Modes of female social existence and adherence in Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady

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Modes of female social existence and adherence
in Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady

by

Melanie Ann Brown

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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With respect, gratitude, and much love, I dedicate this thesis to my family, all of whom supported my decision to hop a bus for a 55-hour trip from Providence to Des Moines in the middle of August in order to pursue my desire to teach. While my entire family, extended and otherwise, have spent the last two years tirelessly rooting for me, I’d especially like to name here:

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CHAPTER 1
"MERE PARASITES":
MODES OF FEMALE SOCIAL EXISTENCE

Early in her relationship with Isabel Archer, Madame Merle, a Brooklyn native brought to Europe as a child and a cosmopolite who long since has established herself there, laments the "unnatural" condition of expatriate Americans on European soil. Significantly, Merle buries within her analysis of displaced Americans her critique of the condition of women not only in America, but in society at large:

'There are a great many of us [expatriates] like that in these parts, and I must say I think we're a wretched set of people. You should live in your own land; whatever it may be you have your natural place there. If we're not good Americans we're certainly poor Europeans; we've no natural place here. We're mere parasites, crawling over the surface; we haven't our feet in the soil. At least one can know it and not have illusions. A woman perhaps can get on; a woman, it seems to me, has no natural place anywhere; wherever she finds herself she has to remain on the surface and, more or less, to crawl. You protest, my dear? you're horrified? you declare you'll never crawl? It's very true that I don't see you crawling; you stand more upright than a good many poor creatures. Very good; on the whole, I don't think you'll crawl.'

In suggesting that women can eke out survival in any environment because they have "no natural place anywhere," Merle implies that any society in which women live is one unnatural to them—one that compels them to "crawl" and, therefore, to remain visibly subordinate to whatever dominant
force informs their crawling. Moreover, her comments about the female condition seem to carry her analogy of expatriates and women to a frightening and radical conclusion: American women can survive as parasitic expatriates in an unnatural (foreign) environment because women everywhere have had to survive as parasitic non-men in an unnatural (male-dominated) environment.

Ralph Touchett helps cement this perspective of women as social parasites in his consideration of Isabel's future:

She was intelligent and generous; it was a fine free nature; but what was she going to do with herself? This question was irregular, for with most women one had no occasion to ask it. Most women did with themselves nothing at all; they waited, in attitudes more or less gracefully passive, for a man to come that way and furnish them with a destiny. Isabel’s originality was that she gave one an impression of having intentions of her own. (63 emphasis added)

Whereas Merle describes the condition of women as subordinate but to some extent active in their subordination (they crawl), Ralph views women as passive extensions of active, dominant, and therein more powerful men. Wondering what a woman will “do” or how she will act is a rarity in his experience. Women do not “do”; instead, in a manner particularly quiescent, they wait for a man, presumably a husband, who will give them “a destiny,” a fate, a purpose for living. Thus, women’s greatest actions are passive: they wait to become receptacles for men’s names, designated destinies (and to extend the metaphor) sperm and eventually children.
These seemingly opposing perspectives of women in society—active subordinates/passive receptacles—actually oppose each other only in degrees, for common to both Ralph's and Merle's assessments is the implied existence of male-regulated social power. The most obvious example of this dominant male presence in *The Portrait of a Lady* is its antithesis: the predominant presence of female absence throughout the text. This Derridean paradox best manifests itself in the substitution of parental roles. Isabel Archer's father raises his three daughters after the death of their mother, and Gilbert Osmond usurps the role of mother in parenting Pansy by denying Madame Merle any maternal access to her own child.

In a further denial of female maternity, Ralph Touchett muses to himself that “[h]is father...was the more maternal; his mother, on the other hand, was paternal, and even, according to the slang of the day, gubernatorial” (42). Another telling example of female absence in the text builds upon the Touchetts' exchange of parental roles and implicitly maligns Lydia Touchett for her non-fulfillment of conventional maternal duties. Known for traveling beyond the confines of her home and thereby leaving her invalid husband and son for ten months out of the year, Lydia earns from Mr. Archer the designation “crazy Aunt Lydia” (34) for her unconventional actions. Thus, by constructing maternal figures as dead, denied, and “crazy,” the text reveals at once the dominance of paternal figures and the forced invisibility of female maternity.

The text's male-regulated social regime further manifests itself in the presence of female absence by sidelining female rituals. In “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth
Century America," her landmark examination of desire and emotional intimacy among female family and friendship communities, cultural historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes both marriage and childbirth as specifically female rituals, noting that "the birth of the first child [is] virtually a rite de passage". Significantly, neither of these rituals receives foregrounding in The Portrait of a Lady. Instead, Isabel’s marriage to Osmond is relegated to the text’s four-year gap between chapters 35 and 36, and the abbreviated life of her “poor little boy, who died two years ago, six months after his birth” (299) also takes place during those same undocumented years, earning only a brief mention in passing by another thwarted mother, Madame Merle. Moreover, this backgrounding of such important female rituals further suggests a commanding patriarchal presence in that, according to one critic, the narrator who presents the story, the voice that decides which events will receive narrative exposure and which will be exiled beyond the reader’s view, seems to be masculine.

The manifestation of this masculinist domination results in the social subordination of women that sets the stage for the bleak “destinies” of nearly every female character in Henry James’s The Portrait of a Lady. James’s fictional treatment of his female characters has been investigated by scholars of both genders and of various critical disciplines for decades. These critics often consider not only the treatment of women themselves in James’s text, but his treatment of issues concerning women, with Nina Baym noting that The Portrait of a Lady “was one of an increasing number of works about ‘the woman question.’” Similarly, other critics have considered James’s text according to their interpretations of the transitional social status of women in
the nineteenth century. Such critics examine James's female characters for their fulfillment or express refusal of the tenets of various theoretical constructions of women and morality, including the "Cult of True Womanhood," "the New Woman," and "the American girl."\(^5\)

Not all readings of James's female characters find their critical bases in theories of female morality. For instance, Michael T. Gilmore notes a deliberate objectification of the characters in the novel in his reading of *The Portrait of a Lady* according to the "economic and social reality that was becoming more and more prevalent in the late nineteenth century with the rise of monopoly capitalism."\(^6\) Interpreting this objectification as commodification, Gilmore notes the textual prevalence of "the denial or suppression of another person's autonomy by using that person for purposes of one's own" and claims that "[m]arriage is the most obvious instance of an arrangement in which one person is expected to implement an idea or destiny that has originated with another."\(^7\) In other words, in marriage, one party (Isabel and, later, Pansy) is expected (forced) to fulfill a marriage contract conceived by an outside party (Merle and, later, Gilbert).

Although she examines *The Portrait of a Lady* from a strictly social feminist perspective rather than from an economic one (or perhaps because of this fact), Elizabeth Allen's *A Woman's Place in the Novels of Henry James* similarly renders visible textual female objectification. Allen claims that while James's text objectifies all of its characters in that "[t]he language of society seeks to define people in terms of their quantifiable value," this seemingly unisex objectification nevertheless "operates in a masculine culture where the appropriators are male and the signs of value to be acquired
or disposed of are female.” In this stifling culture of objectification, Allen maintains, Isabel finds that “[h]er choices seem inevitably to narrow down into the choices of marriage which mean rendering herself up as value”; as a result of this inevitable self-commodification, marriage represents in James’s text Isabel’s “entry...into social existence as a woman.”

Marriage and its dreary consequences for women are not the only female-oriented social issues tackled by critics of The Portrait of a Lady. In one of the few existing detailed studies of Madame Merle’s character, William G. Sayres notes that “James seem[s] to be...revealing through drama the threat to natural law represented by the independent young woman who seeks to ‘affront her destiny’ of motherhood.” Building upon the role of destiny in the novel, Sayres also asserts that “the destiny of the Isabel Archers of the world is to fulfill their maternal role,” and that the manipulative “Madame Merle [is] destiny incarnate.” Here, Sayres’s comments concerning women, “natural law,” and “destiny” recall Ralph’s contention that women wait for men to “furnish them with a destiny” and subsequently define that destiny as induction into the particularly feminine institution of motherhood.

Although I used the term “female-oriented” above to describe marriage and motherhood, I do not wish to maintain that description. These institutions are neither simply nor purely “women’s issues”; to term them as such would be to simplify drastically the domineering role that men obviously play in both events. Therefore, in hopes of devising an expression that will most accurately describe the textual treatment of marriage, motherhood and their consequences for the female characters in The Portrait of a Lady, I will call these events subordinating social tasks: “subordinating”
in that, as Merle notes, women must crawl to exist socially; and "tasks" in that
marriage and, by extension, motherhood, are, according to Ralph, all that
women wait to "do."

Just as the absence of female-based maternal roles in The Portrait of a
Lady implicates male-dominated social control, so too does the particular
significance placed upon marriage in the text. The basic premise of the novel
involves Isabel Archer’s choice of suitors, and the male characters in the text
who are not death-bound invalids all take their turns pursuing Pansy,
Henrietta, and especially Isabel throughout the text. This textual
preoccupation with marriage situates the subordination of women to men
through an institution which French feminist Monique Wittig views as a
social and economic contract by which "men appropriate for themselves the
reproduction and production of women and also their physical persons."12
In The Straight Mind and Other Essays, a collection of essays concerning her
ideological critique of feminism and lesbianism, Wittig depicts marriage in
terms of the social reality of its gendered responsibilities, for it
assigns the woman certain obligations, including unpaid work. The
work (housework, raising children) and the obligations (surrender of
her reproduction in the name of her husband, cohabitation by day and
night, forced coitus, assignment of residence implied by the legal
concept of ‘surrender of the conjugal domicile’) mean in their terms a
surrender by the woman of her physical person to her husband.13

While Portrait does investigate the dire consequences of the financial
dependence (and independence) of women in the text, it does not purport to
present marriage as a safe haven, a rescue for female characters from social
constrictions. On the contrary, by text's end marriage suggests entrapment, defeat, betrayal, and frustrated desire. Likewise, motherhood is itself a frustrated enterprise throughout the text, for maternal figures are either devalued and denied the opportunity to act in a maternal capacity, or sacrificed and substituted as surrogate mothers.

If marriage and motherhood are read as subordinating social tasks expected of all women in the text, it is not unreasonable to consider that women, in their mutual subordination, may attempt to unite to forge common bonds against their social oppressors, namely the potential husbands and fathers who demand the fulfillment of these tasks. The concept of a community of women which deliberately separates itself from a surrounding atmosphere of social oppression in order to construct a network of intense, female-based emotional relationships has received close historical and critical attention by a number of feminist and cultural scholars. In an attempt to discern whether there exists a community of women in *The Portrait of a Lady*, I will investigate the defining characteristics of such communities in regard both to social oppression at large and to specific oppression determined by the fulfillment of the subordinating social tasks of marriage and childbirth.

