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MUTUAL MISUNDERSTANDING: INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AND THE UNCONSCIOUS/CONSCIOUS DIALECTIC IN HENRY JAMES'*THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY*

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Abstract
Henry James, in his novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, builds a world around a main character who temperamentally and then circumstantially appears to every chance for happiness, especially when compared with others. As many critics have noted, Isabel Archer experiences tragedy *because* of this great potential for fulfillment rather than in spite of it. However, what critics have tended to overlook is the other parallel, though "minor," irony of the novel: her friend Henrietta Stackpole's fulfillment and move to England. The infamous ending of Isabel can be better understood by looking at it through the lens of intercultural competence and by comparing it with that of Henrietta. Building off the theory of unconscious versus conscious cultural identity that James sketches in his essay 1878 "Americans Abroad," this article analyzes the role self-consciousness and awareness of cultural differences in the development of the novel's characters.

Keywords: *intercultural competence, Henry James, international theme, expatriate literature, identity, minor characters, marriage plot*

Part of the perennial appeal of Henry James, no matter how antiquated nineteenth century manners may seem in the twenty-first century, is that he writes about cultures in transition and the difficulties individuals experience in relating to those changes. These changes become visible through an encounter with an "other"–James' famous "international theme." For James, part of this interest occurs on a macro level. He writes his first and most popular novels as more Americans were traveling to Europe than ever before, for both personal as well as business reasons. The Unites States had recently emerged from the wreckage of its Civil War to develop lucrative industries that established new

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international relationships. What once had been a backwater colony of the empire on which "the sun never sets" had now become a global power in its own right. The United States' relationship to Europe, and Great Britain in particular, took on new and complex dimensions. The other level of interest, however, occurs on the interpersonal level. James explores the attraction as well as repulsion, desire and fear, that can occur in the initial individual encounter with the other. The excitement of connection and enlarging one's world is offset by the threat of losing one's own identity. This intercultural push and pull is one that James himself had experienced through living as an expatriate American in Europe and becoming a British citizen only just before his death.

In James' 1881 novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, his main character Isabel Archer ostensibly bears the burden of dramatizing a transformational intercultural encounter, with both its opportunities and its dangers. Isabel rejects her ideal American suitor, Caspar Goodwood, and accepts an invitation to travel to Europe with her aunt to escape the confines of a life that feels too small for her. In Europe, she encounters scope for her imagination and the possibility of accessing new ways of being, but also of dangerous gaps in understanding and constraints that were hitherto foreign to her. However she is not the only "lady" in the novel to have a transformational intercultural encounter. Her friend and character foil, Henrietta Stackpole, joins her as a foreigner correspondent for an American newspaper. The opportunity Henrietta seeks in Europe is a professional one. Rather than expecting to discover unexpected cultural differences and be transformed by them, she arrives in Europe with her opinions pre-formed and not prepared to budge from them. Moreover, she consistently warns Isabel of the dangers of being influenced by her new foreign context. Despite all this, as I will demonstrate, one paradoxically can argue that Henrietta has the more successful intercultural encounter.

James uses the novel's transatlantic context as well as the contrast between Isabel and Henrietta to explore the dialectic between difference and similarity in intercultural competence. It is no coincidence that most of the other important characters in the novel (the Touchett's, Caspar Goodwood, Ned Rosier, Madame Merle, Gilbert Osmond and his family) are, in fact, other Americans abroad or American expatriates.These characters display differing degrees of adaptation to European values and cultural norms. The other two important characters, Lord Warburton and Mr. Bantling, are British. Though all the characters speak English, their lack of common understanding, misinterpretations, and intentional silences are thematized. The novel suggests that a consciousness of cultural difference is, in fact, a precondition to maintaining a coherent identity as well as bridging that difference. Language itself functions in *The Portrait of a Lady* through a recognition of its limitations. Though Isabel appears to be highly socially and interculturally competent, interested in new experiences and gaining quick acceptance into foreign circles,

Henrietta is harshly aware of the differences between her cultural identity and those of the others she encounters. As a result, Henrietta's marriage to Mr. Bantling is one of the great ironies of the novel while Isabel's marriage to Osmond is the great tragedy.

