



Copyright © 1997 The Johns Hopkins University Press. All rights reserved.

The Henry James Review 18.2 (1997) 197-199

Muse Search Journals This Journal Contents

Access provided by Santa Clara University

I Don't Like Isabel Archer



Marc Bousquet

[Responses to Jane Campion's
The Portrait of a Lady](#)

I DON'T LIKE ISABEL ARCHER. I never have liked her, and I'm always surprised when other people admire her. She seems to me selfish, naive, ill-attuned to the feelings of others despite her education, an emblem of caprice and poor judgment--at best emergently admirable at the end of the novel, after the ordeals that transform her into Mrs. Gilbert Osmond.

The on-screen Isabel Archer (she never matures in the Campion film into a Mrs. Gilbert Osmond, retaining in the final shot that deer-caught-in-the-headlights look of injured innocence) also struck me as trivial. "Isabel is strong but she is so vulnerable at the same time," remarked Nicole Kidman during a publicity interview, "and I love that" (Polygram).

The slightness of this characterization doesn't argue against the film; like Henry James, Campion puts the emptiness of her leading vessel to good use.

Campion's Next Movie?

Shortly after the release of *Portrait*, Nicole Kidman let it be known that she had acquired the rights to Susannah Moore's *In the Cut* (1996), which she expected to develop into another film with Campion (Hoge 1). Should it make it to the screen, this "erotic thriller" will produce a role for Kidman markedly reminiscent of her appearance as the femme-fatale schoolteacher of Gus Van Sant's *To Die For*. The heroine of this explicit but otherwise unremarkable novel becomes sexually involved with a police officer, leading to some fairly predictable deployments of handcuffs, but--and the novel insists on the heroine's peculiarity in this regard--doesn't wish to form a lasting relationship with the fellow. As the cover of the paperback edition breathlessly reports, this is one creative-writing teacher who "likes being on her own just as much as she likes sex, and she makes no bones about it."

For some viewers, this blurb does a pretty good job of describing Campion's idea of Isabel Archer (or her sense of Isabel Archer's unrealized ideal, what Archer [End Page 197] ought to have been free to be in a differently-organized world). The scenes of the film attracting the most attention are

those which elaborate the heroine's erotic life, creating an Isabel who experiences gender oppression largely as sexual repression. Her eruptive fantasies and more-than-cousinly necking tell us that she is unfree in that her desires are restrained: Campion invests ethical value in her male characters to the exact degree that they accept her desire as multiple and mobile. Moral good in this movie means working for erotic liberty, perhaps just the sort articulated postcoitally by Susanna Moore's heroine. "The desire for separation. I wanted to be alone in my bed, and he wanted to be gone, and neither of us minded, eager now for dissolution, not union" (133). Her Isabel's restless world-traveling offers an analogy to, and inferior satisfaction of, her errant libido.

The Summer of Love

I personally find this equation of self-determination and wide-ranging desire irritating--probably because I belong to a generation which has been asked to make do with zipless fucking as a *substitute* for economic rights. We are mobile sexually, and we are also--involuntarily--mobile economically, gypsy labor constantly on the move at the beck of the immense wealth of the baby boom.

James makes Isabel interesting by giving her property. Without her cousin's bequest, she is just like "millions of presumptuous girls"--the *jeune fille* or "mere young thing" still "lacking much of the impress that constitutes an identity" (EW 1076-79). The situation is unique. The character, James insists (perhaps a bit too forcefully after all), is not.

Campion's film has it the other way around. She takes Isabel's economic independence for granted. (Most Hollywood films do the same, engaging a culture which thinks about class only by using the language of race.) Campion and Kidman collaborate to present Archer as a prototype of Today's Woman, on her own and liking it a century before her time. They need the period setting. It does the work of fabricating a uniqueness for the heroine: *we* understand her, we feel, but oh, how strange she must have appeared to Grandpa.

Ten minutes into the movie I'm sure that Campion's movie only misses greatness by being shot in the wrong period. She should have filmed Kidman as Isabel at Woodstock.

The screen *Portrait* opens with a sequence like a Benetton advertisement, redolent of sixties flower power but glossier than the sixties ever were. The partnership of Campion and Kidman inspires me with an eerie composite Jane Fonda Barbarella recovered by an articulate pro-sex feminist invisibly anointed by Ted Turner's millions.

A writer for *Premiere* magazine enthuses, "Bring her your corsetted, your lustful, your repressed. This New Zealand director is the statue of sexual liberty" (*Premiere*).

I think: been there, done that.

Show me the money. [End Page 198]

Two Polemics

Where Campion crusades against possessive eroticism, James crusades against possessive

individualism. James isn't worried about Isabel being owned by men--he's provided against that, early on--he's worried about Isabel's delusion that she owns herself. John Rowe has it right when he compares Isabel to Hester Prynne, writing that she's sinned "in her pretension to free and autonomous identity" (33). For the filmmaker, Isabel's remark, "I'm very fond of my liberty" (*PL* 18), provides an anthem. The novelist uses it as self-incrimination, and the moral evolution that makes Mrs. Gilbert Osmond such a startling, surpassing figure is that--even though she has the money to insulate herself, like Mrs. Touchett--she returns to wear her husband like a crown of thorns, in expiation.

Because Isabel's fate is so beautifully unfair--because her punishment so exceeds what we are willing to acknowledge as her sin--her tale is tragedy, despite the deeply melodramatic register of the novel. (The self-promoting Henrietta Stackpole is a not-so-oblique reference to "Roarin'" Ralph Stackpole, one of the earliest and most enduring stage-emblems of Jacksonian heroic individualism, a boisterous, self-aggrandizing frontier hero on the order of Mike Fink the riverboat man or Mose the fireman.) ¹ And as tragedy, we have to acknowledge the possibility that the heroine's flaw--like Macbeth's martial prowess and Lear's paternal fondness--is also her greatest virtue.

As much as James indicts his heroine for self-absorption, her limited capacity for interest "in things that are not herself" (*EW* 1079), for the habit of treating others like "specimens" (just like Adam Verver, who similarly collects himself a ringer of a spouse), she nonetheless extorts unwilling admiration from the Master: "the wonder being," he says, "how absolutely, how inordinately, the Isabel Archers, and even such smaller female fry, insist on mattering" (*EW* 1077).

Indeed.

CUNY Graduate Center

Note

¹. From Bowery dramaturg Louisa Medina's successful adaptation of R. M. Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1834).

Works by Henry James

EW--*European Writers and the Prefaces*. New York: Library of America, 1984.

PL--*The Portrait of a Lady*. New York: Oxford, 1981.

Other Works Cited

Hoge, Warren. Interview with Nicole Kidman. *New York Times*, 19 Jan. 1997, sec. 2: 1+.

Moore, Susanna. *In the Cut*. New York: Penguin, 1996.

Polygram Filmed Entertainment. "Portrait of a Lady" Commentary Page. Online. Internet. 8 Apr. 1997. Available: www.passengers.com/cgi-bin/PFE/conduit.cgi.

Premiere website. Online. Internet. 4 Apr. 1997. Available:
www.premieremag.com/archive/WIH_96/campion/index.html.

Rowe, John Carlos. *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1984.

Muse	Search	Journals	This Journal	Contents	Top
------	--------	----------	--------------	----------	-----