In *Communities of Women*, Nina Auerbach applies her own definition of a community of women to groupings of female characters in nineteenth-century English and American literature. Throughout her examination of literary female communities, Auerbach emphasizes the self-sufficiency of women marginalized by masculinist society, noting that as "a recurrent literary image, a community of women is a rebuke to the
conventional ideal of a solitary woman living for and through men.” This self-sufficiency is not a trait of the solitary woman, but a characteristic of solidarity: not woman versus the world, but a community of women versus their social construction by an oppressive patriarchal regime.

In an effort to reveal other characteristics unique to literary communities of women, Auerbach contrasts them to those perpetuated by literary communities of men. Situating power and authority within such male communities, Auerbach traces the roots of that power to the quest trope so prevalent in male-oriented texts. While “the male community turns inward to explore...the nature of its own authority,” female communities explore the potentiality of self-possession through their rejection of the male community and its tenets. Furthermore, although male communities live by and communicate via an “explicit, formulated, and inspirational” code, female communities, in their marginalization under the power of a patriarchal social regime, are denied this capacity and must instead depend upon a code of existence and communication which is hardly a code at all, but “a whispered and fleeting thing, more a buried language than a rallying cry.”

This submerged, covert language is that which women must seek out and understand before they can attain self-possession within the female community. The absence or “burial” of that language within the surface of a given community’s patriarchal social fabric, however, adds to women’s difficulties in attaining self-possession in a society informed by male-regulated power and creates favorable conditions for miscommunication within and beyond the community. This miscommunication can undermine...
women's own potential capacities to unite and subvert the patriarchal social order (perhaps the reason why that social order buries female code in the first place). Thus, Auerbach defines communities of women as united, self-sufficient groups of women who reject the markings of dominant, male, conventional society in two ways: first, they refuse to act in accordance with social conventions that dictate women's existing solely "for and through" men; and second, they search for and attempt to use a "buried" female code in order to attain self-possession and, conversely, to avoid usurpation and possession by men.

While Auerbach examines the solidarity of communities of women in works of literature, cultural historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg investigates female self-sufficiency in the society of nineteenth century America. In "The Female World of Love and Ritual," Smith-Rosenberg studies intimate, lifelong relationships among both female family members and female friends as arenas of emotional self-sufficiency for women forced into communities by the dominant social notion of "distinctly male and female spheres...determined by the immutable laws of God and nature." These spheres are claimed to have dictated the parameters of female existence in the nineteenth century. Smith-Rosenberg notes that women often were physically rooted in the domestic realm, for

most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women lived within a world bounded by home, church, and the institution of visiting—that endless trooping of women to one another's homes for social purposes. It was a world inhabited by children and by other women.
In addition to the duties socially expected of women, female family ties served to keep them bound to the domestic realm. Close bonds among extended family members revolved around the “intimate mother-daughter relationship [which] lay at the heart of this female world.”21

This gender-oriented separation from the male/public power sphere was not only spatial, however; strong bonds of friendship also developed as a result of the “severe social restrictions on intimacy between young men and women.”22 Indeed, the emotional relationships and close-knit communities women constructed resulted in “a world in which men made but a shadowy appearance.”23 At the very least, these intimate bonds served to unite women subordinate to patriarchal social power by establishing “supportive networks [that] were institutionalized in social conventions or rituals that accompanied virtually every important event in a woman’s life.”24 That is, from adolescence to adulthood, women called upon the strength of their female family and friends to experience and endure as a community the often painful rituals and ceremonies of passages of adolescence, marriage, and childbirth.

When marriage inevitably intruded upon these intense emotional relationships, it marked both “a girl’s traumatic removal” from her family and friends and her “adjustment to a husband, who, because he was male, came to marriage with both a different world view and vastly different experiences.”25 Notably, despite the traumatic life changes resulting from marriage, generations of women nevertheless fulfilled and perpetuated the socially constructed expectations (subordinating social tasks) demanded of them according to the tenets of patriarchal society by bearing children and
raising them in these emotionally self-sufficient female communities, only to prepare those children for adulthood and their own imminent removal from communal security. This perpetuity stemmed from the pervasive strength of the mother-daughter connection, the "heart" of the female community, for daughters were born into a female world. Their mothers' life expectations and sympathetic network of friends and relations were among the first realities in the life of developing children. As long as the mothers' domestic role remained relatively stable and few viable alternatives competed with it, daughters tended to accept their mothers' world and to turn automatically to other women for support and intimacy.26

In other words, the nearly non-existent chances of a mother's domestic role becoming unstable in a patriarchal society that ensures her subordination guaranteed the continuity of this cycle of masculinist dominance. Without a break in this cycle, daughters of such mothers did not even venture to question the legitimacy of patriarchal authority, much less devise methods of subverting it.

Thus, according to a composite definition of Auerbach's and Smith-Rosenberg's theories, a community of women is a marginalized group that consists entirely of women who unite either to undermine the patriarchal ideology that oppresses them or to promote an atmosphere of emotional self-sufficiency within that patriarchy. The discovery of male-regulated conventions of social existence in the text against which female characters may act renders conditions favorable for the potential existence of a community of women in The Portrait of a Lady. Moreover, community
implies consciousness, an awareness of existing within the parameters of a
given group. Unity suggests communication—a mutual understanding, a
shared purpose undertaken to realize a common goal, such as that which
Smith-Rosenberg finds in the lifelong emotional relationships between
women in nineteenth-century America or Auerbach in her description of the
Amazons, the Muses, and other communities of women from Greek
mythology.27

Although there is potential for the existence of a community of
women in James's text, such female solidarity does not exist in *The Portrait of
a Lady*. Women are not united, but physically distant. Lydia Touchett's trip
to Albany finds Isabel alone in "the most depressed" of the rooms in her
grandmother's house; Henrietta, an employee of *The Interviewer*, is the only
woman in the text to act in the visible realm of employment; and Pansy is
isolated in the convent where her father stows her for fifteen years.
Moreover, while emotional interaction between female characters is apparent
throughout the text, such emotional bonds serve only to unite Isabel to other
women, such as her friends Henrietta and Merle and her husband's daughter,
Pansy. There is no apparent emotional relationship at all within any group of
women of which Isabel is not a part.

Significantly, the characteristics which Auerbach and Smith-Rosenberg
situate as the definitive centers of both literary and human female
communities are the very elements stunted, sidelined, and outright banished
within the text of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Auerbach's requirements for female
self-sufficiency—the refusal to exist "for and through" men and the use of a
"buried" code—do not exist in this text. Instead, female characters who
attempt to sustain themselves apart from men are either stymied by undesired male intervention (Ralph’s request to his dying father to ensure that Isabel receives a substantial inheritance), inducted into social existence via marriage (Henrietta’s engagement to Bob Bantling), or represented as aberrations (“crazy” Aunt Lydia).

Likewise, Smith-Rosenberg’s communities of women remain unseen throughout the text. The mother-daughter relationship is marginalized to the point of non-existence: Isabel’s mother is dead, Pansy’s is denied, and Henrietta’s is unknown. Also invisible is the communal experience of female rituals of marriage and childbirth. Every engagement, wedding and birth in the text takes place offstage and unseen and generally garners perfunctory retrospective mention at best. The marginalization of and the refusal to acknowledge these strategies for female unification within emotionally self-sufficient social communities further suggest the existence of the text’s simultaneous patriarchal essentializing and devaluing of women through their forced completion of the subordinating social tasks of marriage and childbirth.

Isabel and the other female characters are all finally defined vis-à-vis their positions in society in relation to men. In the end, they are either pre-wives (single women pursued—and often captured—by male suitors), wives, or mothers. Although this ultimate definition according to their relations with male characters significantly subordinates women, their method of entry into the text further grounds them in the private/invisible (female) realm reserved for women: all the text’s women gain entrance to Portrait either as family (sisters, daughters, nieces), or nearly family relations (friends).
This point of entry into the text according to the predominantly private arenas of family and friendship assigns women a less powerful position than the text's men: women first come to be viewed as objects—Osmond notes that Isabel "had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects," and Ned Rosier claims to "care more for [Pansy] Osmond than for all the bibelots in Europe" (253, 296)—and later as marital or potential marital accessories to the men who objectify them. Male characters, however, do not find themselves defined exclusively as family or friends. Instead, men gain entry into the text as suitors and are subsequently defined in terms of their occupation and monetary value. The exceptions to this rule—non-suitors Ralph and Daniel Touchett—still derive their textual identification according to their commodity status: they exist as invalids, an acceptable social occupation, and more importantly, perhaps in an attempt to redeem their invalid/ity in a public arena that values commodities, these male invalids are also rich.

I mentioned above that all of the women in The Portrait of a Lady are either family relations, pre-wives, wives, or mothers. I intend to explicate these categories for the purposes of this study—that is, in order to examine the proffered social roles and the subsequent consequential actions of these women. I assert that female characters in this text are defined according to their fulfillment of the subordinating social tasks of marriage and motherhood: women are either depicted as unmarried and socially expected to stay that way because they lack some culturally desirable value, as married because of their fulfillment of this value, or as maternal figures—biological, surrogate, or denied mothers. These three modes of female social existence
are, respectively, Sisters (Lilian Ludlow and the Misses Molyneux), Wives (Edith Keyes), and Mothers (Lydia Touchett, Mrs. Osmond, and Serena Merle).  

Three female characters in *The Portrait of a Lady* do not meet the definitions of any one of these conditions of female existence and therein present intriguing exceptions to the categories of Sisters, Wives, and Mothers. Henrietta Stackpole (Sister/pre-Wife) and Amy Gemini (Wife/frustrated Mother) represent bridges within and between different modes of existence defined here. Isabel Archer's textual position, however, is even more striking in that she is the only female character to play all three roles at some point in the course of the text: she encounters the Touchetts at Gardencourt as an unmarried Sister, comes to live in Rome as a Wife, and undertakes her final return there as a Mother.

While these women act in varying degrees of similarity according to the social conventions assigned their marital/maternal status, none of them is united in their presence as unmarried, married, or mothers. Despite the fact that it is viewed in terms of "conquest...[and] possession," "diminished liberty," and as a "big bribe" (103, 104), marriage is inevitable in the society of James's text. In fact, the only characteristic common to both Smith-Rosenberg's communities of nineteenth century American women and *The Portrait of a Lady*'s loosely-knit group of female characters is the unquestioned perpetuity of the cycle of masculinist dominance through the fulfillment of subordinating social tasks and specifically through the maternal sacrifice of female children: Mrs. Osmond offers her daughter, Amy, in marriage to Count Gemini, and, in the absence of Mrs. Archer, Serena Merle
sacrifices Isabel to Gilbert Osmond for the sake of Pansy, the daughter to whom she is denied access and therefore cannot sacrifice to marriage.

