy. Isabel’s promise to Pansy is not that of the dutiful wife, since it is clear that Pansy wants her, in part, as a bulwark against Osmond’s authoritarianism. Nor can she be understood as seeking the pleasures of (step-)maternity to compensate for the disappointments of marriage. Isabel may appear, in returning to Pansy, to take up the position that Merle has created for her, as substitute mother to her own alienated child; such a move would seem to uphold the sentimental attractions of maternity as a natural refuge for women from the mechanisms of the patriarchy. Yet this naturalization, of course, in no way mitigates the exchange of women, but operates to secure masculine power (Rubin).¹⁴ Merle herself suggests as much when she tells Isabel, in the same conversation in which she discusses Ralph’s invalid career, that “a woman [. . .] has no natural place anywhere [. . .]” (181). When Isabel protests the submissive posture (that of “crawling”) that Merle’s description constructs for women, Merle concedes, “[Y]ou stand a good deal more upright than a good many poor creatures. On the whole, I don’t think you will crawl” (182). Isabel carries out Merle’s prediction at the end of the novel by taking up and transforming the “place” that Merle has constructed for her; she returns for Pansy, but not exactly as a “mother.”

Ralph’s mother fittingly enough emphasizes this transformation, at the close of the scene following his phantasmatic appearance to Isabel. Ralph’s oddly-gendered mother suggests the cohabitation of the conventionally actualized and what she herself dismisses as the “irrelevant”; this mixture explains why Ralph, contrary to all appearances, insists, during the initial conversation about the ghost, that he “take[s] greatly after [his] mother” (45). After Ralph’s appearance to Isabel, she reports to his chamber and attempts to comfort Lydia, who tells her, “Go and thank God you have no child” (534). This anti-maternal statement from a presumably traditionalist figure can only be read as an injunction laid down for Isabel’s future, since her aunt knows that she, too, has a dead son, the infant whose death is mentioned, almost parenthetically, as the second section of the novel opens.

The injunction against maternity laid down by the “gubernatorial” Lydia Touchett exposes the queerly familial politics of *Portrait*. The linear heterosexual narrative of the family, meant to reproduce and transmit itself, its norms, its bloodlines, and its property over time, is shadowed by the proliferation, throughout the narrative, of affinitive kinship. This form troubles the logic of the traditional family by following Ralph’s preferred model of lateral expansion, producing multiple imaginary-sibling bonds ordered around affective exchange, bonds that mimetically mock the future-projected filial relations that center the nuclear family. Isabel, despite her early insistence that she is “not a candidate for adoption” by Ralph’s mother (*PL* 20), ends by declaring Ralph her “brother,” a relation she had first posited in the forty-second chapter, which reveals the connection in their imaginations. Her return to Pansy is ordered, similarly, by a

sororal attachment. After Isabel promises Pansy, immured in the convent in Rome, that she “won’t desert” her (513), the narrator observes that “they held each other a moment in a silent embrace, like *two sisters*” (513, emphasis mine). The creation of a sisterly bond in a convent—the two women are, after all, surrounded by sisters—underlines the existence of unconventional possibilities within the “very mill of the conventional” (531). These possibilities are insinuated by the notorious Countess Gemini, Osmond’s rebellious sister, who enthuses, “Speak to me of the convents. You may learn anything there” (237). Though Pansy has been sent to the convent in order to learn submission, Gemini’s revelation of the riotous proliferation of forms of knowledge and relation enables other ways of understanding the conventual. Isabel’s suggestively sororal relationship with Pansy, like her imagined fraternal relation to Ralph, stands starkly in opposition to Osmond’s traditionalist understanding of the patriarchal “form” of their marriage, in which (his) knowledge and authority are singular. Rather than representing her submission to that marriage, Isabel’s return to Rome (and to Pansy) extends the form of queer kinship she has begun to construct with her invalid cousin.