One of the keys to James' complex thinking about cultural identity can be found in his 1878 essay for *The Nation*, "Americans Abroad," written just a few months before he began working on *The Portrait of a Lady*.[1] At this point in his career, James had now been living in Europe for several years and had just experienced his first major success four months prior with the publication of the much-discussed "Daisy Miller" in *Cornhill Magazine*. In "Americans Abroad," he essentially analyzes the class of people he has himself joined. He begins by outlining a preexisting argument featured in *The Nation* several weeks earlier: "the question of American appearing 'to advantage' or otherwise in Europe" (James, "Americans Abroad" 786). Rather than coming down on one side or the other, James pronounces that Americans asking themselves how Europeans view them is in and of itself uniquely American. Europeans consider that their own national standards are the only ones worth caring about.

James insists on the utter difference of Americans from Europeans, "As a people we are out of European society; the fact seems to us incontestable, be it regrettable or not," as well as the oddness of the American attraction towards Europe where one would "take up an abode in a strange city and and remain there year after year, looking about, rather hungrily, for social diversion and 'trying to get into society" ("Americans Abroad" 787, 788). The situation of the American abroad is one of being on the outside looking in, both because of cultural differences and becomes of, often tacit, assumptions about the cultural superiority of European countries. Self-consciousness (being aware of how one might be perceived from the outside) is naturally produced under these circumstances, partially as a result of a new country like America coming into contact with an older, established country.

Though the question of how they appear to others is distinctly American, James specifies that not all Americans abroad ask themselves this question. From this point in the article, what chiefly interests James are the possible permutations of consciousness and unconsciousness when it comes to American cultural identity. The conscious American is "apologetic, explanatory – a pessimist might say snobbish" because of the attention he pays to how he is being perceived as an American, whether or not his rhetoric is of one of European or American superiority. On the other hand, James also identifies the unconscious American who simply does not consider how he is being perceived. These are the tourists who "neither know nor care what [the European] thinks

[1] In the New York edition preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James states that he began working on the novel in the spring of 1879.

about them, and, having examined the antiquities of the Old World, they go westward across the Atlantic with a perfectly good conscience" ("Americans Abroad" 791). While the conscious American is slavish, the unconscious American is usually boorish. He implicitly critiques both of these types, but where does that leave James himself? He holds out hope that "by a sort of Hegelian unfolding" the conscious type can return to being unconscious, though one can only assume that this will be a return with a difference ("Americans Abroad" 789). He also considers the possibility that Americans as a whole "shall some day become sufficient to ourselves and lose the sense of being the most youthful, most experimental, and somehow, most irregular of nations" ("Americans Abroad" 791).

Essentially, James sketches the beginning of a model for intercultural competence as well as a stable national identity. At several points throughout the article he makes clear that it understandable for an established or powerful country to consider itself beholden only to its own standards, and will judge itself favorably according to those standards. In doing so, James actually aligns unconscious Americans with unconscious Europeans. Self-consciousness comes as a result of engagement with another cultural, not merely in terms of geography (like unconscious Americans or Germans who go to other countries to make money), but also in terms of values. In this stage, Americans (necessarily so in the model James creates) pay great attention to cultural differences. These self-conscious Americans can judge their own values and culture either favorably or unfavorably, but the verdict will still be made with a European perspective in mind. According to James, this stage is often accompanied by the lack of a stable cultural identity that manifests itself in a distancing from one's countrymen and accepting compliments for being an exception to the rule. The final stage, reached through dialectic, looks like a return to unconsciousness or "innocence". Here the American will no longer care what Europeans thinks of him, while still being aware of differences between their cultures. Though James never states this explicitly, one of the benefits of this stage is that one may well retain the ability to discriminate that one formed in the self-conscious stage, but that one's tastes are now proper to him, rather than being an imitation. After all, what seems to be most offensive about an unconscious American versus the baseline Englishman is the American's "vulgarity."