Nearly all of the female characters in the text, however, promote dominant cultural values that oppress women and render them as Merle’s crawling social parasites. This urging of Sisters, Wives, and Mothers of female adherence to subordinating social tasks that oppress and objectify women in a cycle of physical and economic dependence on men is what I will call their promotion of social adherence. The extent of each woman’s promotion of adherence and her actions in doing so tend to depend on her assigned mode of social existence. Sisters and Wives tend to act conventionally and promote conventional behavior; atypical bridge characters, such as Henrietta and Amy Gemini, promote adherence through their unconventional behavior; and Mothers, as aforementioned, perform an outright sacrifice of their daughters.

Thus women as Sisters, Wives, and Mothers separately fulfill and perpetuate their common subordinating social tasks, and the emotional interdependency of female communities does not exist in The Portrait of a Lady. Instead, in perpetuating the social cycle of female dependence, these women act malevolently toward each other by encouraging and even covertly constructing and ensuring other’s marital relationships. The most active participants in the manipulation of other women are Mothers. Having themselves been successfully assimilated into the male-regulated social structure as objects and receptacles, Mothers are the most dangerous women in the text in that they perpetuate the subordinating social tasks of marriage.
and motherhood by sacrificing their daughters or daughter-figures to husband/possessors.
CHAPTER 2
CULTURAL BANISHMENT, SOCIAL ESCAPE:
SISTERS AND WIVES

The definitive characteristic of the women who inform the categories of Sisters and Wives in this study is their mutual promotion of female adherence to social conventions including marriage and other manifestations of female deferment to male authority that serve somehow to oppress both themselves and the text's other female characters. These women, however, share another distinguishing feature. All women in Sisters and Wives are present in the text as siblings only—Isabel knows them either as her own sisters (Lilian and Edith) or as sisters of another main character with whom she is closely acquainted (the Misses Molyneux). Moreover, all of these women are defined by and subject to dominant male-regulated cultural values. So, while Sisters—women who are either unmarried or who, for various reasons, are not expected to marry—tend to be socially ignored, Wives are rendered as commodified marital objects for their ability to meet culturally desirable definitions of femininity.

Despite the fact that they promote adherence as women's logical, inevitable, and sole social option (or perhaps expressly because they do so), Sisters and Wives find themselves offered a thin slice of the textual spotlight throughout *The Portrait of a Lady*. Sister siblings may be prevalent in the text, but they still go for the most part unheard and unseen. In fact, throughout the novel, Isabel Archer, the only female character with visible, living female relations, interacts with only one of her sisters (the eldest, Lilian), and the text affords that manifest interaction only two scenes, one of which is described entirely in exposition devoid of dialogue.
Similarly, the Misses Molyneux make but two textual appearances, and like Lilian Ludlow’s scenes at Albany and Paris (where, on account of Lily’s two young sons, Isabel “confined her movements to a narrow circle” [265]), they emerge from the text only within the boundaries of domestic spheres, this time of Lockleigh and Gardencourt. While other women (notably including Isabel, Henrietta, Merle and Lydia Touchett) deliberately exist in the male/public/social sphere, Sisters and Wives seldom, if ever, venture beyond the female/private/domestic realm. In limiting these Sisters and Wives to a few scant scenes strictly bounded within the domestic arena, the text marginalizes them, rendering Lilian, Edith, and the Molyneux sisters as peripheral characters who appear in a limited number of scenes and who, therefore, seem to be afforded limited ability to impact the text’s events.

In addition to distinguishing themselves from other female characters in the text as those who openly promote acceptance of and participation in oppressive cultural values, the women in Sisters and Wives distinguish themselves from each other by perpetuating female subservience to the dominant (male) definers of cultural values: those women who are socially expected to marry, and those who are not. Sisters whom society expects to remain unmarried—the Misses Molyneux and Lilian Ludlow—generally lack culturally desirable beauty or are exempt via some affiliation with religion. Conversely, Edith Keyes is expected to marry because of her culturally desirable/objectifiable appearance. In meeting patriarchal standards of marriageability, Edith is reduced to object status, judged only according to her physical/material value and to the extent to which she will benefit her husbands.
Edith Keyes, considered "the beauty" (37) of the three Archer sisters, is consistently described in terms of her appearance and its effect on society. Her culturally desirable appearance results in an unmatched social popularity that Isabel notes as an intellectual child growing up with a beautiful sister:

Isabel, though she danced very well, had not the recollection of having been in New York a successful member of the choreographic circle; her sister Edith was, as every one said, so very much more fetching. Edith was so striking an example of success that Isabel could have no illusions as to what constituted this advantage, or as to the limits of her own power to frisk and jump and shriek.... (40)

This unmatched popularity also leads to multiple visits by young men who are impressed by Edith's beauty but fear Isabel's intellect. Her inability to achieve Edith's success either with boys or in society at large leads Isabel to detest her own acumen, for "[t]he poor girl liked to be thought clever but she hated to be thought bookish; she used to read in secret and, though her memory was excellent, to abstain from showy reference" (41). In indirectly forcing her sister to hide the extent of her mental ability, Edith Archer seems to exemplify Merle's theory of the visible, female parasitic social existence and to perpetuate male-defined values that prefer superficial appearance to informed intelligence.

As Mrs. Keyes, Edith cements her inclusion in the category of Wives by further perpetuating the image of the masculinist cultural ideal of woman-as-object. First, as a beautiful woman in the "unfashionable West, to which, to her deep chagrin, her husband was successively relegated" (37), Edith is afforded subhuman status in a nearly exclusively male domain in her role as
"the ornament of those various military stations[.]" Second, she is objectified by the text’s narrator, who dismisses her in one sentence by noting that "as our history is not further concerned with her it will suffice that she was indeed very pretty and that she formed the ornament of those various military stations" (37). Here, Edith becomes an object not only for the visual pleasure of the male/public/social sphere, but also for the verbal pleasure of the narrator, who sums up her self in terms of her socially pleasant appearance in all of sixty-four words (in none of which she is afforded the opportunity to assert her own voice) so as to tell his narrative as he wishes to tell it.

Sisters whom society does not expect to marry do not find themselves objectified so much as ignored by male definers of cultural value. Consequently, the characteristic that distinguishes these women from desired, commodifiable Wives is their existence as the female equivalents to the text’s male invalids. That is, like male invalids, Lilian and the Molyneux sisters are socially excused from participating in the otherwise mandatory social contract of marriage. However, whereas Ralph Touchett is excused from marrying as a result of his tuberculosis, these Sisters are exempt from this union because they are "practical," plain, and/or "not in their first youth" (37, 72)—that is, because they lack culturally desirable looks. Thus, while Wives are celebrated and commodified by their husbands as possessions for their express fulfillment of sought-after cultural values, Sisters are maligned for their inability to meet such cultural standards of desirable beauty and femininity.

Ralph’s excuse of poor health is ironic in light of the fact that his earlier assertion that women do not “do” suggests, conversely, that men must “do,”
must “come that way and furnish [women] with a destiny” (63). The text’s male/public/(active) society exempts men for their lack of health because illness is considered a social occupation: Ralph Touchett’s “consumption’s his carrière; 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’ ” (169). Here, no equivalent career exists for unmarriageable women, for while illness invests invalid male characters with social purpose and a particular career, the lack of culturally desirable looks does not offer Sisters any such socially acceptable status.

Instead, women whom (male-regulated) society excuses from marriage—women without a culturally desirable appearance—are seen as desexed women, as creatures with little to offer men searching for attractive objects to acquire in marriage. Notably, the Misses Molyneux (the only Sisters to end the text without potential husbands) are not described according to degrees of beauty. Apart from noting that they “were not in their first youth,” the text describes these sisters’ appearances in terms of religion: Miss Molyneux “had a smooth, nun-like forehead and wore a large silver cross suspended from her neck,” both of which Isabel believes refer to “a weird Anglican mystery—some delightful reinstitution perhaps of the quaint office of the canoness” (72, 114). This deliberate invocation of religious discourse to describe the appearance of the only unmarried/unengaged women in Sisters and Wives suggests that the male-controlled conventional society not only excuses women from marriage if they possess culturally undesirable looks, but also affiliates these unmarriageable women with religion. Therein lies their
Another Sister who lacks culturally desirable looks, Lilian Ludlow, manages to marry regardless, perhaps as a direct result of the fact that, despite her culturally devalued appearance, she is not affiliated with religion. Lilian, the eldest, most practical, and most sensible of the three Archer sisters, is a "short and solid [woman whose] claim to figure [had been] questioned" (37). Because of her less feminine appearance (and especially in comparison to her beautiful, suitor-pursued sister, Edith), Lilian "had occasionally been spoken of as a young woman who might be thankful to marry at all—she was so much plainer than her sisters" (37). Despite her figure, however, "she was conceded presence," and she eludes social exclusion through her career as "the mother of two peremptory little boys and the mistress of a wedge of brown stone violently driven into Fifty-third Street" (37).

In that her sister manifests culturally desirable attributes that allow her to marry, and in that she seems to lack these very traits herself, Lilian Ludlow triumphs in her fortuity and takes pride in assimilating herself to the dominant male-regulated culture through marriage, an event in which she probably never thought she would participate. As the wife of a New York lawyer, Lilian is "very happy, and now seemed to exult in her condition as in a bold escape" (37). The word escape here implies a skirting of what otherwise would have been a presumably dismal fate—that of the unmarried, sensible, practical (read: unattractive) woman in a society that demands feminine objectification in marriage.
In that they are either culturally conditioned to marry or socially excused from doing so, Sisters and Wives present themselves both as products and as perpetuators of the dominant, male-informed culture that demands female adherence to the subordinating social tasks of marriage and motherhood. One characteristic of their successful assimilation into this essentializing and objectifying realm is the Sisters' and Wives' conventionality. Ralph points out to Isabel the Misses Molyneux's lack of originality, "declaring that no epithet could be less applicable than this to the two Misses Molyneux, since there were fifty thousand young women in England who exactly resembled them" (72). In contrast to the unmarried Englishwomen, Lilian Ludlow, wife, mother of two, and "mistress" of a metropolitan brownstone, embodies nineteenth-century middle-class American domestic conventionality. Rather than react against the culture which both essentializes and objectifies them, Sisters and Wives perpetuate that culture, urging other women to follow its social rules.

Further demonstrating their status as products of this male-regulated culture, Sisters and Wives act in accordance with the men in their lives. Despite her desire to live elsewhere, Edith remains the ornament of military stations in "the unfashionable West" (37). Lilian remains consistently conscious of "her husband's force in argument," noting that he "always take[s] the opposite ground" (37). Even the unmarried Misses Molyneux act in deference to a man: their brother, Lord Warburton. Isabel witnesses this reverence firsthand:

Lord Warburton's sister addressed him with a certain timidity and reminded him she ought to return home in time for tea, as she was
expecting company to partake of it. He made no answer—apparently not having heard her; he was preoccupied, and with good reason. Miss Molyneux—as if he had been Royalty—stood like a lady-in-waiting. (118)

This sacrifice of self-oriented desires to the desires of the men closest to them extends to sheer passivity in any actions relating to men. Miss Molyneux best exemplifies this passivity in relation to men in the dialogue of the scene following the passage above. When Warburton finally agrees to leave with his sister, Henrietta (revealing the extent of the distance between her unconventional position as Sister/pre-Wife and conventional Sisters) exclaims, "I hoped you would resist!" .... 'I wanted to see what Miss Molyneux would do,' " to which Miss Molyneux replies, "I never do anything" (119).

