**Norms of Embodiment and Transgender Recognition:**

**The “Wrong Body” Problem, the Taboo on Translocation, and the Case of Henry James**

A middle-aged widower and collector of art who woos and marries the heroine of Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, Gilbert Osmond figures in the eyes of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary scholarship as perhaps the most egregious male chauvinist pig in nineteenth-century American literature. Certainly his marriage to Isabel Archer does not turn out well. But while the question of Isabel’s conscious and unconscious motivations in accepting Osmond’s suit continues to be enthusiastically debated – “like Sisyphus’s boulder,” Julian Murphet has recently remarked, it “rolls inexorably back to its original position, an intellectual affront and incentive to undertake the task yet again” (Murphet 194) – the nature of Gilbert’s desire for Isabel has provoked little real analysis. Instead, critics have rested content with the virtually tautological explanation that Osmond is a heterosexual man, and an aesthete to boot: “the ultimate representative of the male gaze,” in Patricia E. Johnson’s notably pithy but absolutely typical formulation (Johnson 45). Unsurprisingly – as it would appear – the outcome of the match is misery for the free-spirited Isabel, and since the novel’s first publication in 1881 James’s readers have enjoyed an unflagging orgy of loathing for the man who is to blame. Modern critics have called Osmond “feckless,” “malevolent,” “villainous” and “despicable” (Person 89; Freedman 146-47; Lawrence 59; Tintner (1998) 256). Whether “work[ing] from purely economic motives” to gain control of Isabel’s ample inheritance or exemplifying the erotic drive of “the patriarch who dominates his wife by adding her to his art collection,” this “seductive fortune-hunter,” it has been claimed, is by no means free of the taint of sexual criminality, his relationship to his daughter Pansy “on several occasions turn[ing] incestuous” (Sanner 164; Gregory 149; Luciano 210; Sanner 156-57). Ruthless in his social discriminations – “like the Proustian snob, he is also a *consumer* and an *exploiter*” (Heffernan 189) – the American Gilbert is contemptibly déclassé nonetheless. His collection of art, Jonathan Freedman opines, reveals “[an] aesthetic gaucherie,” “[a] diminished imagination” (Freedman 151). “[O]f course, no one is more deeply vulgar than Osmond,” Kathleen Lawrence remarks. “Although resident in Italy for three decades, Osmond still buys like a bourgeois tourist” (Lawrence 57; 59). These vindictive pleasures are heightened by the customary self-indictment of the figure of the critic, in character as an exemplary reader of the novel, on the charge of complicity in the persecution of James’s charismatic heroine, for it is a staple of the interpretative tradition to characterise all acts of attention as forms of assault upon their object.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus an affected identification with Osmond adds the excitement of self-flagellation to the critical fiesta at the same time as it entrenches the perennial analytic neglect of Isabel’s anathematized husband.

Guilty, myself, of a fair amount of Osmond-bashing in earlier years, I had begun to mistrust the unreflective consensus that characterizes discussion of this unhappy expatriate connoisseur, and I returned to James’s novel with the intention of reclaiming Gilbert’s masculinity as an object of empathetic exploration, if not, perhaps, of admiration or of love. I would not have been the first reader to make such an attempt: in *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity* (2003), Leland S. Person attends very seriously to the “second story” that James tells in this novel, a fictional “experiment in reforming manhood” peopled by “a veritable gallery [of] ‘portraits of gentlemen,’” among whom Osmond figures prominently (Person 87). But while Person’s own portrait of Osmond is considerably more detailed than those found in most critical assessments, it is overcast nonetheless by a similar hostility. Intuiting something radically surprising in Gilbert’s nature, Person suggests that “James wished to evacuate conventional male qualities from the site of Osmond’s character” (94). But the critic’s approach defers from the start to a prioritization of Isabel’s experience: Osmond, Person writes, evidences James’s “desire to explore a non-traditional or even anti-traditional masculinity from a woman’s point of view” (94). Perhaps this is why Person’s account of Osmond’s difference turns ineluctably back into an account of Osmond’s masculine malevolence, his passion for art explained as a manifestation of his “intellectual or imaginative phallicism,” his desire for Isabel parsed in terms of the use he can make of her “as a sign of manly presence and power” (96). I wanted therefore to develop a newly open-minded reading of this universally disliked fictional character, encouraged in part by the example of standard psychotherapeutic models of attention that posit non-judgemental curiosity as one of the basic conditions of insight. Precisely because Isabel suffers such unhappiness in her marriage, an approach implicitly or explicitly aligned with her perspective will not offer the best vantage point from which to develop some understanding of what it feels like to be Mr Gilbert Osmond.

My attention was captured early on by the question of Osmond’s relationship to his own desire, which struck me as peculiarly shame-ridden. In the early days of Osmond’s courtship of Isabel Archer, James says this of Gilbert: “Clearly he was amused – as amused as a man could be who was so little ever surprised, and that made him almost applausive. It was not that his spirits were visibly high – he would never, in the concert of pleasure, touch the big drum by so much as a knuckle: he had a mortal dislike to the high, ragged note, to what he called random ravings.” (James 305) The metaphor suggests that Gilbert has an intense awareness of “audience,” and that this awareness is linked to a horror of public exposure, as if self-expression could only redound to his discredit. If even the most tentative manifestation of desire risks making Osmond appear grotesque, then inexpressiveness, figured here as abstaining from interaction with a musical instrument, keeping feelings of pleasure and excitement safely indiscernible, aims to ensure the dignity of Isabel’s suitor in the eyes of his community.

James’s subsequent exploration of Gilbert’s behaviour in the days immediately following Isabel’s acceptance of his suit lends support to an account of Osmond’s reticence as a behaviour based in a sexual modesty exaggerated to the point of shame. “Contentment,” James writes, “on [Osmond’s] part, took no vulgar form; excitement, in the most self-conscious of men, was a kind of ecstasy of self-control.” (James 350) I will return to the topic of Gilbert’s sexual self-distaste, as I understand it to play a crucial part in determining the events of the story. But notwithstanding the general salience of Gilbert’s shame to understanding the plot of James’s novel, this passage invites us to notice that there certainly do exist some forms or modes of self-expression that are wonderfully welcome to the finical connoisseur. James writes:

[Osmond] was immensely pleased with his young lady [....] What could be a happier gift in a companion than a quick, fanciful mind which saved one repetitions and reflected one’s thought on a polished, elegant surface? [....] His egotism had never taken the crude form of desiring a dull wife; this lady’s intelligence was to be a silver plate, not an earthen one – a plate that he might heap up with ripe fruits, to which it would give a decorative value, so that talk might become for him a sort of served dessert. He found the silver quality in this perfection in Isabel; he could tap her imagination with his knuckle and make it ring. (350)

No preference for silence here, no fear now of “tap[ping]” with his knuckle at a musical instrument in order to make it sound. Why not? The answer, I reasoned, must lie in the contrasting performance possibilities presented by the big drum and the silver plate. In both cases what would get expressed is the force communicated through Osmond’s knuckle, but the acceptability of the sound is determined by the nature of the instrument: the drum makes an ugly noise, the plate makes a beautiful one.