These distinctions of consciousness appear very clearly in *The Portrait of a Lady* in the characters of Isabel Archer and Henrietta Stackpole. In addition to the chronological proximity of the article to the book, James himself ends his 1908 preface to the novel by reflecting back on how at the time he "had, within the preceding few years, come to live in London, and the 'international' light lay, in those days, to my sense, thick and rich upon the scene. It was the light in which so much of the picture hung" (James, "Preface" 15). Louis Auchincloss,

among others, is somewhat mistaken when he claims that "*The Portrait of a Lady* is not, properly speaking, an international novel... [in that] the contrast of manners and mores no longer has the importance that it had in the earlier stories. Isabel adapts herself to European standards with almost no trouble at all" and that instead by 1881 James "had to come to recognize that transatlantic distinctions were slight enough to be left to the minor characters. Henrietta Stackpole, who insists on them ... is a ridiculous character" (qtd. in Richmond 166).[2] The fact that Isabel is able to adapt herself to European standards with almost no trouble at all, given what James had just written about the self-conscious American (and Isabel is nothing if not conscious of her *self*), is insufficient evidence to prove that the question of nationality identity and intercultural encounters no longer matter to James.

The confusion may also come from the first part of the "Preface" to the New York Edition of the novel in which James recounts the genesis for *The Portrait of a Lady*. Over twenty years later, James states that the beginning of his idea was not found in any plot "but altogether in the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman, to which all the usual elements of a 'subject,' certainly of a setting, were to need to be super-added" (James, "Preface" 4). Yet he also continues that in thinking about what she will do, he answers himself, "Why, the first thing she'll do will be to come to Europe" (14). Throughout the novel, the setting for the novel is not simply the background for Isabel as a character but it becomes part of Isabel's psyche, as discussed by Frank Novak in his article "'Strangely Fertilising': Henry James' Venice and Isabel Archer's Rome." Every travel decision she makes signals change in her development, whether she has become more "herself" or less, with her final two trips, to Gardencourt and Rome being the most dramatic examples. Her grappling with where to be is also a grappling with *how* to be.

It has become a trope of criticism to call Henrietta a ridiculous character, particularly as James himself refers to her "so broken a reed" in his "Preface" (12). He goes on to call her a "light *ficelle*" rather than a "true agent" in contrast to Isabel. Yet, at the same time, he answers the implicit criticism: "The only thing I may well be asked, I acknowledge, why then, in the present fiction, I have suffered Henrietta (of whom we indubitably have too much) so officiously, so strangely, so almost inexplicably, to pervade" (James, "Preface" 13). Even here, in his preface, she reappears several times and in more detail than any other of the "secondary" characters who do more work as part of James' "plan." She seems rather far from being, as he inadequately explains, "an excess of my zeal" or "part of my wonderful notion of the lively" at the time he wrote the

[2] In Louis Auchincloss. "The International Situation: The Portrait of a Lady." *Reading Henry James. Minneapolis*: University of Minnesota Press, 1975, pp. 56-70.

novel (James, "Preface" 15).This is in keeping with the observations of Carolyn Mathews' masterful article "The Fishwife in James' Historical Stream: Henrietta Stackpole Gets the Last Word." She aggregates facts that question a light treatment of Henrietta: such as James' explicit decision in his writing notebook to give Henrietta "the last word" and James' refusal to change her in response to his friend and *Atlantic Monthly* editorWilliam Dean Howells' criticism. Not only did James tell Howells he did not think Harriet was "really exaggerated" when the novel first began appearing serially, when he made his significant revisions to *The Portrait of a Lady* for the New York edition "he had, in fact, revised the novel to make her influence even more pervasive" (190).[3]