Indeed, that is the credo of the invisible, conventional Sisters and Wives in The Portrait of a Lady: they never do anything. In lieu of acting, Sisters and Wives put forth opinions that support and perpetuate the cultural values and subordinating social tasks which mire them in convention. Lilian, "watching [Isabel] as a motherly spaniel might watch a free greyhound," voices her desire to "see her safely married—that's what I want to see" (37). Despite her desire, however, Lilian does not actively try to marry Isabel. The extent of her action, in fact, surfaces as no more than an anxious hope that surrogate Mother Lydia Touchett, in offering to take Isabel abroad, will "do something handsome for Isabel" and "give her all the advantages" (38). Likewise, neither Edith nor the Misses Molyneux do anything
throughout the text: one decorates a military base, and the others entertain guests with tea and conversation within the domestic confines of Lockleigh.

In that *The Portrait of a Lady* constructs Sisters and Wives as generally passive, conventional women judged and afforded a valued place in male-controlled society according to their possession of culturally desirable traits via objectification as ornament or commodity, the text suggests a severe marginalization of women who openly promote this masculinist social dominance. The one Sister who best exemplifies the successful process of female conformity to male-regulated society is banished without vocal self-representation from the text, curtly described and dismissed in the course of one sentence. The textual invisibility of Edith Keyes, a woman who earns her husband as a result of her culturally desirable beauty and who finds herself the ornament of male-dominated spheres (military bases), suggests the invisibility of women who maintain the patriarchal status quo.

The textual marginalization of Sisters and Wives is ironic in light of the fact that the backgrounding of these characters—that is, of women who urge female (and specifically, Isabel's) adherence to male social control through deferment to masculine authority and specifically through marriage—foregrounds the grim battle between Isabel and her suitors. This irony is hardly incomprehensible, though. In that all of the women in Sisters and Wives are either married or beyond marriageability and are thereby already assimilated according to the parameters of male-informed cultural norms, the masculine narrator can afford to ignore them and highlight instead the process of breaking—or assimilating—Isabel Archer.
This invisibility of Lilian, Edith, and the Misses Molyneux is best manifest in another group of marginalized female characters who also serve to promote female deferment to men: the sisters of the convent to which Gilbert Osmond relegates his daughter. Spatially the truest community of women in the text, the nuns deliberately remove themselves from public visibility and construct a personal, domestic-oriented sphere of and for women. Nevertheless, the holy sisters continue to perpetuate adherence to oppressive cultural values, though not through marriage and the fulfillment of culturally requisite subordinating social tasks so much as through their express unmarriageability (not unlike the Molyneux sisters, themselves described in religious terms).

Thus, although they create a separate, entirely female space, the nuns do not foster a community of women, a unity of purpose that empowers women or encourages their autonomy. On the contrary, the convent is a private space devoted to preparing girls for survival as women in the male-regulated public domain. Inasmuch as the convent is the location of this education of social survival and as that education results in the construction of women who firmly adhere to male-dictated social standards, the nuns perpetuate the conventional attitude of the text's Sisters and Wives and play a direct role in constructing their work-in-progress, Pansy Osmond.

Pansy Osmond represents the youngest embodiment of the ideal social female for two reasons. First, taught by nuns who promote the attitudes of the society beyond the convent, Pansy is subjected to a program constructed "precisely to fit her for the world" (198). Fitting Pansy for the world translates into transforming her into a "good Christian," which does not matter to her
father nearly as much as does her transformation into “a charming young lady—a real little woman” (196). In order to achieve this growth and to prepare her for the world, the nuns enforce a rigorous system that teaches her to ask and to obey, which Merle notes is “what good little girls should do” (199). Thus, the nuns create a separate sphere in society to promote female subservience to men, a purpose infused with a sad irony in light of the fact that this sphere of nuns represents the only true, separate comm(on/)unity of women in the text.32

Second, Pansy represents the ideal social female because she has been subject to and assimilated according to patriarchal cultural values since birth. Raised from birth only by Gilbert Osmond, her aesthete father who finds fault in women with “[t]oo many ideas” (239), Pansy is sent to the convent specifically to keep her empty of ideas, to sequester her from the social world and to render her a receptacle into which her father can then deposit his own ideas and opinions. By the time Pansy reaches her sixteenth birthday, she has been reduced to object status and Gilbert’s goal has been more than adequately met. Accordingly, when Isabel first meets Pansy, recently released from the convent after years of education, she finds “a sheet of blank paper” which she “hoped...would be covered with an edifying text” (233). By their next meeting a few weeks later, however, Isabel has the opportunity to inspect her more closely and discovers a girl carefully cultivated to submit to men, for

Pansy was really a blank page, a pure white surface, successfully kept so; she had neither art, nor guile, nor temper, nor talent—only two or three small exquisite instincts: for knowing a friend, for avoiding a mistake, for taking care of an old toy or a new frock.
In realizing Pansy’s complete purity, Isabel views Pansy as a female automaton, a being incapable of expressing anger, craft, intellect, or ability. Moreover, the only actions she can discern within Pansy’s grasp are overtly feminine: she can participate in friendships, avoid mistakes (like upsetting men, especially her father), and exhibit caretaking techniques that inform the roots of her maternal capacity. Isabel acknowledges the danger of existing as a “blank page” in the male/public/social/(active) domain:

Yet to be so tender was to be touching withal, and she could be felt as an easy victim of fate. She would have no will, no power to resist, no sense of her own importance; she would easily be mystified, easily crushed: her force would be all in knowing when and where to cling.

(262)

This passage, though directly concerning Pansy’s construction within the strictly enforced boundaries of the private sphere of the convent, seems also, to some extent, to describe Isabel. Although she shields herself from Goodwood’s and Warburton’s marriage proposals with what she believes to be her own autonomy, Isabel eventually comes to have neither the will nor the power to resist the subordinating social tasks of marriage and childbirth. Furthermore, the employment of the phrase “easy victim” in Isabel’s perception of Pansy is an ironic one, for Isabel repeatedly evokes this very phrase in relation to herself, telling Caspar twice at Pratt’s Hotel in London that she will “not be an easy victim” (138, 142). What Isabel does not know when she utters this phrase, however, is that her male suitors—men who visibly attempt to usurp and possess her in marriage—are not her greatest
threat. That distinction belongs to the covert actions of her surrogate Mother, Serena Merle.
CHAPTER 3
ENGAGED WITHIN AND BETWEEN:
SISTER/PRE-WIFE, WIFE/DENIED MOTHER

Two female characters who resist the features of social adherence described in this study as common to Sisters and Wives are also the two women who most visibly distance themselves from the socially conventional behavior of Edith, Lilian, and the Molyneux sisters. Henrietta Stackpole, a bold "emanation of the great democracy" (87), stands contrary to Lilian Ludlow's embodiment of the middle class American housewife and the Misses Molyneux's caricature of women in England's domestic middle classes. Likewise, Amy Gemini's visible and unconventional extravagance counters Edith Keyes's silence and social banishment.

In fact, these female characters distance themselves from Sisters and Wives so fully that their actions often seem to contradict this examination's parameters of existing as a Sister or a Wife: they are active, vocal, visible, and, relative to scenes involving conventional Sisters and Wives, they are textually dominant. Despite their textual dominance relative to the nearly invisible Sisters and Wives (four characters who appear in five scenes throughout the whole of the text), Henrietta and Amy Gemini are textually peripheral characters in relation to Isabel and Merle. They appear neither as seldom as sidelined female characters nor as often as emphasized female characters. Thus neither entirely marginalized nor entirely spotlighted, Henrietta and Amy Gemini are boundary characters who bridge the gap between the ignored and the showcased women in the text.

Likewise, their socially unconventional behavior and manners of promoting female adherence to male-informed cultural values stem from
their unique positions as bridge characters in relation to masculinist society. Both Henrietta, as Sister/pre-Wife, and Amy Gemini, as Wife/denied Mother, exist in suspension ("engaged," so to speak) between two of the modes of female social existence discussed in this examination. Existing simultaneously within and between specific modes of female social existence, Henrietta Stackpole and Amy Gemini cannot be neatly categorized or objectified by the dominant cultural values that prey on Sisters and Wives. Accordingly, both women have access to and manifest actions according to their socially unconventional perspectives of male-regulated cultural values.

While they reject the tenets of male-informed cultural values that demand female passivity and invisibility, however, neither Henrietta nor Amy Gemini ultimately refuses that culture’s subordinating social tasks. Rather than fully embrace their distinct social unconventionality by urging other women to spurn those tasks and the masculinist social order that dictates them, they exploit their unique positions as cultural bridge characters and employ methods of promoting social adherence that are unavailable to Sisters and Wives held fast within the private/domestic/silent domain of culturally desirable female convention.

As a newspaper correspondent, Henrietta Stackpole not only enters but also visibly acts within the male/public/social arena, thereby existing well beyond the conventional limits of the domestic-oriented realm of other Sisters and Wives. Despite her apparent refusal to submit to conventional roles expected of her (such as Ralph’s assertion that women do not "do"), Henrietta aligns herself with the ultra-conventional Sisters and Wives in two ways. First, as aforementioned, although she is not directly related to any of
the characters in the text, Henrietta labels herself Isabel’s “sister-spirit,” and Isabel herself notes that Henrietta “was a woman, she was a sister” (88, 399).

Second, the verbal placement of Henrietta within the realm of Sisters is amplified by her engagement to Bantling, which represents her anticipated physical self-placement within the realm of Wives.

The only female character in Sisters and Wives to be both single and engaged to be married within the scope of the text, Henrietta as Sister/pre-Wife doubly roots herself among the otherwise conventional women in these groups. Henrietta’s position situates her in the visible realm, thereby refusing the social banishment of Sisters Lilian and the Misses Molyneux, and removes her from the commodifying objectification of Wife Edith. Instead, as a Sister/pre-Wife “engaged” between these two conditions of female existence, Henrietta is treated as an aberration, a female deviant who does not satisfy the requirements of male-regulated cultural values of passive femininity in both action and appearance. As such, Henrietta is neither banished nor objectified in the text; she is defeminized.