But what makes one sound – which is to say, one social manifestation of the self – ugly, and another beautiful? It cannot be a matter of pitch, or at least not a matter of pitch alone – however we translate the meaning of pitch in the operation of the metaphor as a whole – because the pitch of both notes is high, which presents something of a puzzle. It is not surprising that a silver serving dish, of a size to sit comfortably on a domestic dining table, would be imagined to “ring,” as would a small bell, at a relatively high pitch: but why would a big drum not be expected to sound a low note, whether attractively or not? There is no doubt, however, in Gilbert’s mind that not only the pretty plate but the big drum, too, can be expected to give out a high-pitched sound, at least insofar as it is Gilbert’s knuckle that is applied to each instrument. I came to hypothesize, therefore, that in Gilbert’s idiosyncratic construal of the practice of music-making, instruments of different types emit notes of a single, invariant pitch by virtue of the identity of the performer in question, the particular pitch expressing some aspect of the musician’s self that persists unchanged whether it is given voice by a big drum or by a bell-like silver vessel. I came to understand that to Gilbert it seems obvious that if his own subjectivity is to enjoy any vocalisation, as it were, in the social “concert of pleasure,” it must inevitably sound at a high pitch; the only question is whether the performance will be a pleasing one, in the “polished” accents of an “elegant” lady, or a travesty of such, the “high, ragged” cry or “random ravings” as of a madwoman, an hysteric, or a shrew. By now it had become clear to me that what was at stake in the contrast between the big drum and the silver platter was the sexual identities of these two symbolic forms. The burly butch to the silver platter’s femme, the big drum is a masculine apparatus and therefore incapable of producing Osmond’s high music as a lovely thing. It is, for Osmond, quite simply the *wrong kind of instrument*. In contrast, the polished, elegant platter is an especially prestigious example of the right kind of instrument for a musician such as Gilbert. In taking to himself a silver bell, an Is-a-bel, Gilbert looks to achieve a seemly and attractive representation of his own identity in the cultural ensemble: an identity that I could no longer fail to recognise as distinctively – and, from Gilbert’s perspective, intrinsically and unproblematically – feminine.[[2]](#footnote-2) Isabel’s value for Osmond, I now found myself able to specify, lies in her symbolic capacity, *as a woman*, to represent a femininity other than her own, a femininity that could only be manifested in burlesque fashion by a masculine form such as the “big drum” of Osmond’s male physical person. My project, I saw, would require some radical reconceptualization, as I could not continue to characterize my inquiry into Gilbert’s self-experience as an exploration of a fictional masculinity. I would need to recognise James’s most loathed male character as a trans woman and undertake a reconsideration of *The Portrait of a Lady* in this exhilarating new light.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the first half of this essay, I will investigate, critique, and develop some theoretical resources for thinking about the psychical conformation, and social and self-experience, of a trans subject such as Gilbert Osmond for whom the “wrong body” problem represents a basic existential crux. I begin with a sketch of the status of the concept of the “wrong body” in trans studies, where it has been characterized by many scholars as a trope deriving from and acting to reproduce a repressive ideological formation. I compare and contrast to this the dominant characterization in Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse of subjects who consider themselves to have the “wrong body” as psychotic, or lawless. From there, I embark on the main work of this half of the essay, which is to demonstrate in the basic principles of Lacanian theory the logical postulation of a class of subjects like James’s character Gilbert Osmond: subjects whose psychical sexuation as men or women does not match up with the symbolic sexual identity of their physical persons. Remaining within psychoanalytic logic, I develop a theoretical analysis of the solution to the problem of the “wrong body” that I have gestured towards in my opening account of Isabel Archer’s importance to Gilbert, a solution that I will call “translocated embodiment.” I propose that the general failure of Lacanian commentators to recognise the intrinsic suitability of their theory for a sympathetic account of transgender subjectivity – of the variety, that is to say, that is represented by Osmond – may be evidence of the operation of a non-psychoanalytic norm of “co-located” embodiment. Recognising the existence of such a norm may therefore open up new ways of understanding the hostility aroused by transgender subjects such as James’s fictional Gilbert in terms of a taboo on translocation.

In the second half of the essay, I return to *The Portrait of a Lady* to explore in detail the operation of the taboo on translocated embodiment in the Anglo-American leisure-class community investigated by James’s novel. I suggest that the foregrounded aestheticism not only of Gilbert Osmond but also of Ralph Touchett and Edward Rosier may be understood as a historically specific instance of translocation, and that its very marked disfavour in the nineteenth-century world of the text can be seen to provoke James’s three connoisseurs to attempts at courtship and matrimony whose purpose is to secure a socially advantageous representation of these transgender subjects in the form of cisgender women. Thus the overt translocational practice of art collection gives way to a covert translocational practice of heterosexuality. Where the trans aesthete achieves social and phantasmatic being in the bodily form of beautiful objects, the trans husband achieves social and phantasmatic being in the form of his wife’s material and social identity. Although my focus remains tightly, for the most part, on James’s novel, I will raise the possibility that the baleful operation of the taboo on translocation is discernible well beyond the pages of James’s fiction, both in historical anti-aestheticist critique and in modern literary-critical accounts of aestheticism such as we find in some influential strands of James scholarship. If this proposition at all persuasive, it may consequently become possible not merely to recognize in the literary and theoretical materials that I explore across the essay evidence of the historical potentiality of translocation, but to hypothesize the real historical existence, across or within a span of a century and a half, of a certain number – perhaps very large numbers – of subjects embodied in this way.

The theoretical, literary-critical, and speculative-historical work of my essay will therefore have clear implications for the kinds of questions that we might ask of any novel from James’s era and of certain more recent periods, too. Identifying a coercive norm of bodily co-location in the nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first century societies in which were produced the materials that I examine here will suggest the possible rewards – interpretative and ethical – of attending to the archival capacity of the novel form in relation to the translocated subjects who could, in principle, have lived, or who may in fact have lived, in the various cultures in question. I therefore aspire here to model, and intend implicitly to argue for, the value of looking for the narrative registration of such transgender subjects not only in *Portrait* and elsewhere in James’s writing, but throughout the literary fiction of any society that is governed by a norm of co-located embodiment. Moreover, it seems to me reasonable to suppose that James is not the only writer capable of exploiting the analytic capacity of the novel form to investigate the silent norms and constructive taboos that determine historically and culturally specific modes of embodiment. My attention here to James’s exploration, in a single, if magisterial, text, of the psychical operation of translocation and the social and psychological ramifications that result when this mode of embodiment is functioning under a taboo might therefore encourage some profitable interest in the question of how James’s professional peers, or inheritors, deployed the propositional or philosophical capability of the novel form to stage their own analyses of the cultural politics of embodiment.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**The “wrong body” in theory**

The “wrong body” is a contentious concept in texts about transgender self-experience. “*Anima mulieris in corpore virilis inclusa*: the soul of a woman imprisoned in a man’s body. Karl Ulrichs’ 1862 account of trans- experience,” writes Julian Carter, “echoes into our own time in variants of the phrase ‘trapped in the wrong body.’” (Carter 130) As Carter observes, the trope is “[c]ulturally powerful and politically controversial, claimed and resisted in many ways”: “such descriptions can feel like a potent form of truth-telling,” Carter concedes, yet the proposition that some transgender people have in some sense got the “wrong body” has been forcefully contested since the inaugural moments of modern transgender studies. On the one hand, the formulation has been characterized as evidence of a regrettable capture by hegemonic myth. In “The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” (1991), which is widely acknowledged today as a foundational text in the field, Sandy Stone argues that the notion of the “wrong body” is implicated in an ideological mirage of biologically grounded heterosexuality, “the ‘true’ story of Adam and Eve as the ontological account of irreducible difference, an essential biography which is part of nature” (Stone 230). Eva Hayward stresses the fetishistic importance of perfection, or wholeness, in such a fantasy of the natural. “Rather simplistically,” Hayward writes, “it has been suggested that the pre-operative transsexual feels constrained by the ‘wrong body’ and longs to acquire the whole or healed body, which is represented by the male or female form.... [T]he transsexual aspires to make the so-called ‘defective body’ intact, entire, complete, in order that it may be owned as mine, as me” (Hayward 182). [[5]](#footnote-5) For Julian Carter, the imperative in question pertains to an opposite but equally oppressive philosophical ideal of disembodiment: “To imagine the body as a prison for the soul is to participate, however reluctantly, in a conceptual universe where our flesh is inconvenient matter which limits the free expression of our inner and nobler being.... In this depressive figuration, simply to be embodied is already to be trapped by a wrongness inseparable from the condition of materiality” (Carter 130).

On the other hand – and sometimes almost simultaneously – critiques of the “wrong body” formulation from within transgender studies have sought to problematise the status of the claim as *any* subject’s description, in good faith, of lived experience, however much such lived experience may be understood to be prescribed by ideology. Use of the trope has been characterised instead as strategic. A major contribution of Stone’s essay is its striking analysis of the ways in which people who seek gender confirmation surgery (GCS) may deploy concepts such as that of the “wrong body” rhetorically to secure the professional support of psychiatrists and surgeons. “Initially,” Stone observes, “the only textbook on the subject of transsexualism was Harry Benjamin’s *The Transsexual Phenomenon* [1966]. When the first [GCS] clinics were constituted, Benjamin’s book was the [clinical] researchers’ standard reference. And when the first transsexuals were evaluated for their suitability for surgery, their behaviour matched up gratifyingly with Benjamin’s criteria.... [T]he candidates, too, had read Benjamin’s book ... and they were only too happy to provide the behaviour that led to acceptance for surgery.” (Stone 228) Jeanne Vaccaro argues that while utilisation of the trope may quite successfully advance the interests of an individual, narrowly defined, it acts against the political interests of the class to which the individual belongs. “To strategically deploy feelings of ‘wrong’ embodiment – for the benefit of a therapist, surgeon, case worker, welfare administrator, and so on – has the effect of depoliticizing and privatizing gender identity” (Vaccaro 95).