The disdain for Henrietta by critics and ostensibly by James, if we are to take his statements in the preface at face value, is generated by the very blind spot she represents, cultural unconsciousness. Writing in *Frontiers*, an interdisciplinary study abroad journal, Amy Muse confesses her surprise at so many students' interest in and self-identification with Henrietta in one particular class.[4] After analysis, however, she reflects:

> Why wouldn't a student want to see herself (or himself) in Henrietta? Hers is the travel experience they want to have: filled with fun new people, parties, free of worries, always centered in the American circle" versus "traveling twitchily, not knowing what you want, encountering people far more sophisticated than you (the kind of people you'd meet in Europe), people who may not have your best interests at heart. (Muse 52)

Henrietta's travels are not focused on deep introspection, the opposite of James' plan for his novel as stated in the preface and the assumed mindset for an interculturally competent traveler.

However unconscious Henrietta may be, James does not portray cultural unconsciousness as exactly equal to naiveté. Being unconscious does not mean that she is unaware of cultural differences or of different ways of relating to one's cultural identity. In fact, Henrietta's unconsciousness makes her hyperaware of differences and is an important stage in developing intercultural competence. When she appears on the scene physically, arriving at Gardencourt

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[3]See also "The Marriages of Henry James and Henrietta Stackpole" by Elise Miller, *The Henry James Review*, 10.1 (1989), pp. 15-31.

[4]For someone who is supposed to be just a "light *ficelle*", significantly scholarly attention has been given to discovering the "real" model for Henrietta. See "James and Kate Field" by Gary Scharnhorst, *The Henry James Review*, 22.2, (2001), pp. 200-206. In addition to putting forth his own theory of reporter Kate Field, he begins his article by enumerating possibilities named by other critics: Oliver Harper, Katherine Hillard, and Constance Fenimore Woolson. Considering Henry James' own journalistic background and the similarity of their names, a consonance with the author himself, whether intentional or not, is not out of the question.

in chapter ten after having been described in chapter six, Henrietta's opening words are, "Well, I should like to know whether you consider yourselves American or English …. If once I knew I could talk to you accordingly" (James, *Portrait* 80). Daniel Katz astutely points out that "Henrietta's question is less naïve" than one might initially think: "She asks not what 'nationality' these two gentlemen 'are' but rather what nationality they consider themselves to be–in this question, she is not concerned with essences but rather with identifications and positionings" (102). Rather than gloss over differences, her very first statement calls attention to the role of acknowledging them, especially as pertains to effective communication–one that goes beyond mere language.

What *does* characterize her unconsciousness is that she remains wholly indifferent to what others, especially "foreigners," think of her. Without being exactly rude, Henrietta has a way of making Ralph uncomfortable, a feeling that lingers long after their initial meeting. Not only is she not interested in changing herself to accommodate others, she's suspicious of others who would. When Ralph teases Henrietta by saying, "To please you I'll be an Englishman, I'll be a Turk!" (James, *Portrait*80). Henrietta expresses surprise if not disdain at his cosmopolitan attitude, seeing it more as a character flaw rather than a skill.Though *to please* is meant as a joke here, it later takes on more complicated valences when it comes to Isabel and what Henrietta sees as her urgently needing to be ready to "*di*splease others" after inheriting her fortune (James, *Portrait* 188).