Henrietta’s defeminization stems not so much from the absence of culturally desirable beauty as from her presence in the world of public, non-philanthropic employment. As a working woman, she both infringes on the social sphere of men and appropriates the patriarchal domestic role generally reserved for them: that of the breadwinner. Henrietta, a talented writer “without parents and without property, had adopted three of the children of an infirm and widowed sister and was paying their school-bills out of the proceeds of her literary labour” (54). While Isabel admires her friend’s courage and unfailing efficacy as a woman working for her family in a male-
dominated field of work, men do not so esteem her actions. When they learn of her occupation as a newspaper reporter, a vocation heralded by its nature of interrogation and invasion, and of her adamant disavowal of passivity, domesticity, and other culturally valued feminine qualities, they do not applaud her stamina but question her femininity.

Upon hearing that "'[s]he doesn't care a straw what men think of her,'" Ralph Touchett exclaims, "'As a man I'm bound to dislike her then. She must be a kind of monster. Is she very ugly?'" (78) Although Ralph makes his comment in a lighthearted conversation with Isabel, the same image is echoed later in a much less innocuous context. Railing against Isabel's relationships with her family and friends, Gilbert Osmond scoffs, "'Miss Stackpole, however, is your most wonderful invention. She strikes me as a kind of monster'" (401). Thus, in that she breaks the social rules dictating the preordained domestic subordination demanded of women by the existing possessors of cultural power, Henrietta is not only defeminized throughout the text by its narrator's ascription to her of masculine qualities, but she is dehumanized as well, viewed as a deviant, a freak of "nature," a monster-person existing against and apart from society's carefully gendered conventions.

However, Henrietta's defeminization by a masculinist culture that objectifies women through subordinating social tasks does not hinder her repeated, intrusive involvement in Isabel's personal interests (or concerning Caspar, Isabel's non-interest) throughout the text. A working woman with a minimal visible affiliation with any domestic sphere, Henrietta does not appear to be someone who would press marriage on an unmarried female
friend, especially in a culture that values female objectification and commodification through the marital institution. Curiously, it is who Ralph notes this discrepancy, for when Henrietta tells him "'[i]t's every one's duty to get married,'" he finds that her remark "struck him as a false note. When a marriageable young woman urges matrimony on an unencumbered young man the most obvious explanation of her conduct is not the altruistic impulse' " (85).

If urging marriage on Ralph stems from a less than munificent purpose, then pressing upon Isabel a social institution that serves to objectify women and render them inert domestic prisoners cannot be the result of a beneficent inclination. That inclination, however, never reveals itself. Instead of manifesting a motive for her actions, Henrietta simply continues to manipulate Caspar's relationship with Isabel up to the last page of the text, telling him, "'Look here, Mr. Goodwood...just you wait!' " (482).

The second female character who bridges two modes of female social existence is Wife/denied Mother Amy Gemini. Like Henrietta, the Countess Gemini enters the text in sibling terms. Upon meeting her future sister-in-law, Isabel "contented herself with having given a friendly welcome to the unfortunate lady, who, whatever her defects, had at least the merit of being Mr. Osmond's sister" (234). Despite her entrance into the text as a sister, Amy Gemini is not a socially maligned Sister. Married to an Italian nobleman, Gemini is a woman associated with both subordinating social tasks: she has married and gone through childbirth. Her attempts at motherhood have been frustrated, however, for "'[s]he had no children; she had lost three within a year of their birth' " (235). Thus, as Henrietta is engaged within and between
the conditions of Sister and Wife as Sister/pre-Wife, Amy Gemini is suspended within and between Wife and Mother as Wife/thwarted Mother.

In contrast to the deliberately unconventional Henrietta, though, Amy Gemini is domestic in her association with her husband’s palace in Florence. However, this domesticity is not self-imposed; quite the contrary, the Countess “was often extremely bored—bored, in her own phrase, to extinction” (367). Imprisoned in her home as a victim of social convention, she “lived with her eyes upon Rome, and it was a constant grievance of her life that she had not a habitation there” (367). She longs for an invitation to Palazzo Roccanera in Rome and “would have gone all the same,” but she cannot because “[i]t was her husband who wouldn’t let her” (368). In that she is a domestic prisoner, forced against her desire to live in an area that she considers socially isolated, the Countess Gemini to some degree shares the distinction of social banishment with Edith Keyes. One woman is relegated to “the unfashionable West...to her deep chagrin” by her military husband; the other is forced to remain in Florence, unable to live in Rome where her husband is “simply a very dull Florentine” (37, 367).

Despite her spouse-imposed domestic-oriented existence, the Countess presents an intriguing contradiction to the actions and textual treatment of the silent, invisible Wife Edith Keyes. Infamous for “her style, her shrillness, her egotism, [and] her violations of taste” (235), Amy Gemini employs socially unconventional attitudes and behavior in her attempt to make a presence for herself in the realm of the visible beyond her domestic prison in Florence. She is certainly visible within the confines of the text, where she is afforded far more scenes and dialogue than Edith. The most interesting difference
between Edith and Amy Gemini, however, finds its roots in another similarity: both are objectified via their fulfillment of the subordinating social task of marriage. The difference between their individual objectification, though, is great: while Edith is objectified as an ornament by the male military community, the Countess is objectified as a commodity by her own mother.\(^{33}\)

Mrs. Osmond, (a Mother to be described in detail in the next chapter), with a nod to the male-dictated cultural norms that value female superficiality/appearance over demonstrations of intelligence, “approve[s] of political marriages” (235) and acknowledges the financial importance of marriage for young women from less than wealthy families. Unable to rely on her daughter’s looks—for the Countess, “thin and dark and not at all pretty, having features that suggested some tropical bird” (214) is without culturally desirable features—she attempts to buy the attention of an Italian nobleman. Her attempt is ultimately successful, for the underfinanced Count “had been glad to accept Amy Osmond, in spite of [her] questionable beauty...[because of] the modest dowry her mother was able to offer” (235). Thus, while Henrietta, no longer Sister and not yet Wife, a woman engaged between culturally dictated and valued modes of female social existence, is defeminized and viewed as a monstrous anomaly, Amy Gemini, in her fulfillment of the subordinating social task of marriage, is a successfully assimilated Wife, a woman rendered as object and as measurable value via the marriage process.

As a result of her mother’s having chosen her a husband for his status and (lack of) wealth, Amy Osmond finds herself unhappily married to “a low-
lived brute,” and she reacts to her unhappiness by becoming “horribly extravagant” (235). In so doing, the Countess Gemini, unlike Edith Keyes, refuses to fade into textual oblivion. Furthermore, though objectified by her mother, she refuses to be rendered socially invisible, attempting instead to remain in public view. There, Amy Gemini is derided for her “horribly extravagant” actions, but (in a distinction that recalls Merle and her metaphor of women-as-parasites who crawl in active subordination) those actions garner her notice and visibility just the same. This notice, however, stems from actions unlike those undertaken by Henrietta, who both enters into the public realm of employment and usurps the typically male social role of household financier. Instead of Henrietta’s active visibility, Amy Gemini’s is a passive visibility, one which does not find her forging her way into male-dominated arenas like work or wage earning, but expanding her imposed domestic status. That is, rather than act as and with men in the public domain, the bored, jobless, home-bound Countess manifests unconventional extravagance within the domestic/female/private realms of family and household. These are not male-oriented actions socially unexpected of women, but female-oriented actions conventionally unexpected of women. Her visibility manifests itself as a lack of conventional female behavior.

Like the extravagant actions that earn her notice, Amy Gemini’s promotion of female adherence to oppressive social values is also a passive action, a deliberate lack: she purposely refrains from informing or warning Isabel of Merle’s motivations behind the former’s marriage to Osmond. There is no doubt that she understands Merle’s intentions well before Isabel’s marriage or even much of the courtship preceding it takes place. She warns
Merle from the outset that "'If I don’t approve of your plan you ought to know it in order to appreciate the danger of my interfering with it’" (225). Implying that she will foil Merle’s objective, the Countess seems to align herself with the virtually helpless Isabel, noting that

'You’re capable of anything, you and Osmond....'

'You had better leave us alone then,’ smiled Merle.

'I don’t mean to touch you—but I shall talk to that girl.’ (225)

Despite her declaration, the Countess does not talk to Isabel, and her silence is her passive promotion of female social adherence. Opting not to inform Isabel of Merle’s deception, Gemini nevertheless admits her personal aversion to a culture that demands and places such great objectifiable and commodifiable value on the oppressive institution of marriage. When she and Merle discuss Pansy’s future, Merle says,

'I shall certainly take an interest in her marrying fortunately. I imagine you’ll do the same.'

'Indeed I shan’t!’ cried the Countess. ‘Why should I, of all women, set such a price on a husband?’

'You didn’t marry fortunately; that’s what I’m speaking of. When I say a husband I mean a good one.’

'There are no good ones. Osmond won’t be a good one.’ (227)

Having been unhappily married by her mother, the Countess unsurprisingly finds little value in marriage or husbands. Notably, she discusses marriage in financial terms, wondering why she would care to set a price—the sacrifice of Pansy—on a spouse when her own relegates her to his Florentine domestic prison. Moreover, she directly claims that Osmond will
not be a good match for Isabel, and in so doing sets the stage for the betrayal of Merle that never comes. Instead, the Countess refrains, holding back from her argument when she learns that Isabel is so financially endowed:

Madame Merle [said,] “Miss Archer has seventy thousand pounds.’

‘Well, it’s a pity she’s so charming,’ the Countess declared. ‘To be sacrificed, any girl would do. She needn’t be superior.’ (229)

Here, the Countess acknowledges Isabel’s status as Merle’s sacrifice, but still withholds the crucial information Isabel needs in order to avoid what will inevitably be her unhappy union with Osmond. Having been sacrificed by her own mother for financial reasons, Gemini seems to buckle under Merle’s not-so-veiled threats of retaliation (which could result in her never receiving another invitation to Rome). Accordingly, the Countess’s resigned comments pitying Isabel and her now-inevitable fate suggest that Isabel is beyond rescue, that she must complete the cycle perpetuated by both Merle and Mrs. Osmond. This belief (and Merle’s threats) dictate her silence and her promotion of social adherence as well as her own adherence to the doctrines of masculinist culture. Unlike Henrietta’s attempts to unite Isabel and Caspar, attempts that begin as covert orchestrations but evolve into discernible (and therefore deflectable) manifestations of what Isabel considers “treachery” and betrayal (134), Amy Gemini’s promotion of female social adherence is indiscernible, a lack, an absence of speech, and its invisibility proves to be a far more dangerous threat to Isabel’s maintaining any level of social autonomy.
CHAPTER 4
THE CYCLE OF SALE AND SACRIFICE:
MOTHERS

In addition to presenting women as Sisters, Wives, and bridge characters in between, the text investigates the cultural roles of Mothers, women who act in some maternal capacity. Lydia Touchett, Mrs. Osmond, Madame Merle, Amy Gemii, and Isabel Archer all exist as Mothers to varying extents throughout the text. While similar cultural values (such as those that dictate Mrs. Osmond’s selling of her culturally undesirable daughter into marriage) tend to motivate their maternal actions, Mothers in The Portrait of a Lady all differ from one another according to the social acceptability of their maternal status, for unlike Edith, Lilian, and the Molyneux sisters, who all present consistent examples of social convention, passivity, domesticity, and cultural objectification or rejection (and therefore social acceptability or unacceptability), Mothers are present in the text in a variety of contexts. They are biological Mothers, surrogate Mothers, and absent, thwarted, or denied Mothers.