Thus, whether mobilised, more or less knowingly, to obtain assistance from medico-juridical institutions, or called upon guilelessly in an effort of self-description by a subject in the grip of a malignant hegemonic frame, the formulation of the “wrong body” represents an obstacle to realising what Stone, Vaccaro and many others identify as the inherently transgressive potential of transgender ways of being. For Stone, the challenge – and the opportunity – is to “generate a true, effective, and representational counterdiscourse ... from outside the boundaries of gender, beyond the constructed oppositional nodes that have been predefined as the only positions from which discourse is possible” (230). “To be trans,” Hayward affirms, “is to be transcending or surpassing particular impositions whether empirical, rhetorical, or aesthetic” (181). “What kinds of intellectual labor can we begin to perform through the critical deployment of ‘trans-’ operations and movements?” ask Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore; “how might we ... begin to critically trans- our world?” (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 13)

A 2017 Special Issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* addressed itself to the question of the mutual benefits that might derive from an engagement of psychoanalytic theory by transgender studies, and vice versa. “[P]sychoanalysis offers exciting – and underdeveloped – potentials for trans studies,” remark Stryker and Currah in their General Editors’ Introduction; “[j]ust as significant, ... if not more so, than the demonstrable usefulness of psychoanalysis for insight into transgender existence, is the usefulness of transgender and transsexual ways of being for revitalizing psychoanalysis itself” (Stryker and Currah 323; 324). The special issue thus represented something of a watershed for contemporary transgender studies, given the recognition in the field of a widespread pathologizing of transgender subjects in historical and modern psychoanalysis.[[6]](#footnote-6) A “Lacanian tendency to reduce trans\* subjectivity to psychosis,” as Sheila L. Cavanagh notes, for example, in this special issue, “is evident in most other psychoanalytic paradigms as well” (Cavanagh 326).

In standard Lacanian theory, psychosis is a state of being insufficiently subordinated to symbolic law – a state that may be indicated, according to some Lacanian theorists, by a subject’s complaining of having the “wrong body.” Lorenzo Chiesa writes, for example: “What the transsexual really wants to get rid of by changing sex/organ is not, as he claims, his being positioned on the ‘wrong’ side of anatomical difference, but the phallic signifier that decrees castration on both sides of sexuation” (Chiesa 193). By “castration,” Lacanians mean a condition of ontological lack that defines every subject, whether masculine or feminine, of symbolic law.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus Geneviève Morel’s diagnosis of a “madness” in “[t]he transsexual [who] would like to change his anatomical sex and denounces the error of nature that has given him a woman’s soul in the body of a man (or vice versa)” is bolstered by the contention that such a subject manifests little suffering or doubt in their self-recognition as a sexed being. In place of the existential anguish ineluctably generated by subjectivization under symbolic law, someone confident enough in their “‘true’ sex” to argue for its difference from “the anatomical sex” of their physical person demonstrates “intimate convictions about his [or her] [psychical] sex[uation] ... that we know [to be] a sign of the absence of neurosis” (Morel 33). Morel’s argument reiterates Catherine Millot’s claim that “[t]ranssexuals who claim to possess a female soul imprisoned in a man’s body” thereby reveal “a monolithic sexual identity, one that admits of neither doubts nor questions” (Millot 15). Building on Millot’s work, Charles Shepherd duly affirms “that *the certainty of the subject who claims a transsexual position* ... is a sign that the symbolic order has been foreclosed” (Shepherdson 96). Thus, in dramatic contrast to the way in which trans subjects who complain of the “wrong body” have often been characterised in trans studies as political conservatives, representing a regrettable individualism if not a full-blown captivation by heterosexist norms, they feature frequently in psychoanalytic discourse as a variety of psychotic, a figure whose refusal of castration is coextensive with a failure of symbolic law.

As is demonstrated by the terms in which Morel, Millot, and Shepherdson reason in the texts I have quoted above, any attempt to demonstrate the profound suitability of Lacanian theory for a sympathetic investigation of the “wrong body” problem will have to acknowledge from the start the thoroughgoing pessimism of the philosophical sensibility in question. “[T]he always problematic and (ontologically) uncertain character of sexuality,” Zupancic writes, instantiates “an inherent twist, or stumbling block,” or “persisting contradiction” in “[t]he fundamental ontological category, ‘being as being’” (7; 3; 23).[[8]](#footnote-8) If, in principle, *any* subject’s apparent or occasional absence of existential anxiety is therefore to be parsed as evidence of psychosis, we will have to expect that a certain dourness of outlook will characterise even an avowedly “trans-affirmative” articulation of Lacanian thought (the term is Chris Coffman’s).[[9]](#footnote-9) This need not deter us, however, from recognising in the basic principles of Lacanian theory the logical postulation of a class of subjects whose psychical sexuation as men or women (in all its ordinary, irreducible difficulty) does not match up with the symbolic sexual identity – male or female – of their physical persons: a class of subjects, therefore, for whom the lived experience of the “wrong body,” in both its most intimate and its most public and social dimensions, asks to be understood not in psychoanalytic terms as evidence of psychosis but politically, in relation to the ideological effects of an unacknowledged norm pertaining to embodiment.

As long ago as 1982, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose set out, for the benefit of Anglophone feminist theory, the key tenets of Lacanian thought with respect to the phenomenon of sexual difference. The first, and most important, point to note is that both sexed positions are an artifact, or effect, of symbolic law. “For Lacan,” Rose wrote in her introduction to *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, “men and women are only ever in language (‘Men and women are signifiers bound to the common usage of language’, SXX, p. 36). All speaking beings must line themselves up on one side or the other of this division, but anyone can cross over and inscribe themselves on the opposite side from that to which they are anatomically destined” (Rose 49). (In a footnote, Rose subjoins at this point: “Note how this simultaneously shifts the concept of bisexuality – not an undifferentiated sexual nature prior to symbolic difference (Freud’s earlier sense), but the availability to all subjects of both positions in relation to that difference itself.”[[10]](#footnote-10)) Thus Rose refutes absolutely the naturalist notion that psychical sexuation as a man or as a woman is preordained or “anatomically destined” by the physical person in question.[[11]](#footnote-11)

“It is, we could say, an either/or situation,” she continues, “but one whose fantasmatic nature was endlessly reiterated by Lacan” (49). Rose accordingly warns against the myth that “each sex [...] [is] that which could satisfy and complete the other”: “It is when the categories ‘male’ and ‘female’ are seen to represent an absolute and complementary division that they fall prey to a mystification in which the difficulty of sexuality instantly disappears” (33).[[12]](#footnote-12) Nonetheless, what we can hardly help but describe, however problematically, as the existential twoness of the sexual either/or is the second point to note in Rose’s explication of Lacanian first principles.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The third point to note is the signifying function of the body with respect to the sexuated subject. Having played no determining part in the psychical sexuation that is identical with subjectivisation *per se*, sexual anatomy acquires after the fact a certain symbolic valence as a representation of the subject as a man or as a woman. “[It is] not that anatomical difference *is* sexual difference (the one as strictly deducible from the other), but that anatomical difference comes to *figure* sexual difference, that is, it becomes the sole representative of what that difference is allowed to be” (Rose 42).[[14]](#footnote-14) Anatomical sex does not *instantiate* a subject’s sexual difference any more than it constitutes a natural origin or cause of it: anatomical sex comes merely to *signify* the subject’s sexual difference, after the fact of sexual subjectivization under the mandate of symbolic law.

The ease with which the symbolic nature of the relation may be misrecognised as a matter of equivalence, of continuity, or of identity, is registered in the Lacanian notion of the “common error.” The “common error,” as Chiesa explains, is the “transposing [of] symbolic [i.e. psychical] sexual difference onto the natural possession or lack of an organ” (193). “I am a man because I have a penis,” thinks the masculine subject in the grip of the “common error.” So very common is the subject’s capture by what we might think of as the reality effect of anatomical sex – a *signifier* of the subject’s sexuation that poses as the *referent*, the thing in itself – that Morel identifies it as a signature feature of life under symbolic law, and a basis for sociality *per se*. The “error Lacan calls the ‘common error,’” she writes, “[is] common because it is everybody’s and because it creates a community, just as discourse creates a social link on the basis of the phallic universal” (Morel 30).[[15]](#footnote-15) But transgender subjects fail to participate in the “common error” insofar as they insist on the categorical unsuitability of their own sexual anatomy to support any such referential illusion. “How could I possibly equate my genitalia with the person that I know myself to be?” such a subject seems to inquire, truculently. “I’ve got the wrong kind of body. It’s nothing like me. I could hardly mistake it for myself.” For Morel, such a refusal to accept the physical person of the subject as a signifier of the subject’s psychical sexuation is virtually identical with a refusal of symbolic law. Equating a “foreclosure ... of common error” with a “foreclosure ... of sexual discourse,” Morel adduces an immunity to the reality effect of sexual anatomy as evidence of the transgender subject’s “madness” (Morel 34). “[T]he transsexual .... psychotically mistakes the ‘common error’ ... for an error in the very order of nature that affects his body,” Chiesa concurs (193).