Henrietta, for her part, is always ready to displease others. Not only is she a great source of displeasure to Mrs. Touchett and Osmond, with whom she is most at odds, Caspar Goodwood's often dismissive attitude towards her suggests she is not particularly concerned with pleasing non-expatriated Americans either. Several scholars have interpreted Henrietta as a figure for the "New Woman" at the turn of the twentieth century.[5] This portmanteau term referred to a constellation of activities and attitudes that traditionally were deemed inappropriate for women, from suffrage to divorce and smoking to riding bicycles. At times the term "New Woman" also had valences of class, with women choosing to work and rejecting an "aristocratic" model adopted from Europe. As Carolyn Mathewspoints out, Henrietta may well have not qualified as a "lady" on either side of the Atlantic: "During this period, Americans of the aspiring middle class appropriated European, aristocratic codes of behavior as a strategy for gaining entrance into the U.S. urban upper class" (197). If Henrietta seems conventional as the stereotypically vulgar (read, unconscious) American traveler abroad, it is in fact partially due to her unconventionality.

[5]The first to explore this dimension was Annette Niemtzow's "Marriage and the New Woman in The Portrait of a Lady," *American Literature*, 47.3 (1975), pp. 377-395.

Traveling alone and working for a newspaper marks Henrietta as different and unassimilable into the European landscape (in contrast to Isabel, especially after becoming wealthy), but also serves as the means by which she engages the foreign countries in which she finds herself. Though she arrives from America with her opinions set, she nevertheless requires first-hand experiences in order to be able to write about them. It is precisely through her search for differences that Henrietta comes to know one of the quintessentially English characters in the novel, Mr. Bantling, who quickly promises to give her a view of real English life by having his sister, Lady Pensil, invite Henrietta to visit. She responds by saying, "I don't know but I *would* go, if your sister should ask me. I think it would be my duty" (James, *Portrait* 128). The humor in this scene resides in Henrietta's unconsciousness which is now abetted by Mr. Bantling.Henrietta displays a certain degree of knowledge of the levels of society in England by asking about her name, rank, and county. Mr. Bantling answers each of these questions but in doing so minimizes Lady Pensil's higher social standing each time, implicitly encouraging Henrietta not to think herself unequal to the visit. Henrietta's half-protest, "I don't know but what she'd be too fine for me" demonstrates an realism about the social structure in Englandbut also a lack of personal concern (James, *Portrait* 128).

Seeing their initial mutual interest, Isabel expresses her doubts to Ralph aboutthe possibility of them developing a deeper relationship: " I don't think it will go far. They would never really know each other. He has not the least idea what she really is, and she has no just comprehension of Mr. Bantling" (James, *Portrait* 129). Isabel's ideal relationship involves far more similarity. Ralph, on the other hand, in his habitual bantering fashion, identifies a key theme of the novel, "There's no more usual basis of union than a mutual misunderstanding." Ironically, Henrietta, who had warned Isabel of becoming too intimate with a "foreigner," increasingly depends on Mr. Bantling as she travels in search of material for her articles, both of them slightly baffled but pleased by the differences of the other. Henrietta begins to value the presence of at least one Englishman and his perspectives, and Mr. Bantling "found great comfort in the society of a woman who was not perpetually thinking about what would be said and how what she did, how what *they* did – and they had done things! – would look… his curiosity had been roused; he wanted awfully to see if she ever *would* care. He was prepared to go as far as she…" (James, *Portrait* 241). Mutual misunderstanding in their case involves an explicit recognition of their differences. And it does indeed lead to a union.

Whereas the language used for Henrietta is clear, or at least clearly unclear, Isabel is often signified through silences or lacks and subtle distinctions, linguistic and cultural. The reader first learns of Isabel Archer in (what is first assumed to be) her absence, from her uncle Mr. Touchett, an American banker who moved to England thirty years prior. From the beginning, the language

around her is suffused with negatives. Touchett offhandedly introduces Isabel as a character when he says to his neighbor, Lord Warburton, "Well, you may fall in love with whomever you please; but you mustn't fall in love with my niece" (James, *Portrait* 23). His son, Ralph, immediately interprets this statement as a cultural faux paus, one that will fail to communicate his true intentions to his English interlocutor: "He'll think you mean that as a provocation! My dear father, you've lived with the English for thirty years, and you've picked up a good many of the things they say. But you've never learned the things they don't say!" (James, *Portrait* 23). Even though the words are perfectly intelligible to the two parties, thoroughly bi-cultural Ralph translates them. The negative command could either be read directly as a warning, or contain the subtle enticement that his mysterious niece may indeed readily cause men to fall in love with her. The possible interpretations of Touchett's statement sets up a clear dichotomy between literal meanings and implied ones, as well as between characters who speak their minds and those who hide what they really mean.