James’s own ambivalence on “the woman question” has been amply documented, and the extent to which he conceded women’s ability to successfully imagine their own destinies is limited. What I am suggesting here, however, is the need to take advantage of the “generosity” of an author who, if he openly shrank from the figure of the self-authorized New Woman, nevertheless provided a number of resourceful, dissident feminine figures and left open to his readers the possibility of imaginative exchange with his texts. John Carlos Rowe has recently made the case for “‘another’ Henry James, who is not just subject to ‘masochism’ and to the vision resulting from psychic ‘trauma,’ but who also achieves a psychic alterity that can take erotic pleasure and intellectual satisfaction from subject positions no longer tied to strict gender and sexual binaries. Such Jamesian scenarios help us imagine powers of care, sympathy, and love beyond those conventionally linked in the Foucauldian equation of ‘power’ with ‘knowledge’” (29–30). This Henry James saw the potential for success in “secondary physical weaklings and failures” and drew upon them in order to “quicken” the reader’s “consciousness of all relations” and highlight the invalid’s “passionate [. . .] inspired resistance” (AN 290, 289).

Though he appears idle throughout the novel, Ralph’s imaginative labor is crucial in a queerly attentive reading of *Portrait*. His unconventional fantasies, and the proliferation of intensely affectionate queer kin that emerges from his wounded form, defy the linear temporal imperative that governs heteronormative reproduction. By becoming the promised, long-awaited ghost of Gardencourt, Ralph converts himself into *affective* capital, a phantasmatic echo transmitting both a utopic hope for knowledge without loss and the simple, sentimental deathbed truth of “love.” This invalid longing enables Ralph to fantasize an escape from the structures that reduce marginal subjects, like himself and his cousin, to vehicles for the circulation of power. Working through and beyond his fantasies, Isabel locates resistance to power not outside, but within the very structures of convention. The “happy effects” associated with this invalid work

to unsettle the naturalization of alliance and sexuality alike through the romantic imperative; “love,” in this novel, ultimately becomes the ghost that haunts the heterosexual machine.

NOTES

¹On the gender identity deemed appropriate to the nineteenth-century literary invalid, see Herndl.

²Strong examples of this productive area of James criticism include the work of Person, Litvak, and Stevens. For a selection of work in this area, see Bradley.

³Although many readings of Foucault incorrectly assume that the latter form of power had begun, by the time of *Portrait*'s publication, to subsume the former, a closer reading of *The History of Sexuality* reveals that these two modes of power cannot be understood independently. As Lucey has suggested, “Foucault insists that sexuality depended on alliance to elaborate itself, that the two are distinct but interdependent, and that, even though one might imagine that the ‘deployment of sexuality’ would eventually have replaced the ‘deployment of alliance,’ such is not the case” (187).

⁴Edel's psychobiographical readings of James had virtually canonized this position until anti-homophobic criticism began to interrogate its foundational assumptions.

⁵For a fuller exegesis of third-sex thought, see Herdt and Rosario.

⁶For an elaboration of the history of this essentially “one-sex” view of gender, see Laqueur.

⁷See Hekma.

⁸This is the moment Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, identifies as the creation of modern sexual subjectivity.

⁹By “heteronormative” I mean both the conventional structure of heterosexuality and the imagination of homosexuality as a confirming “mirror image” of heterosexuality.

¹⁰On the automaticity with which homosexuality is equated with a solipsistic, pathologized, and regressive form of narcissism in psychoanalytic theory—even when heterosexual attachments are recognized as ultimately narcissistic—see Warner.

¹¹However, as Borch-Jacobsen has shown, this reading of narcissism as opposed to anacritically correct post-Oedipality serves no explanatory purpose other than the tautological one of upholding Freud's description of Oedipality as correct. The willful installation, in psychoanalysis, of gender as the mark of alterity (and of polarized conventions such as “tending”/“protecting” as the mark of gender) needs to be forcibly upheld even where it appears to collapse upon itself. As Borch-Jacobsen notes, when Freud does get around to offering an example of anaclysis in the essay, it is the mother: “[h]ardly an example at all [. . .] but rather a paradigm” (103).

¹²Here I am drawing upon the exploration of flirtation's resistance to a singular teleology in Phillips.

¹³See, for example, Cannon, Walton, and Bloom.

¹⁴Along these lines, Schantz has recently observed that imagining a return to Pansy is a painful irony insofar as Osmond himself has taken care to ensure Isabel's interest in his daughter: “However sympathetic Pansy is, she is also the final iron link in Isabel's chains of mimetic desire” (21). My point in suggesting this reading, however, is that desire is not always simply “mimetic,” even when it most appears to be, and that the possibility of Isabel's returning for Pansy does not necessarily indicate, as Schantz believes, her “typical” feminine self-sacrifice.

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