Yet *the sexual identity of the subject’s physical person* – which may come to function as a signifier of the subject’s sexuation – *is in itself an artifact or effect of symbolic law,* the very mandate by which such a subject is produced: this is the final crucial element of Rose’s account. “Freud gave the moment when the boy and girl child saw that they were different the status of a trauma in which the girl is seen to be lacking,” Rose notes. “But something can only be seen to be missing according to a pre-existing hierarchy of values (‘there is nothing missing in the real’, PP, p. 113). What counts is not the perception but its already assigned meaning – the moment belongs to the symbolic” (42). Sexual subjectivization inaugurates and underwrites the apperception of the physical person as an entity sexed according to the either/or of the symbolic.[[16]](#footnote-16) And Morel and Chiesa agree. “[N]atural, anatomical difference,” Morel writes, “is a mythical real, inasmuch as it acquires its value only from the .... register ... of sexual difference. In effect, ‘nature’ is only of value when interpreted, and no difference is imaginable without the signifier; perception itself is structured by it” (Morel 30). “As Lacan himself has it, against biological discourse, psychoanalysis reminds us that the access to the real is the symbolic,” Chiesa stresses. “‘We do not access the so-called real except in and through this impossible that alone defines the symbolic,’ and, *subsequently*, ‘it is within this perspective that we can take what we call reality, *natural reality*, at the level of a certain discourse’” (27).

Lacanian theory has prepared us to find that sexual subjectivization may not accord with the sexual anatomy of that subject’s physical person; assured us that the sex of such a subject’s physical person is a perceptual effect of the same symbolic mandate by which the subject in question has been produced; implied that the discord that such a subject must discern as characterising the contrast between his or her self-experience and the sex of his or her physical person will be both extreme and intense, given that it reproduces the ontological antinomy of the Lacanian either/or; and inferred that, therefore, the more or less mystifying function of anatomical sex as a signifier of the self cannot possibly operate in the case of this category of subject, not on account of any resistance to symbolic law but as the result of the subject’s very production by it. Why, then, do theorists such as Morel and Chiesa insist on the psychotic nature of the transgender subject who complains of having the “wrong body,” even as they adhere unambiguously to the Lacanian principles according to which the difficulty in question is a perfectly predictable moment in the psycho-somatic constitution of any number of people? Why, for that matter, does Rose at no point acknowledge, however cursorily, that her account of sexual difference logically implies – and accounts for – the formation of a certain category of transgender subject? An answer, I think, may lie in the operation of a socio-political norm of embodiment with which Lacanian theorists need have nothing to do: a norm of co-located corporealization that makes it hard to reckon with the reality of corporeal translocation, notwithstanding the perhaps very widespread historical occurrence, in some modern and contemporary populations, of subjects embodied in this way.

To specify the difference between co-located and translocated corporealization we will need to distinguish, conceptually and terminologically, between the physical person of the subject, and the subject’s body. Extensive work both in psychoanalytic theory and in transgender studies has established that the subject’s body is a symbolic entity, phantasmatically assumed; see, for a relatively recent, substantial example, Gayle Salamon’s *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (2010), an explicitly trans-affirmative exploration of embodiment based in historical and modern psychoanalysis and phenomenology. “[F]ar from a simple biological given,” the body of the subject is a complex significatory construction, Salamon shows, its every quality – its contours, constituent parts, appearance as a whole, persistence through time, et cetera – delimited by symbolic schema and sustained by fantasy (30). The symbolic nature of the subject’s physical person, however – or, better, the significance of the existence of the physical person *as a symbolic entity* – has not been fully recognised; although, as we have seen, Lacanian theory insists that insofar as the physical person is perceived by subjects of symbolic law as either male or female, it always already pertains to the realm of phallic signification.

To distinguish between the physical person of the subject and the subject’s body is thus not to distinguish between a natural entity and a symbolic one, phantasmatically assumed. The distinction is a matter rather of different categories of symbolic artifact or phenomenon, with different histories of composition, as it were, and representing different aspects or functions in the life of the subject. Whereas the body of the subject is a lived assemblage of signs and meanings, the physical person is a conventional sexed form, an illustrative specimen, or type, of maleness or of femaleness. The physical person of the subject dates from the moment at which the sex “of the baby” is announced by the midwife or doctor, at birth (or before, with the help of an ultrasound image). It pre-exists the psychical process or event of subjectivization, as well as the subject’s Imaginary self-investment as a sexuated body. Thus, if the physical person’s symbolic sexual character happens to accord with the psychical sex of the subject, the physical person will represent an image of the self with which the subject can identify. Succumbing to the “common error,” misrecognising a sexed form as the biological ground or anatomical instantiation of his or her identity, the subject may assume his or her physical person, in fantasy, as his or her body. To characterise such a variety of corporealization as “co-located” is to highlight the ultimate coincidence of the physical person of the subject, a sexed signifier and signifier of sexuation, and the subject’s body, the phantasmatic medium of the subject’s being in the world.

Co-located corporealization is a logical impossibility for a subject whose psychical sexuation cannot be represented by the sexual character of his or her physical person, or “body,” as it is more likely, in everyday language, to be called. Such a subject has indeed got the “wrong body” in the sense that the symbolic sexual identity of his or her physical person is flagrantly at odds with his or her psychical sexuation. He or she will be incapable of participating in the “common error” with respect to his or her physical person.[[17]](#footnote-17) There is, however, no reason at all why such a subject of symbolic law should not succumb to the reality effect of an alternative signifier of sexuation, acceding to bodiliness through identification with a symbolic form *other than his or her physical person*. Such a corporealization will be “translocated” in the sense that the subject’s body will materialise in a symbolic form, or locus, outside of the symbolic locus that is the physical person. In respect of the nature of the body that is thereby constituted in and as fantasy, however, there are no distinctions to be drawn between translocation and co-location. The translocated subject’s body is no less real and no more virtual than is the body of the co-located subject; the co-located subject’s body is no more real and no less virtual than is the body of the translocated subject. The dramatically compromised social visibility of a transgender subject such as Osmond, both inside and outside the world of James’s text, could therefore be explained not in terms of some intrinsic flaw or structural abnormality in the translocational way of being in the world, but rather as indexing the effects of a social norm of co-located embodiment. The norm would appear to valorise one particular variety of symbolic form – the subject’s physical person – over all of the other sexed signifiers that a culture makes available nonetheless for phantasmatic bodily assumption, or “corporealization,” as I have been calling it.

**Translocation in *The Portrait of a Lady***

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, the operation of the norm of corporeal co-location is especially discernible in relation to the collection and appreciation of artworks. In the Anglo-American leisure-class culture that James investigates here, the art object is a prominent example of the kind of conventional sexed form with which a subject may identify in order to achieve bodily being if his or her physical person is not apt for the purpose. (In this particular case, the case of the artwork, the sex that is signified by the conventional form in question is, invariably, the feminine.) Characters in this novel deprecate the aesthete’s investment in beautiful things with a relentlessness, and a quite breathtaking discourtesy, that would be hard to understand if the literally existential function of these objects were not at least dimly apprehended by the aesthete’s detractors. Thus we may observe that the extent to which a transgender subject achieves social and psychosomatic materialisation through connoisseurialism is directly related to the degree of community opprobrium that will thereby be incurred. As will be the case in any instance of translocation in a culture entranced by the co-locational norm, aestheticism delivers embodiment under sanction, producing social recognition in the form of slightings, aversion and denigration.

Let us consider in this connexion the instructive figures of Gilbert Osmond, Ralph Touchett, and Edward Rosier. All three are American nationals long established in Europe, living on family money. All three are noted connoisseurs equipped with private collections of art that function as a symbolic locus for the aesthete’s sense of self.

Ralph is Isabel’s cousin; a confirmed invalid since early adulthood, his condition deteriorates over the course of the novel and the event of his premature death figures largely in the complex resolution of the plot. Ralph passively inherits most of his lovely things from his father, and his relation to the connoisseurial modus vivendi is markedly ambivalent. Although he cares passionately for the paintings in the gallery of Gardencourt, the Touchett estate in England, he is obscurely reluctant to exhibit them to Isabel when she requests a tour on her first night at the house. In contrast, Gilbert Osmond and Ned Rosier – this last an acquaintance of Isabel’s from childhood – foreground their artworks in their earliest efforts to open up an intimacy with Isabel. When Isabel and Ned are reunited, as adults, in Paris, Ned’s home, Ned’s conversation is dominated by his enthusiasm for the bountiful opportunities the city offers for the acquisition of antiques. “You can’t get tired of it,” he tells Isabel: “there’s always something new and fresh. Take the Hôtel Drouot, now; they sometimes have three and four sales a week. Where can you get such things as you can here? .... There has been a great deal of talk about London of late; it’s the fashion to cry up London. But there’s nothing in it – you can’t do anything in London. No Louis-Quinze – nothing of the First Empire; nothing but their eternal Queen Anne. It’s good for one’s bedroom, Queen Anne – for one’s washing-room; but it isn’t proper for a *salon*” (215). James plays the scene for laughs, but it is notable nonetheless that the connoisseur’s candid self-presentation forfeits Isabel’s respect. Ned offers to share his knowledge of the best places to buy – “I’ll tell you, if you like, as a particular favour; only you mustn’t tell anyone else” – and even invites Isabel to see his own collection: “You and Mrs Touchett must come and breakfast with me some day, and I’ll show you my things; *je ne vous dis que ça!*” (215) Isabel responds to Ned’s generosity with ridicule, asking him if he “spend[s] [his] life at the auctioneer’s”: it is an interesting jibe, its satirical thrust inextricable from a disavowed appreciation of what is really at stake. “You think I’m a mere trifler,” Ned remarks with the good-natured resignation of one accustomed to being treated as a figure of fun.