As the men discuss her, more information leads to more questions. Rather than being seen simply as "different," Isabel reads as a blank. Touchett and Ralph were informed of her existence in turn by two telegrams from Mrs. Touchett who had been visiting her relatives in America. The first telegram, "Changed hotel, very bad, impudent clerk, address here. Taken sister's girl, died last year, go to Europe, two sisters, quite independent" only begins to make sense with the arrival of the second one, "Tired America, hot weather awful, return England with niece, first steamer decent cabin" (James, *Portrait* 24). Mrs. Touchett's laconic medium of communication produces more curiosity about Isabel than had she written a letter trying to explain her merits. The one quality that (retrospectively) seems to be attributed to her, though even that interpretation cannot be certain, is independence, potentially another form of negation. And if Isabel is indeed independent, of what? Financially, socially, some other way? Mrs. Touchett later claims that she herself never knows what she means in her telegrams, "especially those I send from America," as if crossing the ocean itself makes communication less intelligible (James, *Portrait* 49).

The irony of this discussion is that Isabel, even while she is being described through negation, is actually present, having just arrived with her aunt on the Touchett's estate. This is far from the first time Isabel has been describe as an unintelligible presence. When the reader encounters her in Albany after she has just met her aunt, Isabel's brother-in-law says, "Isabel's written in a foreign tongue. I can't make her out. She ought to marry an Armenian or a Portuguese" (James, *Portrait* 38). This rather strange statement is the first in the novel to link unintelligibility with marriage as well as intercultural communication. While her sister vehemently disagrees with her husband's suggestion of whom Isabel should marry, she does think Isabel seems to be made for going abroad because

of this unintelligibility. For her sister, Isabel's unintelligibility implies the existence of great talent in need of development. This later comes to be Touchett and Ralph's view as well. The other characters' inability to understand her fully, both at home and abroad, is, in fact part of what draws so many virtual strangers to her. It is ultimately also what makes her vulnerable to the intentions of others.

Isabel, on the other hand, seems to understand everything foreign quickly, as if her own unintelligibility prepares her for this task. In contrast to Henrietta's awkward introduction, Isabel is shown to be akin to Ralph in being able to understand even the language of the Touchett's dog who barks at the mysterious visitor: "The person in question was a young lady, who seemed immediately to interpret the greeting of the small beast" (James, *Portrait* 25).She matches Ralph's tone perfectly when they meet and is characterized as "looking at everything, with an eye that denoted clear perception" (James, *Portrait* 26). Moreover, she explicitly keeps different cultural standards in mind when she goes about the grounds of Gardencourt unannounced: "Your mother told me that in England people arrived very quietly; so I thought it was alright" (James, *Portrait* 26). Isabel assimilates everything she encounters in such a way as to retain her originality and independence while pleasing others. When Ralph teases her about her supposed scorching patriotism, of which there is no evidence, she takes it in stride but "Isabel's chief dread in life at this period of development was that she should appear narrow-minded; what she feared next afterwards was that she should really be so" (James, *Portrait* 61-2). This aligns her with the model of the conscious American versus Henrietta's unconsciousness. As opposed to Henrietta, she cares what people think albeit while maintaining a fierce sense of independence.