Some Mothers exist simultaneously in two or three of these maternal contexts. Lydia Touchett, Ralph’s biological Mother, a woman “very fond of her only child and [who] had insisted on his spending three months of the year with her” (42), is also an absent mother, missing from her culturally dictated domestic/female realm for nine months a year. She absents herself so often that Gardencourt is described as “her husband’s house” (30), while she maintains other dwellings in London and Florence with her own finances. Her actions are unconventional among those demonstrated by other married women and mothers to the point that her husband tells Ralph,
"'what a life mightn't you have if you should marry a person different from
Mrs. Touchett. There are more different from her than there are like her'"
(156). In that her travels beyond the arena of domestic invisibility violate
socially acceptable and culturally valued characteristics of Wives and
Mothers, Lydia earns the nickname "crazy Aunt Lydia" from her brother-in-
law, Isabel's father, Mr. Archer (34).

"[V]irtually separated from her husband" (30), Lydia is one of the only
women in the text to render her potentially unhappy marital situation
personally acceptable by asserting and acting upon her desires. Realizing "at
an early stage of their community...that they should never desire the same
thing at the same moment" (30-1), Lydia, still married, moves to her own
home in Florence and begins managing her own finances, an "arrangement
[that] greatly pleased her; it was so felicitously definite" (31). A woman who,
like Henrietta Stackpole, usurps the domestic role generally held by men—
head of household and finances—Lydia and her actions run contrary to those
of Edith Keyes and Amy Gemini, Wives who remain imprisoned in their
domestic spheres much against their desires.

Lydia's deliberate relocation, while self-satisfying, directly violates
socially acceptable standards of behavior for married women, and her
intrusion in the public/social/(male) domain is punished in the text through
defeminization. Unlike the defeminization of Henrietta Stackpole, a
"monster" whose beauty is questioned as a consequence of her
public/social/(male) occupation, Lydia Touchett is defeminized through the
denial of her maternal qualities: while Ralph considers his sedentary, invalid
father "the more motherly," he finds "his mother...paternal, and even,
according to the slang of the day, gubernatorial" (42). A woman who “had her own way of doing all that she did,” a woman with a “hard fineness” whose rare visits to Gardencourt are prefaced by her “impenetrable seclusion” (30), Lydia Touchett is portrayed as a representation of female social deviance, an unwilling receptacle who exhibits behavior “unnatural” to women, and so she is stripped of her maternal qualities (31).

Another Mother who exists simultaneously in different contexts of Motherhood is Serena Merle. Biological Mother of Pansy Osmond, Merle is denied the ability to act in a visibly maternal capacity in relation to her daughter because of the socially unacceptable circumstances surrounding Pansy’s conception and birth: she is the product of an illicit liaison between Merle and Gilbert. In order to conceal the social illegitimacy of Pansy’s birth, Osmond concocts the whole rigmarole of his own wife’s having died in childbirth, and of his having, in grief and horror, banished the little girl from his sight for as long as possible before taking her home from nurse. ...The story passed, sufficiently; it was covered by the appearances so long as nobody heeded, as nobody cared to look into it. (443)

Forced to conceal her maternal relationship to Pansy, Merle attempts to maintain contact with her daughter in the only context she has left, the only one that affords a socially acceptable non-familial female bond: she asks Pansy, “‘Am I not your great friend in Rome?’” (198)

Inasmuch as Merle’s maternal status is demoted to that of family friend in order to maintain the fictional history of Pansy’s birth, she is both a biological and a denied Mother, a woman socially restricted from acting on
her maternal desires. As a result of this culturally imposed restriction, Merle employs a substitute mother for Pansy, a socially acceptable maternal figure to act as an extension of Merle’s maternal desires. In order to situate this substitute maternal figure for Pansy, Merle adopts the role of surrogate Mother in her relationship with Isabel Archer. Quietly replacing Isabel’s biological Mother (the long-dead and therein absent Mrs. Archer), Merle initiates the role of surrogate Mother by taking interest in marrying Isabel to a particular suitor.35

Throughout the text, the subordinating social task of marriage is often a venture involving and to some extent controlled by mothers who are expected to secure a suitable future for their daughters. Indeed, the events leading up to and the consequences of marriage—especially Isabel’s—are a central focus of The Portrait of a Lady. As a result of both this foregrounding of Isabel’s eventual marriage and the absence of the late Mrs. Archer, other female characters manifest some kind of interest in her marriage. Lilian, the eldest Archer sister, reveals a maternal concern for Isabel’s future:

‘I’ve never kept up with Isabel—it would have taken all my time,’ she had often remarked; in spite of which, however, she held her rather wistfully in sight; watching her as a motherly spaniel might watch a free greyhound. ‘I want to see her safely married—that’s what I want to see,’ she frequently noted to her husband.” 37)

Unlike Lilian, who claims to want Isabel to marry but does not act on that desire,36 Lydia Touchett actively removes Isabel from the stifling domestic realm of Albany and brings her abroad to the open air of Gardencourt but subsequently verbally rejects the responsibilities of
mothering the youngest Archer sister. When Ralph asks her what she plans to do with Isabel, Lydia reacts with unsurprisingly un-maternal comments: "'Do with her? You talk as if she were a yard of calico. I shall do absolutely nothing with her, and she herself will do everything she chooses. She gave me notice of that' " (48). In refusing to mother Isabel, Lydia refuses the social conventions that dictate the involvement of a maternal figure in a young woman's marriage. Merle adopts this involvement instead and uses her powerful position as surrogate Mother to act indirectly on her maternal desires concerning her biological daughter's future. In fulfilling these personal desires, however, Merle exhibits maternal behavior visible in another mother-daughter relationship in the text—that of Mrs. Osmond and Amy.

In subjecting their daughters to what Smith-Rosenberg calls "the marriage market," Merle and Mrs. Osmond display similar domestic-oriented, maternal actions. First, both women are associated with the household domain. Though she is denied the opportunity to actively mother her biological daughter, Merle paradoxically remains committed to the domestic sphere in her public interactions. A woman "welcome wherever she goes" (153), Merle is a social visitor, a perpetual houseguest. Moreover, the actions she undertakes in her time at others' homes are less socially than domestically oriented:

When Madame Merle was neither writing, nor painting, nor touching the piano, she was usually employed upon wonderful tasks of rich embroidery, cushions, curtains, decorations for the chimney-piece .... She was never idle, for when engaged in none of the ways I have
mentioned she was either reading (she appeared to Isabel to read "everything important"), or walking out, or playing patience with the cards, or talking with her fellow inmates. (165)

Mrs. Osmond’s association with the domestic sphere, on the other hand, is specifically maternal: she is a mother of two who raises her children, Amy and Gilbert, in the absence of their deceased father. While raising her children, Mrs. Osmond “bristled with pretensions to elegant learning and published descriptive poems and corresponded on Italian subjects with the English weekly journals” (235). Although it is published for public scrutiny, Mrs. Osmond’s work is of a different nature than that published by Henrietta. Rejecting the domestic domain in favor of her position at The Interviewer, Henrietta interacts with others in order to create a story concerning some aspect of social life. Conversely, Mrs. Osmond, “[a] defunct poetess” (369), writes poems—private, isolated texts that do not take their genesis from the public/social/visible domain.

Second, and more importantly, Mrs. Osmond and Merle demonstrate similar actions motivated by their maternal contexts. Biological Mother Mrs. Osmond sells her daughter into marriage in order to improve that daughter’s social position. That is, by endowing her daughter with a dowry and marrying her into a title (Countess), Mrs. Osmond keeps the otherwise physically unattractive/culturally undesirable girl from disappearing into social oblivion. Likewise, surrogate Mother Merle sells her “daughter” Isabel into marriage in order to improve her daughter Pansy’s social position. By selling Isabel to Osmond, Merle offers Pansy the otherwise unavailable opportunity to receive a substantial dowry and subsequently to marry, like the
Countess, into nobility. Thus, in creating dowries for their daughters, Mrs. Osmond and Merle perpetuate a cycle of female economic subordination in marriage. In so doing, they reveal as dependent on male money and status not only Amy Osmond (with her culturally inadequate appearance) and Pansy Osmond (with her culturally inadequate financial/family background), but also the Mothers themselves, who, by virtually selling their daughters into the social institution of marriage, acknowledge that female survival in the (male)/public/social realm beyond the borders of the (domestic-based) mother-daughter relationship depends on the combination of men, money, and marriage.

Although Merle's role in the marriage of Isabel and Gilbert is one often pursued by critics of The Portrait of a Lady, the role of Mrs. Osmond as the pivot point in the triangle of relations that unites her daughter and the Count in marriage is a crucial one that has yet to be adequately developed in any criticism of the text. Though told in retrospect with Mrs. Osmond's having died before the time of the narrative, the mother-daughter interaction between her and Amy is the only biologically-based female relationship granted textual presence in the entire novel. Also dead by the time of the narrative, Mrs. Archer plays no role equivalent to Mrs. Osmond's in Isabel's marriage.39 The presence or absence of biological maternal influence on marital affairs of daughters seems to have little impact on the outcome of those marriages, however, for both Amy (married by her biological Mother) and Isabel (married by her surrogate Mother) are miserable as a result of their marital relationships.
Just as Mrs. Osmond and Merle exhibit similarities in their maternal actions, so do Isabel Archer and Amy Osmond share common characteristics in their positions as familial pawns. Each finds herself "married by her mother" (234) to a man she does not like—one a "low-lived brute," the other "convention itself" (235, 259). More significantly, both women consider their marriage in terms of misery and oppression. In the conversation between Merle and Amy documented in the previous chapter, the Countess declares that she will take no interest in Pansy's "marrying fortunately," asking, "Why should I, of all women, set such a price on a husband?" (227) A domestic prisoner sentenced to marriage by her mother, Amy Gemini "struggled bravely enough with her destiny, which had been to marry an unaccommodating Florentine who insisted upon living in his native town," from where she "lived with her eyes upon Rome,...ashamed to say how seldom she had been allowed to visit that city" (367).

Similarly, in the famous reflection chapter in which she meditates upon recent events of her life, Isabel envisions the domestic realm of Palazzo Roccanero in terms of a prison. Calling it "the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation," she acknowledges at last that "[t]hey were strangely married, at all events, and it was a horrible life" (353, 356). As the Countess realizes that marriage was her destiny, so Isabel acknowledges the social expectations attached to marriage and the role of Wife, telling Ralph, "If I were afraid of my husband that would be simply my duty. That's what women are expected to be" (412).