The first significant action that Osmond takes in relation to Isabel is to show her his collection of rare, precious, and beautiful things: Gilbert’s display of his treasures makes up the main item on the programme for Isabel’s inaugural visit to his apartments in a Florentine villa. This encounter, too, is the occasion of a kind of willed incomprehension on Isabel’s part, as while she believes herself anxious to develop her understanding of art and of Mr Osmond alike, she stubbornly resists the lesson that her host is endeavouring to teach. Primed, as it would appear, by the taboo on translocation, Isabel seeks to separate out the paintings and objects in Osmond’s collection from what she is determined to regard as the intriguingly unexpressed truth of Osmond’s experience. “His pictures, his medallions and tapestries were interesting,” Isabel reflects; “but after a while [she] felt the owner much more so, and independently of them, thickly as they seemed to overhang him.... She was certainly far from understanding him completely; his meaning was not at all times obvious” (261-62). Ned had offered no editorial gloss on the meaning of his appetite for the salerooms, but Osmond spells out the ontologico-social function of his aesthetic project and at the same time highlights the inveterate failure of his community to recognise its significance. “The events of my life have been absolutely unperceived by any one save myself,” Gilbert tells his guest; “getting an old silver crucifix at a bargain (I’ve never bought anything dear, of course), or discovering, as I once did, a sketch by Correggio on a panel daubed over by some inspired idiot.” Isabel not only discounts his communication but preens herself on her wisdom and empathy in so doing. “This would have been rather a dry account of Mr Osmond’s career if Isabel had fully believed it,” James’s narrator reports; “but her imagination supplied the human element which she was sure had not been wanting” (266).

As the relationship between Isabel and Gilbert, an ugly and frustrating tragicomedy of mutual misconception, ramifies luxuriantly over the course of James’s massive novel, Isabel’s reflexive dismissal of Osmond’s translocated personhood, as of Ned Rosier’s, hardens into an active hostility towards the connoisseur’s mode of life, her presumption of its meaninglessness devolving into a diagnosis of malignity. Some years into her disastrous marriage to Osmond, Isabel refuses to accept a compliment on her Roman reception rooms on the grounds that the taste therein expressed is not her own, but Gilbert’s. Her refusal has nothing to do with a concern to ensure credit where credit is due, but indicates rather a wish to anathematise the aesthete’s way of being in the world. To her visitor’s remark: “He” – Osmond – “must be very clever,” Isabel responds with what she intends as an unreserved condemnation of her husband: “He has a genius for upholstery” (385).

Identifying aestheticism as a practice of psychosomatic and social self-realization, James’s novel shows how translocation works in a culture governed by a norm of co-located embodiment. By refusing the wrong kind of “body” – an inhospitably sexed physical person – in favour of the right, an artwork or collection of artworks that represents appropriately the psychical sexuation of the transgender subject in question, the connoisseur achieves corporealization, the absolute personal, as much as the social, condition of existence. The translocated subject *lives*. At the same time, the self that is thereby actualized is subject to systematic social undermining; at its least violent, the prejudice against translocation takes the form of the humorous micro-aggressions with which Ned has had to become familiar, but it may also be embodied more robustly in a forthright moral pathologization which seems to infer that the transgender subject’s very aspiration to be is indistinguishable from a spiritual malaise. Isabel’s hostility typifies the attitudes of the fictional community of which she is a part, but it is indicative also of positions within public debates about aestheticism in the historical 1870s and 80s. Her animus doubles that of “the satirical attacks on aesthetes launched largely, but not exclusively, by Du Maurier and the rest of the *Punch* coterie” in the period, as Jonathan Freedman (147) and, more recently, Michèle Mendelssohn have shown. Such contemporaneous cultural critique disparaged the aesthete as “unnatural or perverse,” “literally, a commodity fetishist” whose “libidinal energies [were] deflected from healthy and normal outlets onto art objects” (Freedman 149).

The reiteration of this nineteenth-century critique in late twentieth- and early twenty-first century characterisations, in modern literary-critical scholarship, of aestheticism, in general, and of Osmond, in particular, is striking. As recently as 2015, for example, Daniel Rosenberg Nutters described “Gilbert Osmond’s aesthetic apprehension” as “foul”, while Sigi Jottkandt has called “Osmond’s ... aesthetic vision” “virulent” (Nutters 88; Jottkandt 21). Such echoes or continuities of rhetoric seem to confirm moreover an expressive similarity in emotional and political logic, for just as Isabel’s denigration of the aesthete’s mode of being at once rejects and concedes its literally existential function so too the heavyweight tradition of literary scholarship that sits in judgement on the aesthetes of James’s fiction displays a dogged commitment to devalorizing the very connoisseurial practices to which it has evidently felt compelled to attend. Thus when Adeline Tinter characterises *The Portrait of a Lady* in her monumental *The Museum World of Henry James*, the summation of a career-long fascination with art objects and art collectors both inside and outside the world of James’s texts, she insists on the novel’s “acceptance of the priority of … the richly complete human life over the aestheticized life of taste,” as if to dismiss her almost simultaneous recognition of the way in which “James … us[es] the Touchett collection as a touchstone of analogies for Ralph and his self-image,” this last an observation surely intimating the rich human significance of the artworks in question for the novelist as well as for the fictional invalid heir to the Touchett millions (Tintner (1986) 59).[[18]](#footnote-18) Or consider how Freedman, in his influential *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (1990), supports his own characterisation of Osmond as a “heavily satirical,” indeed “notorious” portrait of a privileged wastrel by glossing Du Maurier’s account of the aesthete as “one who avidly, at times even lasciviously, devotes himself to the appreciation of obscure works of art, to the collection of fine pieces of china, and to *the cultivation of himself as an artwork* in order to advance his social standing, and, frequently, to gain a fortune” (Freedman xx-xxi; my italics). In such a passage, the fleshy carapace of pejorative adjectivals and diffusely sarcastic paraphrase encapsulates without concealing the presence of an irritating nugget of comprehension nestled obstinately within; indeed, only a modest shift of perspective, or strategic bracketing of tone, is required to make out in such argumentation the germ of an analysis in essence very similar, if not identical, to that of the present essay. “The aesthete fostered consumption as a means of improving individualism and unconformity,” Simone Francescato wrote in 2010, airily confident that the conventional disfavour with which phenomena associated with “commodity culture” are regarded in Anglophone liberal arts circles will cast a moral pall over a way of life whose importance to the individual subject in question he all too evidently, if resentfully, understands (and characterises, moreover, in delicious contrast to a surrounding stolidity and groupthink). “The collection of rare, eccentric and exotic items enabled the individual to develop his sensibility and to experience extraordinary pleasures, distinguishing himself among the boring and tasteless bourgeois” (Francescato 53). Critical texts such as these by Tintner, Freedman, Francescato, Nutters, and Jottkandt – exemplary representatives of a significant continuing tradition in James scholarship – suggest the working of the taboo on translocation in twentieth- and twenty-first century academic discourse, as well as in the nineteenth-century world that James investigates in his novel.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The silent norm of co-located embodiment produces distinctive distortions of thought in response to translocated subjects, forms of social recognition at once warped and disfiguring in their construal and misconstrual of the figure of the aesthete. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James characterises the result, for the social subject in question, as a certain paradox of existential healthiness, as it were, overshadowed by insistent community attributions of disease. “His sensibility had governed him – possibly governed him too much,” thinks Isabel in her early reflections on Osmond; “it had made him impatient of vulgar troubles and had led him to live by himself, in a sorted, sifted, arranged world, thinking about art and beauty and history. He had consulted his taste in everything – his taste alone perhaps, as a sick man consciously incurable consults at last only his lawyer” (262). A transgender subject might then look to minimise their social “sick[ness]” by resisting the ontological affordances of translocation. We have seen Ralph Touchett do this: holding back from the display of his paintings, buying nothing – it would appear – from the dealers on his own behalf. But the modicum of acceptability thereby secured is purchased at an exorbitant price, beggaring the self of existence *tout court*. The consequence is a sort of auto-abortiveness in the living subject. “Ralph,” as Isabel observes, “had something of this same quality [of Gilbert’s], this appearance of thinking that life was a matter of connoisseurship; but in Ralph it was an anomaly, a kind of humorous excrescence, whereas in Mr Osmond it was the keynote, and everything was in harmony with it” (262). The vital principle that breathes through Osmond’s psychosomatic integration or “harmony” has been dammed up, or embolised, and partially extruded, as it were, from Ralph’s personality, the quintessence of his identity making itself known in comedy-horror style as a grotesque malformation, a kind of herniated rupture or suggestive tumescence in an otherwise bloodless or bogus articulation of the self. If Osmond is diseased by virtue of his wellbeing, Ralph is wholesome insofar as he is inauthentic. The absolute necessity, for any human subject, of social and phantasmatic materialisation makes stinting on corporealization a form of radical abnegation, even as the taboo on translocational practices might seem to recommend such a recourse.