In fact, Isabel is on her way to what James referred to as the third stage of intercultural competence in "Americans Abroad" – the dialectical return to unconsciousness. This would be a return to an unconsciousness of foreign standards, but after receiving and being impressed by what they are. Though Isabel enters into the European context almost seamlessly, there is one notable exception: the night Isabel stays up late with Ralph and Lord Warburton in the company of her aunt. She does not understand her aunt's cue when says she wishes to go to sleep and so they must "bid the gentlemen good-night," forcing her aunt to be explicit (much to the party's general dismay) about the impropriety of Isabel remaining without her (James, *Portrait* 66). After this intercultural gaffe,one of Isabel's few, she thanks her aunt for being willing to draw her attention to culturally inappropriate behavior though she cannot promise always to agree. She wants to be able "to know the things one shouldn't do…. So as to choose" (James, *Portrait* 67). Essentially this implies that after one has the knowledge that comes with the self-conscious stage, one can then experience the freedom to choose regardless of the influence of others in the third stage of renewed unconsciousness. In James' model of intercultural

competence, a higher degree of personal freedom is, in fact, equated with a higher degree of intercultural competence.

Isabel's idealism and quick perception, as well as her desire to reach this third stage, makes her gravitate in the first place towards Madame Merle and then, partially through her influence, to Gilbert Osmond, two of the characters who represent the heights of discrimination, in addition to Ralph. Isabel instantly recognizes Madame Merle as another original, brilliant soul like herself; however, based upon these similarities, she ignores the many negative things Merle says about herself (that Isabel is better than her, for example). Isabel quickly "found herself desiring to emulate" Merle's talents and accomplishments (James, *Portrait* 165). She especially admires her for being in possession of a great thing: "to be in a better position for appreciating people than they are for appreciating you" (James, *Portrait* 166). Isabel associates this value with the aristocracy, though Madame Merle is not an aristocrat, and hence with her ideal of independence and judging for herself. Because of this ideal of independence, rather than in spite of it, she comes under the "foreign" influence of her new friend.

Madame Merle ultimately orchestrates Isabel and Osmond's marriage more through her silence than through affirmations, knowing Isabel's character. She capitalizes on this knowledge of Isabel's character even when giving Mrs. Touchett,who has begun suspecting that Osmond is interested in Isabel, ostensibly good advice.Wishing to talk to Isabel about it, Madame Merle advises her not to, saying that it would have the opposite effect of raising the possibility in Isabel's mind. Madame Merle thus preserves the illusion of Isabel's perfect freedom and Isabel

> had no suspicions that her relations with Mr. Osmond were being discussed. Madame Merle had said nothing to put her on her guard; she alluded no more pointedly to him than to the other gentlemen of Florence, native and foreign, who now arrived in considerable numbers to pay their respects to Miss Archer's aunt. (James, *Portrait* 237)

However, though her mentions of Osmond are few, they are significant, even more significant because of her silences. As Frank Novak points out, Madame Merle first refers to Osmond at Gardencourt as the very type of the purposeless American man found everywhere on the continent but after Isabel inherits her fortune,

> Merle speaks 'afresh' of Osmond, and Isabel does not appear to notice. Merle cunningly associates Osmond with the culture and beauty of Italy, which Isabel is juts beginning to discover. She claims that he knows more about Italy than anyone 'except two or three German professors'; moreover, his fine 'perception and taste' surpass their ponderous scholarship. (James, *Portrait* 157)

Osmond is presented by Merle as someone who knows things, and it just so happens that these are the things that interest Isabel and that he knows them the way she is interested in knowing them. It is left up to Isabel to jump to the conclusion that she could learn from him and that this learning would be conducive to her freedom and ability to choose for herself. As for Osmond, he only tells the truth about himself and of his love of fine things and keeps silent about whatever does not fall into that category (which is, in fact, very little). Isabel's imagination fills in the rest. Similar to Merle's self-deprecations, when Osmond calls himself a dilettante, she does not believe he is telling the whole truth, but assumes:

> His life had been mingled with other lives more than he admitted; naturally she couldn't expect him to enter into this. For the present she abstained from provoking further revelations; to intimate that he had not told her everything would be more familiar and less considerate than she now desired to be – would in fact be uproariously vulgar. (James, *Portrait* 228).