One more striking similarity between Amy and Isabel is their existence as thwarted Mothers: the Countess Gemini "had no children; she had lost
three within a year of their birth," and Isabel's own child, "a poor little boy,...died two years ago, six months after his birth" (235, 299). While Amy Gemini remains childless throughout the text, a thwarted biological Mother, Isabel is offered the opportunity to exercise her thwarted maternal capacity as the surrogate Mother of Pansy Osmond. Her fulfillment of the role of surrogate Mother is the greatest motivation behind Merle's marital sacrifice of Isabel to Gilbert in the first place. The financially-motivated actions of both Mrs. Osmond and Merle in providing for their daughters' futures through marriage suggest a pattern of behavior common to female family relationships, a pattern that manifests itself in a triangulated relationship involving mothers, daughters, and what inevitably prove to be unsuitable suitors employed more for their financial status than for their ability to fulfill the desires of the sacrificed daughters/future Wives. Thus, as surrogate Mother, Isabel is expected to perpetuate the cycle of promoting female social adherence through the subordinating social task of marriage. In her role as surrogate Mother, Isabel ascends to her place in the third of three triangles of mother/daughter/son-in-law relationships in the text:

Mrs. Osmond

Amy Gemini

Isabel Osmond

Isabel

Pansy (Warburton)
Having herself been sacrificed and sold into a horrible marriage by her surrogate Mother Merle, Isabel is now expected to fulfill her own destiny as surrogate Mother by sacrificing and selling Pansy to the unwanted Lord Warburton—unwanted, that is, by Pansy, who loves instead the socially unacceptable, underfinanced suitor, Ned Rosier. Pansy’s father and biological Mother, on the other hand, manifest much interest in Pansy’s marrying Warburton, a member of English royalty. A marriage to Warburton would offer Pansy that which Amy Osmond gained upon her marriage—a title. Gilbert acknowledges this opportunity, noting that “[m]y daughter has only to sit perfectly still to become Lady Warburton” (345). That is (in an assertion that recalls Ralph Touchett’s opinion concerning the social condition of women discussed in Chapter 1 of this text), Pansy need only passively await her destiny of having a husband to come along and provide for her. Neither Gilbert nor Merle show interest in the fact that “‘Pansy doesn’t care for him’” (395)—indeed, personal desire has little to do with the cycle of maternal marital sale and sacrifice. Although such a marriage promises to be as satisfying as the Countess and Isabel find theirs, it completes the cycle and meets the conditions of female social adherence through the subordinating social task of marriage.

Thus, Isabel Osmond is not to Mother Pansy according to her own desires, but to act as a passive extension of Pansy’s biological Mother, Serena Merle, who is denied the opportunity to actively participate in her daughter’s marriage. In sacrificing her hand-picked substitute Mother, Merle expects Isabel to see that Pansy marry nobility, telling Isabel in no uncertain terms, “‘I want to see her marry Lord Warburton’” (340). Gilbert echoes this desire,
warning Isabel to assist in the procurement of this marriage, informing her that "it lies in your hands. I shall leave it there. With a little good-will you may manage it. Think that over and remember how much I count on you" (347).

In an effort to break this cycle of maternal sale and sacrifice of daughters in marriage, Isabel removes herself from its process. Unsurprisingly, Osmond considers her actions treacherous, accuses her "[o]f having prevented Pansy’s marriage to Warburton" (395), and punishes both women by indefinitely relegating Pansy, now twenty years old, back to the convent. Before leaving for Ralph’s deathbed at Gardencourt, Isabel, still undecided as to whether she should return to Rome after her cousin’s death, visits Pansy at the convent,

scarcely kn[owing] what she could say to her. On the one hand she couldn’t let her think she had come to pity her, and on the other it would be a dull mockery to pretend to rejoice with her. So she simply added after a moment: ‘I’ve come to bid you good-bye. I’m going to England.’

Pansy’s white little face turned red. ‘To England! Not to come back?’

‘I don’t know when I shall come back.’

‘Ah, I’m sorry,’ Pansy breathed with faintness. She spoke as if she had no right to criticise; but her tone expressed a depth of disappointment. (453)

Indeed, Pansy is disappointed—and afraid. Both she and Isabel acknowledge the role Isabel played, or more specifically, the role she did not play in Pansy's
escape from the potential conjugal confines of Lockleigh. After more conversation, Isabel takes her leave:

At the top of the staircase they had to separate .... Isabel descended, and when she reached the bottom the girl was standing above. “You’ll come back?” she called out in a voice that Isabel remembered afterwards.

“Yes—I’ll come back.” (455)

Critics make much of this promise when deciphering Isabel’s motivations for returning to Palazzo Rocanero after Caspar’s offer of freedom. The tenuous nature of Goodwood’s offer notwithstanding, many critics claim that Isabel’s return to Rome is the result of her making good on her promise to Pansy—a result of her following through on her vows, not only her personal one to Pansy, but her marital ones to Gilbert as well. Indeed, Isabel considers her verbal promises physical bonds, believing that marriage, “for all that...meant that a woman should cleave to the man with whom, uttering tremendous vows, she had stood at the altar” (441).

Her return to Rome, however, hardly stems from her desire to follow through on her vows to Gilbert, or, for that matter, even to Pansy. Instead, Isabel returns to Rome in a sustained effort to break the cycle of marital sale and sacrifice of daughters culturally expected of Mothers. Viewing Palazzo Rocanero in terms of a domestic prison, Isabel notes a similar aspect in the convent, which produces “the impression of a well-appointed prison; for it was not possible to pretend Pansy was free to leave it” (448). She may not be able to free Pansy from the convent prison, but in her position as surrogate
Mother, she can help keep Pansy from a marital prison like that promised her by Warburton.

Isabel also returns to Rome for financial reasons. While Merle originally employs Isabel as surrogate Mother in order to provide a dowry by which to marry Pansy into nobility, Isabel does not use her dowry to that end. Likewise, while Merle wishes Isabel to secure the hand of Warburton for Pansy, she does not. Having expressly defied every action she is expected to undertake in her position as surrogate Mother, Isabel returns to Rome to continue this defiance by providing a pension for Pansy in the event that she marries someone she desires—like the underfunded Ned Rosier. If Isabel leaves Gilbert, she will take with her her inheritance and any hope of assisting Pansy’s future, whether it involves marriage or not. Furthermore, Isabel’s maintaining her surrogate Mother position means that Gilbert cannot usurp the maternal role as he did from Merle years earlier. Leaving Gilbert in charge of Pansy’s upbringing has forced her into social banishment at the convent; leaving him in charge of her marriage will lead to her social banishment in the invisible/private/passive/female realm of domesticity.

In an attempt to avoid this repetition of female sale and sacrifice, of daughters forced by their Mothers into fulfilling the subordinating social tasks of marriage and childbirth, of perpetuating female social adherence to male-regulated cultural values of objectification and commodification through marriage, Isabel forfeits her opportunity to escape the domestic prison built by Gilbert Osmond and returns to Rome. In so doing, she commits a sacrifice yet unseen in any of the mother-daughter relationships investigated throughout The Portrait of a Lady. In deliberately choosing against her own escape from
Gilbert, she sacrifices herself so that Pansy may escape him—so that Pansy may slip the cycle of marital sacrifice and perhaps later perpetuate a new condition of non-adherence to male-dictated conventions of female social behavior, a condition pioneered by her surrogate Mother, Isabel Osmond.
NOTES


3 See Priscilla Walton, *The Disruption of the Feminine in Henry James* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992). In her poststructuralist examination of the relationship between the text's patriarchal authority and the "Feminine Other," Priscilla Walton asserts that she "believe[s] the narrator to be male, although this is not made clear in the text. But 'his' general tone and the generalizations he offers about femininity seem to me to be made from a masculine perspective" (54n. 10).

4 Nina Baym, "Revision and Thematic Change in *The Portrait of a Lady,*" in *Modern Critical Interpretations of The Portrait of a Lady,* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 71-86, esp., 71. The crux of Baym's argument, which considers the larger implications of sentence-level differences between the 1881 and 1908 editions of James's text, is that the 1881 version is concerned with "'the woman question' " and "sympathize[s] with her [Isabel's] aim to the point of calling both love and marriage into question" (72). The revised 1908 version, Baym contends, "transform[s] the story into a drama of consciousness [that] overlaid and in places obliterated the coherence of the 1881 version" (72).
While Baym's argument is valid and her support extensive, I suggest that the 1908 version still is immersed in the examination of issues concerning the condition of women if for no other reason than within its emphasizing of Isabel's consciousness lies a deeper investigation of her desires, actions, and the oft unseen motivations behind her actions, all of which serve to provide particular answers (or least pose additional queries) to "the woman question."

5 See M. Giulia Fabi, "The Reluctant Patriarch: A Study of The Portrait of a Lady, The Bostonians, and The Awkward Age," The Henry James Review, 13(Winter 1992): 1-18. Giulia Fabi writes that she "will trace the development of James's critique of the new woman, which is indicative of his participation in the cultural attempt to contain the social upheaval of the post-Civil War era she emblematizes" (1 emphasis added). Later, she suggests that "[t]he female model Isabel upholds...derives from the traditional, constrictive prototype of the pious, pure, submissive, domestic, 'true woman' that dominated the first part of the nineteenth century" (3 emphasis added).


7 Ibid., 51, 57.


9 Ibid., 59.

10 William G. Sayres, "The Proud Penitent: Madame Merle's Quiet Triumph
in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady,*” *Essays in Literature,* 19(Fall 1992): 231-45, esp. 243. Sayres is careful to offer an explicit definition of “nature” according both to its context within James’s text and to its application to different female characters and their relationships with women. He concludes that

‘[n]atural’...as applied by Merle to Pansy’s future, is coded language for the destiny foreseen by her mother, while the term for Isabel suggests both absence of the artifice usually masking character, as well as her sense of the force radiated by the proximity of mother and daughter. (237)

11 Ibid., 241.


13 Ibid., 7. For Wittig, the patriarchal ideology that dominates modern society informs a higher power: heterosexuality. In Wittig’s analysis of feminism, the category of “sex” is an arena of oppression in which the heterosexual patriarchal regime firmly grounds women as sexual, biological beings whose difference from men is therefore thought to be “natural.” Accordingly, Wittig calls upon women to accomplish two tasks: first, to destroy the category of sex in order to “destroy the sexes as a sociological reality” so that women may exist; and second, to unite as a class against the social, economic, and political oppression of the heterosexual patriarchal regime in order to destroy “the class of women within which men appropriate women” (8, 20).