If translocation courts obloquy, and its simple renunciation is coextensive with a renunciation of life itself, what is the transgender subject to do? How, in a culture entranced by the norm of corporeal co-location, is the transgender member of society to *be*? In what remains of this essay, I want to rough out the main features of James’s answer to this question in *The Portrait of a Lady*; demonstrate how such an account casts fresh light on the meaning of courtship and the function of marriage in the lives of such fictional subjects as Gilbert, Ralph, and Ned; and thereby gesture towards the possibility that the novel may suggest new ways of thinking about social institutions of heterosexuality in the historical culture of the Anglo-American nineteenth century. My primary contention is that the taboo on translocation generates a camouflaged or dissimulated variety of this mode of embodiment. Persecuted by the co-locational norm, the transgender subject may seek self-representation *in the form of a co-located subject*, taking another human being as the symbolic locus of his or her social and psychosomatic realization. Thus, in James’s novel we see co-located women pressed into service as signifiers of trans women’s being. Characters such as Isabel Archer and Pansy Osmond are social subjects in their own right, and yet they function also as a representational medium for ladies who cannot find an image of themselves in their own physical persons: ladies such as Ralph Touchett, Ned Rosier, and – chiefly – Gilbert Osmond.

It is time to recognise in *The Portrait of a Lady* the story of a trans woman’s quest for social validation in the face of a culture entranced by the co-locational norm, a project of special urgency for a subject whose personal history is characterised by paternal abandonment and feminine degradation. Gilbert’s father died young, “lost,” as Madame Merle relates, “in the grey American dawn of the situation” (281). “[R]eputed originally rich and wild,” Mr Osmond Senior may or may not have bequeathed a substantial income to the family he left behind; in any case, after his death, his widow “brought her children to Italy,” where, “bristl[ing] with pretensions to elegant learning,” she made a living for herself “publish[ing] descriptive poems and correspond[ing] on Italian subjects with the English weekly journals” (280-81). Styling herself “the American Corinne,” Mrs. Osmond “had been used to wear a Roman scarf thrown over a pair of shoulders timorously bared of their tight black velvet ... and a gold laurel-wreath set upon a multitude of glossy ringlets. She had spoken softly and vaguely, with the accent of her ‘Creole’ ancestors, as she always confessed,” amplifying the poetry and pathos of her position – as her daughter recalls – by “sigh[ing] a great deal” and appearing to be “not at all enterprising” (451). A genteel, highly effective pimp to her own femininity, the American Corinne had had less success in securing an establishment for her daughter, eventually marrying her off to Count Gemini, “a member of an ancient Tuscan family, but of such small estate that he had been glad to accept Amy Osmond, in spite of the questionable beauty which had not yet hampered her career, with the modest dowry her mother was able to offer” (280). Contracting the marriage for the sake of a financial bribe alone, the Count, perhaps unsurprisingly, had not proved faithful to his wife; and Amy, detecting, as we might imagine, in her husband’s sexual rejection of her an echo of her father’s “wildness” and early death, sought compensatory attention elsewhere, carelessly or defiantly acquiring a reputation as a bad woman. Isabel’s aunt, Mrs. Touchett, will not receive her. Programmatically urbane, Madame Merle, as she tells Isabel, “always ma[kes] the best of [the Countess Gemini] for her brother’s sake; [Osmond] appreciated any kindness shown to Amy, because (if it had to be confessed for him) he rather felt she let down their common name.” Gilbert’s sister, virtually his twin, Amy offers her transgender sibling an object-lesson in the devaluation of femininity, presenting an eloquent, aversive image of the kind of woman that Gilbert most fears to recognise as himself. As Madame Merle says, the Countess “was not *his* sort of woman. What was his sort of woman?” – the question is Isabel’s. “Oh, the very opposite of the Countess,” the answer comes, “a woman to whom the truth should be habitually sacred.” (281)

James’s novel is essentially bipartite in structure, its first half culminating in the engagement of Isabel and Osmond, its second investigating the breakdown of their relationship in tandem with the efforts of Osmond and Madame Merle to arrange a great marriage for their daughter, Pansy. A very great deal of the plot in both parts issues ultimately from Gilbert’s need to experience himself as a woman of exemplary purity, and to be recognised and honoured as such by a community inclined to denigrate overt practices of translocational embodiment, such as the collection of artworks. Why does Gilbert want to marry Isabel? Because he makes out in her a representation of his adult female self preserved as if miraculously from the taint of sexual dishonour. Although Isabel, too, is the semi-neglected daughter of a dashing and feckless man – a gambler, perhaps virtually a rake – she is acclaimed wherever she goes as a lovely young woman, at once fresh and accomplished, vital and refined. Osmond is first moved to declare that he loves her during a tête-à-tête in a hotel drawing-room in which he has found her “[sitting] alone in a wilderness of yellow upholstery. The chairs and sofas were orange; the walls and windows were draped in purple and gilt. The mirrors, the pictures had great flamboyant frames; the ceiling was deeply vaulted and painted over with naked muses and cherubs. For Osmond the place was ugly to distress; the false colours, the sham splendour were like vulgar, bragging, lying talk” (306-7). An icon of virtue amidst the spiritual squalor of the Rococo, Isabel looks to Gilbert like an image of himself redeemed, a portrait of the kind of lady that he has always wanted to be able to believe himself to be.

The biggest obstacle to Gilbert’s auto-salvific marital project, at least in its early days, is constituted not by the amorous interest aroused by Isabel in co-located men like Caspar Goodwood or Lord Warburton – their vigorous heterosexual attentions in fact confirming the value of Gilbert’s femininity – but by the opposition put up by Ralph Touchett, Osmond’s transgender antagonist in the first part of the novel. Thwarted, distorted, invalid though he may be, Ralph’s drive to life is violently stimulated by the advent of Isabel Archer, in whom he perceives an image of a femininity very different from Gilbert’s ideal. Persuading his father to transfer half of his inheritance to Isabel, Ralph sets out to actualize himself as a young American heiress whose financial independence underwrites a radical personal autonomy.[[20]](#footnote-20) The characteristic expression of such a sensibility in the sphere of erotic conduct is suggested by a vignette hinting at Ralph’s cosmopolitan female promiscuity: Isabel observes her cousin, in an Italian courtyard, “sitting ... at the base of a statue of Terpsichore – a dancing nymph with taper fingers and inflated draperies in the manner of Bernini; the extreme relaxation of [Ralph’s] attitude suggested ... that he was asleep” (339-40). Whereas Gilbert looks to Isabel to embody a refutation of everything betokened by the “naked muses and cherubs” of the hotel ceiling, Ralph has invested heavily in his cousin as the representational infrastructure or psychical support that enables him to realize his dream of exactly such a life. “I had treated myself to a charming vision of your future,” Ralph laments to Isabel, on learning of her engagement to Gilbert. “‘You seemed to me to be soaring far up in the blue – to be sailing in the bright light, over the heads of men. Suddenly someone tosses up a faded rosebud – a missile that should never have reached you – and straight you drop to the ground. It hurts me,’ sa[ys] Ralph audaciously, ‘hurts me as if I had fallen myself!’” (344) As Isabel cannot be at once, as it were, a dancing nymph and “a woman to whom the truth should be habitually sacred,” a Baroque muse “soaring far up in the blue” and the kind of low-flying domestic angel that can be downed with a single flower, the fight between her husband and her cousin is one of the novel’s bitterest and longest-lasting conflicts, only terminating, as is quite logical, in the death of one of the combatants.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Gilbert is nonetheless profoundly unhappy in his marriage; his dissatisfaction stems at bottom from an evident miscalculation of Isabel’s nature. Taking her for an avatar of an intensely social purity, he finds that he has invested himself instead in a figure of extraordinary relational chastity. Where Osmond yearns “to extract from [society] some recognition of [his] own superiority” (430), queening it, like Cinderella at the ball, over the very community by which he has been held cheap, Isabel holds *society* cheap, “plead[ing] the cause of freedom, of doing as they chose, of not caring for the aspect and denomination of their life – the cause of other instincts and longings, of quite another ideal” (432). Worse, Isabel openly contemns the “opinions,” “ambitions,” and “preferences” that she will not assist her husband in fulfilling, recoiling from the defensive ideational manifestations of Gilbert’s sexual shame as from something “hideously unclean” (432). “[S]ome of his traditions made her push back her skirts. Did all women have lovers? Did they all lie and even the best have their price? Were there only three or four that didn’t deceive their husbands? When Isabel heard such things she felt a greater scorn for them than for the gossip of a village parlour – a scorn that kept its freshness in a very tainted air. There was the taint of her sister-in-law: did her husband judge only by the Countess Gemini?” (432) So thoroughgoing indeed is the irony of Gilbert’s suffering “in the hot light of [Isabel’s] disdain” that we might suspect an unconscious element of self-sabotage in his project of self-redemption (433). The woman who was to have represented him in triumph turns sickeningly into an embodiment of his own self-disgust.