Her fear of appearing vulgar (that perpetual stand-in for the unconscious American) around Osmond, has the effect both of silencing her, literally as well as figuratively. Rather than make a false step as to which of his art objects she should appreciate most, she speaks carefully, wanting to live up to what she imagines Madame Merle said about her (James, *Portrait* 226).

For Isabel, showing how they are similar, eschewing what is vulgar, means doing away with what is common, and in this case even a common language. This is also what allows Osmond to believe in Isabel's perfection and to desire her as his latest acquisition. In a perverse way, mutual misunderstanding serves as the basis, ultimately, for her miserable marriage to Osmond as well. As opposed to the mutual misunderstanding between Henrietta and Mr. Bantling which occurred through an acknowledgement of difference, this misunderstanding occurs precisely through the assumption of similarity, first to Madame Merle and then to Osmond himself. Isabel assumes a nobility of spirit in Osmond that matches her own, preventing her from suspecting his character, let alone expressing doubts about it.Osmond, on the other hand, takes Isabel's delicacy as a sign that she will *make* herself similar to him in every way. Isabel's intercultural cultural competence theoreticallyshould have been a guard against this kind of mutual misunderstanding, but it, in fact, makes her fate tragic. The assumption of similarity, especially when the cultural identity of characters like Madame Merle and Osmond are in question, can only be of benefit after the acknowledgment of difference.

Isabel's "generous mistake" has its genesis in her very strengths. This idea has long been theorized by many scholars, focusing on her empathy, her

imaginative nature, or her desire to help others but without adequate attention to her intercultural competence.[6] The denouement of the novel comes in accepting the utter foreignness of both Osmond as well as Madame Merle, recognizing that she does not understand them while retaining what she has learned from her experience with them. It is now Isabel's turn to practice silence during her final meeting with Merle at the convent where Pansy is lodged. In an instant, Merle guesses that Isabel has found out the truth that Pansy is actually the daughter she herself had with Osmond and "Isabel's only revenge was to be silent still – to leave Madame Merle in this unprecedented situation" (James, *Portrait* 459).The refinement of Isabel's tactic is signature Merle. However, James gives Isabel another moment at the end of the scene that he also terms her "only revenge" (James, *Portrait* 464). In this second "only revenge", Isabel becomes more explicit about Merle's share of blame while still avoiding anything resembling a vulgar scene.

The ending of the novel, while a conventional comedy for Harriet with her upcoming marriage to Mr. Bantling, seems more like a tragedy for Isabel with her refusal of Caspar Goodwood's offer to help her escape her current marriage to Osmond. Carolyn Matthews goes so far as to argue, building off the strange metaphor James gives in his prefacing likening Henrietta to a fishwife, that James "wanted to suggest a revolution – the end of an old order and the emergence of the new" (James, *Portrait* 204). This is one in which the "queen," who can be none other than Lady Isabel, will suffer a beheading. It is indeed evident that Henrietta, who seems less equipped to navigate it, receives the happier ending in Europe. However, both characters end in not caring what others may think of them, a maintenance and a return to unconsciousness. Isabel does not immediately choose to divorce her despicable husband despite what Goodwood may want and for James, this may be his way of showing that he does not care how readers themselves may judge her.

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[6] For an early example see "Isabel Archer's disease, and Henry James's" by J.M. Newton, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 2.1 (1966), 3-22. For an early alternative reading of Isabel's character see Marjorie Perloff's "Cinderella Becomes the Wicked Stepmother: The Portrait of a Lady as Ironic Fairy Tale" in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 23.4 (1969), 413-433, or more recently the evocatively titled article "I Don't Like Isabel Archer" by Marc Bousquet in *Henry James Review*, 18.2 (1997), pp. 197-199.

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