15 Ibid., 8.

16 Ibid., 9.

17 It is this same language—the language of female communal self-sufficiency in societies dominated by male-informed power structures—that feminist critic Denise Riley suggests women employ in undermining the social status quo from within. See Denise Riley, "Am I That Name?" *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995). In her Foucauldian analysis of the history of feminism, Riley investigates the category of "women"—various constructions of women by male-dominated ideologies—from the mind/soul dichotomy of the Enlightenment to the contemporary equation of female identity with the female body. This poststructuralist contention of the non-existence of women is a popular one with radical feminist critics and historians who often assert that women, in fact, do not exist; Riley herself emphasizes that "both a concentration on and a refusal of the identity of 'women' are essential to feminism" (2).

Moreover, commenting on the future of feminism in view of the instability of the category of "women," Riley concludes that feminist theory must "suggest that 'women' don't exist—while maintaining a politics of 'as if they existed'—since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did" (112). Thus, Riley posits a consideration of
feminism which consists of a community of women comprised of people aware of the flaws in male-dominated structures of social power, but who go along with that dominant ideology in an attempt to undermine those structures from within.


19 First published in 1975, Smith-Rosenberg's research on female relationships in nineteenth-century America emphasizes the importance of separate spheres in maintaining strong emotional and psychological relationships among women. In the last two decades, however, historians and critics have taken issue with the use of the concept of separate spheres as a viable and unquestioned critical trope. See Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," The Journal of American History, 75(June 1988): 9-39.

Kerber traces the history (especially since the mid-1960s) of the sphere metaphor and its role in the investigation of the condition of women in historical, psychological, sociological, and economical contexts. Noting that writers in the late 1960s and early 1970s attempted "to identify separate spheres as a theme central to women's historical experience," Kerber discerns an effort by subsequent historians and critics to "refine the definition and identify complexities" of the concept (17). It is in her discussion of the latter group of researchers that she mentions the work of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. Calling Smith-Rosenberg's work "a striking
reinterpretation of the possibilities of separation” (14), Kerber contends that the historian’s investigation of separate spheres identifies “a dramatically different culture,” one that Kerber calls “a distinctive women’s culture” (14).

Despite her acknowledgment of Smith-Rosenberg’s unique findings, however, Kerber points out the critical shift in separate spheres studies from the identification of complexities in the late 1970s to the current attempt to address the “loosely metaphorical” nature of the discourse, the “problems of usage inherent in the terms ‘women’s sphere’ and women’s culture’” (17). This effort to render explicit the definitions of the terms involved in separate sphere discourse is a response to the fact that past “historians referred, often interchangeably, to an ideology imposed on women, a culture created by women, a set of boundaries expected to be observed by women” (17). Rather than focus on nineteenth-century America as the genesis of separate sphere discourse, critics and historians now both investigate gendered separation throughout history and examine separate spheres in terms of the Marxist public/private dichotomy evident in capitalist society. Thus, as Kerber’s study so succinctly and impressively reveals, examinations like Smith-Rosenberg’s, however groundbreaking when first published, are finally constructed according to a now-defunct critical context, and accordingly, their theories, while still thought-provoking, are not to be considered immutable.

27 See Auerbach, 3-6.
28 Here and throughout my text, I refer to Amy and Gilbert Osmond's mother strictly as Mrs. Osmond. While the text calls her by the first name Corinne—or, specifically, "the American Corinne, as Mrs. Osmond had liked to be called" (235)—that appellation is a farcical twist on the protagonist in Madame de Staël's novel, *Corinne, or Italy*. One of the most popular books of the nineteenth century, *Corinne, or Italy* addresses the condition of women in society, noting especially "the happiness of the individual which is made problematic, especially for women, by emotional dependence on others" and "the difficulties faced by the woman who strives for glory like a man and who is therefore resented and ultimately unhappy." See Avriel H. Goldberger, *Introduction. Corinne, or Italy*. By Madame de Staël (Trans. Avriel H. Goldberger. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), xv-liv, esp. xxii.

In Mme. de Staël's text, Corinne is "a woman of independent mind, means, and morals. And in her role as Roman poet, she carries out a prophetic mission to the people of Italy, reminding them of the
greatness that was once theirs” (xxxii). In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Mrs. Osmond is a woman “who had bristled with pretensions to elegant learning and published descriptive poems and corresponded on Italian subjects with the English weekly journals” (235). Thus, her adoption of the monikers Corinne and the American Corinne reveals not a similarity to Mme. de Staël’s Corinne, but a deliberate difference. While the Roman Corinne acts throughout the text in manners which came to exercise “deep and enduring influence over the women who read it, enlightening them on the society they lived in, encouraging them to speak out, to create, and indeed to be full human beings on their own” (xv), the American Corinne, a more superficial, less political character, acts in ways that support not female enlightenment, but female adherence to a male-dominated social order that subordinates women through the act of marriage. Thus, I will refer to this American Corinne by her married name—Mrs. Osmond—throughout my text.

29 Although she is the only main female character with living, visible sisters in the text, Isabel does not seek the emotional acceptance or foster the strong bond of unity in sisterhood claimed by Smith-Rosenberg to be common among and familiar to women in the nineteenth century. Discerning at that time an emotional community established through, among other relationships, “the supportive love of sisters,” Smith-Rosenberg notes that in her research, “[a] sister’s absence for even a
week or two could cause loneliness and depression and would be bridged by frequent letters” (62).

Such a bond does not unite Isabel to her two sisters in The Portrait of a Lady. Indeed, when Isabel sees off Lilian and her family after they visit her abroad, she had never had a keener sense of freedom, of the absolute boldness and wantonness of liberty, than when she turned away from the platform at the Euston Station...after the departure of the train that was to convey poor Lily, her husband and her children to their ship at Liverpool. (267)

Significantly, this scene precedes Isabel's solitary walk from the London station back to her hotel, a walk that she recalls five years later, after fulfilling the subordinating social task of marriage, as something “she could not have done...to-day[]. The incident came before her as the deed of another person” (459).

30 I do not refer to Daniel Touchett as one of the male invalids excused from marriage for two reasons: first, of course, he already is married and therefore is not socially excused from the act of marriage at all; and second, Daniel Touchett’s illness is a result of age—when he married, he was a healthy entrepreneur.

31 Examining the position of Isabel as performer for the men/suitors who surround and watch her, Elizabeth Allen also notes Ralph’s exclusion from the active role of suitor, asserting that he “is exonerated in a sense by having the role of spectator forced on him by ill health. He, like
Warburton and Goodwood, would be willing to involve himself with Isabel rather than just watch her, if he only could” (64).

32 Pansy’s return to the convent is an ironic result of her attempt to establish an unspoken, communal bond with Isabel against the actions and desires of Osmond. Thus, when Warburton leaves Rome without contracting Pansy as his future wife, it is, as Giulia Fabi notes, “[i]n implicit recognition of the interdependence of Isabel and Pansy [that] Osmond punishes his wife’s betrayal by enclosing his daughter in a convent” (5).

33 Interestingly, this commodification by Mrs. Osmond results in a trait common to both Amy and Edith Keyes as well as among Wives in general: possessing a trait culturally desirable to male dictators of cultural values, Wives are either beautiful or financed.

34 Lilian Ludlow, “the mother of two peremptory little boys” (37), is another Mother in The Portrait of a Lady. Despite her obvious maternal status, I will not investigate her as a Mother because apart from the information noted above, the text does not disclose much more information concerning her actions as a mother.

35 This maternal interest in marriage is echoed in Smith-Rosenberg’s studies of female familial relationships among nineteenth century American women. Noting that mother-daughter relations often manifested themselves in “an apprenticeship system” by which “the daughter followed the mother into a life of traditional domesticity,” Smith-Rosenberg asserts that “marriage was an event surrounded by
supportive, almost ritualistic, practices” (65, 69). An apprenticeship system does seem to exist between Merle and Isabel, who emulates her surrogate Mother throughout their relationship. Upon meeting her, Isabel notes the “talents, accomplishments, aptitudes of Madame Merle” and finds “herself desiring to emulate them, and in twenty such ways this lady presented herself as a model” (163). Years later, suspecting that Merle and Gilbert share a stronger relationship than she has been led to believe, Isabel, now having “lost the desire to know this lady’s clever trick,” nevertheless admits that “[t]he best way to profit by her friend—this Indeed Isabel had always thought—was to imitate her, to be as firm and bright as she” (331).

While this model/apprenticeship system seems apparent between Isabel and Merle in the text, the ritual of marriage goes unseen throughout *The Portrait of a Lady*. Like childbirth, the female ritual of marriage is an invisible, offstage occurrence, and its invisibility suggests a devaluation of the ritual, the act of marriage, in light of the more important and culturally valued traits of female passivity and objectification that result from marriage.

Although she repeatedly verbalizes her desire to marry Isabel, Lilian never acts on this desire by either usurping the duties of mothering Isabel, as does Merle, or by expressly interfering with one of Isabel’s suitors, as does Henrietta.

Indeed, Mrs. Osmond, an “administrative person...with an appreciation
of foreign titles” (234) uses her money deliberately to marry her daughter into nobility.

39 These deaths of Mrs. Osmond and Mrs. Archer are themselves telling statistics. *The Portrait of a Lady*, a novel that foregrounds marriage, seems replete with late biological mothers. Mrs. Touchett and Lilian Ludlow make compelling exceptions to this trend. They are the only living biological mothers in the text—and, not coincidentally, they are mothers of without daughters. This absence of biological Mothers of daughters coupled with the invisibility of female rituals like marriage and childbirth suggest a marginalization of Motherhood akin to the sidelining and devaluation of Sisterhood discussed via the example of the nuns and the convent in Chapter 2. For a psychoanalytic critique of the absent mother, see Beth Sharon Ash, “Frail Vessels and Vast Designs: A Psychoanalytic Portrait of Isabel Archer,” in *New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady*. Ed. Harold Bloom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 123-162.

40 Significantly, Merle also reveals a comprehension of socially expected female behavior, telling Pansy, “it would please your father to see a careful little daughter making his tea. It’s the proper duty of the daughter of the house—when she grows up” (227).

41 I suggest that the nuns and their convent in *The Portrait of a Lady* are examples of the simultaneous marginalization, appropriation, and essentialization of Sisters, Wives, and Sisterhood. However, feminist critic M. Giulia Fabi situates them not as Sisters, but as Mothers. In
her examination of “[f]emale rituals of manipulation and betrayal resulting in patterns of disempowerment and enclosure” in The Portrait of a Lady, The Bostonians, and The Awkward Age (1), Giulia Fabi notes that “Pansy’s allegedly deceased biological parent has been replaced by ‘more than thirty mothers at the convent’ (PL 287)” (3). Moreover, she contends that these nuns “are particularly significant surrogate mothers in that they bring the oppressive force of Catholicism...to bear on the already stifling process of female socialization” (3).
WORKS CITED