Why does Osmond become so desperate for his daughter to marry a prominent English landowner? Because Gilbert, as is made clear from his earliest appearances in the novel, has always located in his daughter his own juvenile femininity, creating of the child an aspirational representation of daughterly merit. Our first sight of Pansy shows us the young girl recently returned home in the company of nuns from the convent in which she has been educated: she stands silently in Osmond’s drawing-room in front of an easel on which is displayed a “small, odd, elaborate” picture (227), which confrontation virtually illustrates for James’s reader Pansy’s function in relation to her father. “Well, my dear, what do you think of it?” Osmond inquires. “It’s very pretty, papa,” Pansy replies. “Did you make it yourself?” “Certainly I made it,” says Osmond: “Don’t you think I’m clever?” “Yes, papa, very clever; I also have learned to make pictures,” his daughter says, “turn[ing] round and show[ing] a small, fair face painted with a fixed and intensely sweet smile” (229). As Isabel is the instrument of Osmond’s representation as a marriageable adult, so Pansy is “a little girl whose bell-like clearness gave a new grace to childhood,” a portrait of the daughter that Gilbert feels he might have been had his own father guarded his children’s innocence as Osmond jealously tends Pansy’s (277). “Pansy will never know any harm,” Osmond tells Isabel, on the occasion of her first visit to his Florentine home. “Pansy’s a little convent-flower” (PL 256). As Isabel and Osmond converse, he “draw[s] [Pansy] out of her chair and make[s] her stand between his knees, leaning against him while he passed his arm round her slimness” (257). Look at me, Gilbert is saying to his guest. Look at my pretty body. Look at my *flower*. Gilbert’s flower is profoundly dishonoured by his union with Isabel, the marriage serving only to amplify his feelings of worthlessness and taint; when, then, Lord Warburton, a former suitor of Isabel’s, shows stirrings of an interest in Pansy, the nobleman’s attentions hold out for Gilbert an almost painfully desirable prospect of vindication. Here is the possibility of social glorification in character as the chosen mate of a wealthy, handsome and powerful man. “Pansy would like to be a great lady,” as Osmond “remark[s],” to Isabel, “with a certain tenderness of tone” (421).[[22]](#footnote-22)

Ned Rosier’s desire to marry Pansy is thus perfectly inadmissible from Osmond’s point of view, as it threatens to rule out of court the possibility of his – Gilbert’s – betrothal to Lord Warburton. “Tell him I hate his proposal,” Gilbert instructs Madame Merle, to whom Ned has confessed his hopes. “It doesn’t signify.... It’s not what I’ve dreamed of for Pansy” (373). Although it is certainly true that Ned’s social position is markedly inferior to Lord Warburton’s, his unsuitability as a bridegroom for Osmond is not primarily a matter of degree but of kind, for he too is a transgender female subject in search of a co-located woman in whom to invest himself. Rosier’s designs on Pansy, in the second half of the novel, thus re-run the threat posed to Osmond in the first half by Ralph’s imaginative appropriation of Isabel.

James tells us enough about Rosier’s early life for us to make out that Ned had been protected, in childhood, from the necessity of a translocational embodiment, and spared the stigma that would have attended it. Isabel remembers the young Ned as “a neat little male child whose hair smelt of a delicious cosmetic and who had a *bonne*” – a nursery-maid – “all his own, warranted to lose sight of him under no provocation” (213). “[L]ittle Edward” had looked to Isabel “as pretty as an angel,” his “small pink face surmounted by a blue velvet bonnet and set off by a stiff embroidered collar,” and he had “express[ed] the properest sentiments,” telling Isabel “that he was ‘defended’ by his *bonne* to go near the edge of the lake, and that one must always obey to one’s *bonne*” (214). It thus seems clear that the *bonne* had been employed, by Mr. Rosier Senior, a widower, to undertake two complementary tasks: to nurture Edward’s infantine femininity, and to intervene decisively in the symbolic sexuation of his physical person to bring it in line with that psychical identity. By applying delicious cosmetics and dressing the child in elaborate, exquisite clothes, Ned’s nursery-maid feminised his physical person, enabling him to assume it, in fantasy, as his little-girl body, and thus enjoy a socially advantageous co-located corporealization. It would seem to have been impossible to sustain the bespoke feminine character of his physical person into adulthood, however, for when Isabel encounters Ned again, “[h]is father ... dead and his *bonne* dismissed,” his co-located embodiment has had to give way to translocated corporealization. “[A] very gentle and gracious youth,” he is known among his peers for “what are called cultivated tastes – an acquaintance with old china, with good wine, with the bindings of books, with the Almanach de Gotha, with the best shops, the best hotels.... He had some charming rooms in Paris, decorated with old Spanish altar-lace, the envy of his female friends, who declared that his chimney-piece was better draped than the high shoulders of many a duchess” (214). A well-loved child, Ned respects and cares for his adult body: “I love my things,” as he remarks to Madame Merle (358). But he has not forgotten or ceased to regret the privileged experience of corporeal co-location, and when Pansy presents him with a suitably updated image of himself as such a subject – she is “exactly the household angel he had long been looking for” (357) – it is a simple question of self-worth to exchange art objects for a love object, the overt translocational practice of connoisseurialism for the camouflaged translocational practice of heterosexuality. “I care more for Miss Osmond than for all the *bibelots* in Europe!” (358), Ned insists, and to prove it he sells his collection, in hopes that the sum raised will procure Pansy’s hand in marriage. Ned’s relation to his beloved is nonetheless identical in structure to his relation to his bibelots: “He thought of her in amorous meditation a good deal as he might have thought of a Dresden-china shepherdess” (357). As is an artwork for the transgender connoisseur, Pansy is a signifier of sexuation that Ned can assume in fantasy in order to materialise himself as a corporeal subject: a translocational embodiment. But by virtue of her glamour as a co-located woman she seems to hold out to Ned, as an artwork cannot, the possibility of recovering some semblance of his own childhood prestige.

In *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, Alex Woloch argues that the function of a novel’s minor characters is to enact a critique of the text’s “distributional matrix” of attention.

This process takes a particularly acute and meaningful form in the nineteenth-century realist novel, with its complicated networks of characters, its varied techniques for registering the pull and possibility of interior consciousness, and its wide range of narrative structures that enact and represent both the premises of democratic equality and the pressures and consequences of social stratification. (41)

The minor character is thus a figure of considerable political significance on the basis of a charisma that is inextricable from privation. Precisely because the character “is *not* directly or fully represented in the narrative,” he or she “comes to command a peculiar kind of attention in the partial occlusion of his [or her] fulness” (40). In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James represents the social predicament of his translocated characters as an almost perfect inversion of the case or state that Woloch describes. Osmond, Ralph, and Ned do not suffer from social isolation *per* *se*; there is never any question of any of these characters being ignored by their peers, let alone of being shunned. There will always be invitations aplenty, conversations in galleries, meetings in opera boxes, tea on the lawn: the agreeable daily occupations and picturesque seasonal round of the Anglo-American leisure class in nineteenth-century England, France, and Italy. And yet these characters are subject to relentless prejudice, social dishonour and scorn on the part not only of comparative strangers, figures suggestive of community hostility at large, but of people with whom they are familiar, even intimate: a friend made in childhood; a cousin; a wife. The situation is repeated in the scholarship. Nobody has doubted that Osmond is a figure of major significance in the novel, or that Ralph and Ned have important roles to play. A great deal of critical attention, of a sort, has taken Gilbert, in particular, as its object. Yet there has never been sustained, explicit recognition of these characters as fictional trans women, or understanding of their various translocational practices as the forms of a literally existential praxis, the project of a life. Where Woloch’s minor characters command attention by virtue of their disappearance from the social stage, piquing the reader’s interest with the intimation of a good thing missed, the translocated subjects James describes are never scanted of their time before the footlights but are presumed without question to feature there as figures of perversity, silliness, or sin. Recognising the existence of a norm of co-located embodiment may thus prompt some overdue reflection on the ideological function of consensuses of dislike at the same time as it enables us to recognise in less distorted and distorting ways the real and fictional lives of some transgender subjects in the texts and histories of James’s era and of our own.

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1. So common is this interpretative position in the history of critical responses to The Portrait of a Lady that it would be more feasible to list dissenters to the tradition than to enumerate those works in which it is endorsed. As critical fashions come and go, the characterization in literary scholarship of attention as a form of violence persists virtually unchallenged notwithstanding the prominence in cultural studies at large of work on social recognition by theorists such as Judith Butler, as well as the long established valorization of parental attention in mainstream Anglo-American psychotherapeutic theory (on this, see, for example, Victoria Coulson’s “[The Baby and the Mirror: The Sexual Politics of the Narcissus Myth in Poststructuralist Theory, Winnicottian Psychoanalysis, and Ovid’s Metamorphoses III](https://pure.york.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/the-baby-and-the-mirror%2800da5170-ac7c-4798-b3f5-509e6e4fd28b%29.html)”). For an example of a recent iteration of the traditional position, see Daniel Hannah’s ostensibly modish “Beasts in the Jungle: Henry James, William James, and the Animal Turn.” “[U]nhappy [contemporary] reviewers of [The Portrait of a Lady] likened its form to the process of vivisection,” Hannah writes. “Such reviews ... pick up on the novel’s own critical interest in the voyeuristic, dissecting, framing gaze not only of characters ... but also of the narrator and ... the text’s readers” (379). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I am indebted for recognition of the pun in Isabel’s name to Laura F. Hodges’s “Recognizing ‘False Notes’: Musical Rhetoric in *The Portrait of a Lady*.” Hodges’s reading of the novel is in its broad outlines fully consistent with the critical consensus vis-à-vis Osmond’s self-evident heinousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Throughout this article I use masculine pronouns to refer to Gilbert (and to the other fictional trans women in James’s novel), although I understand him to be a feminine subject of symbolic law. Gilbert’s fictional peers think of him as “he,” the novel’s narrative voice calls him “he,” and without exception literary scholars have denominated him thus as well. To use feminine pronouns would therefore set me at odds, absurdly, with James’s own words, and into the bargain risk compromising, very seriously, the comprehensibility of my argumentation. I have considered enclosing each such masculine pronoun in scare quotes: “Throughout this article I use masculine pronouns to refer to Gilbert, although I understand ‘him’ to be a feminine subject, etc” – a solution that could have merit if it, too, did not countermand the letter of the text at every moment. A positive defence of my actual decision would highlight the social-customary aspect of language use: “he” is a name given to Gilbert by his culture and community, as is “Gilbert” and “Mr Osmond” too. I am not satisfied with my decision, but in context I think it the best I can do. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While some novelists’ analyses may take as their object the question of co-location versus translocation, others might be recognised as addressing as-yet unspecified norms of embodiment (and their associated taboos). For I do not think it can be presumed that the question of location is the only axis of difference determining the particular social and Imaginary form of any subject’s body. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Note the silent glossing or redefinition of “wrong” as “defective.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Patricia Gherovici’s work represents an important exception to this tradition in recent years. See in particular *Please Select Your Gender: From the Invention of Hysteria to the Democratizing of Transgenderism* and *Transgender Psychoanalysis*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a substantial recent explication of this theme, see “The Non-All, or, the Ontology of Sexual Difference” in Slavoj Zizek’s *Less Than Nothing*. “[S]exuality … is primordially ‘out of joint,’ marked by a constitutive gap or discord,” Zizek writes. “[W]hat marks the difference between the two sexes is … a different way of coping with the necessary inconsistency involved in the act of assuming one and the same universal symbolic feature (ultimately that of ‘castration’)” (597; 604). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Or see Zizek: “‘[S]exuality’ is the way the ontological deadlock, the incompleteness of reality in itself, is inscribed into subjectivity. [Sexual difference] is … a subjective distortion which is directly identical with … the inconsistency/out-of-jointness, of reality itself.” (601) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. My project in this essay is comparable to, and may be loosely aligned with, that of Coffman’s in its (very sustained) engagement with the work of Slavoj Zizek, the latter one of the most prominent of contemporary Lacanians to have gained notoriety in transgender studies on account of his variously transphobic pronouncements. In “Zizek’s Antagonism and the Futures of Trans-Affirmative Lacanian Psychoanalysis,” Coffman argues that Zizek “misses the opportunity to explore the ways his Marxist rearticulation of Lacanian psychoanalysis could work in the service of the goals of trans theory rather than negate its claims .... Manifestations of transphobia in Zizek’s writing reveal aporias within his philosophical system and therefore ways in which some of his ideas can be rearticulated in the service of a trans-affirmative mode of Lacanian psychoanalysis” (Coffman, “Zizek’s Antagonism” 473). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Shanna T. Carlson for a recent account of “bigendered,” “gender-fluid” and “genderqueer” subjects as exemplary figures of such a Freudian/Lacanian bisexuality, and exemplary therefore of “the human subject as such” (Carlson 312). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The principle has repeatedly been re-stated; in 2000, for example, Colette Soler wrote: “Freud had no hesitation in repeating Napoleon’s phrase ‘anatomy is destiny.’ Lacan, on the contrary, disagreed and proposed a thesis that seems to mark the end of any norms based on nature. If we take him at his word, subjects are free to choose whether they are men or women” (Soler 39). Of particular interest in the current discussion is Chiesa’s very marked emphasis on “the fact that, for Lacan, it is by all means possible for anatomical males to be symbolically sexed as women, and vice versa” (Chiesa 26). “If we consistently think sexuality in symbolic terms,” Chiesa observes, “we should infer that not only is anatomy separated from sexuation, but, consequently, sexuation does not necessitate a choice of sexual object/orientation based on anatomy. We could then well speak, for instance, of anatomical females sexed as men who are not symbolically homosexual precisely by establishing a liaison with a subject of the same anatomical sex (sexed as woman). By the same token, anatomically heterosexual couples could easily be founded on symbolic homosexuality” (193). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The incommensurability of the two terms, or positions, has been emphasised repeatedly by Slavoj Zizek, for one, in recent years, as Chris Coffman has observed. “In *Tarrying with the Negative*,” Coffman notes, Zizek “draws on Lacan’s sexuation diagrams to conceive of sexual difference as a Kantian antinomy. Rather than allowing ‘us to imagine in a consistent way the universe as a Whole,’ as does the binary logic of all-encompassing oppositions, viewing sexual difference as an antinomy presents us with the simultaneous and contradictory presence of two ‘mutually exclusive versions of the universe as a Whole’” (Coffman, “Queering Zizek” [n.p.]). Or see Zupancic: “difference or contradiction does not so much exist *between* the two sides or positions. Rather, the two positions are parallel configurations of a difference or contradiction of the signifying order itself, which they logically decline in different ways (each one reproducing the fundamental contradiction in its own way)” (50). Consider also Chiesa’s title for his *The Not-Two*, a 2016 work on Lacanian theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “This is the heart of Lacanianism: either/or,” Ellie Ragland concurs: “Either one is masculine or one is feminine. One is not both, except in the suffering of hysteria” (Ragland 85). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Kate Foord emphasises the point: “The anatomical distinction at the level of the body is not equivalent to the logical distinction created by the signifier: it is not *the* difference but an imaginary consistency that underpins, in an architectural sense, a differentiating structure that is an effect of language and that makes the body as lived” (Foord 523). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For a technically similar account of the phenomenon of what contemporary Lacanians call the “common error” from the politically – or at least rhetorically – rather different perspective of a literary-critical feminism, see Valerie Rohy’s “Hemingway, Literalism, and Transgender Reading.” “[G]ender norms rely on a literalism that takes the meaning of the sexed body as self-evident and assumes its natural correspondence with gender,” Rohy writes. “[T]he literal body is not literally true. Literalism ... has a politics; its mechanism of naturalized facticity defends the norm” (163). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. What then of the “real” physical person – or “body,” as it is often called – that precedes or eludes symbolic law? According to strict Lacanian logic, the question is properly moot. “For Lacan,” as Rose remarks, “there is no pre-discursive reality (‘How return, other than by means of a special discourse, to a pre-discursive reality?’ SXX, p. 33), no place prior to the law which is available and can be retrieved.... [T]he unconscious severs the subject from any unmediated relation to the body as such (‘there is nothing in the unconscious which accords with the body’, O, p. 165)” (Rose 55). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Having spelled out this crucial distinction between the physical person and the body we may turn to the vehement opposition put up by theorists such as Morel, Chiesa, Millot, and Shepherdson to the practice of GCS, which they construe as a medically assisted assault on the subject’s body. But GCS, I think we may now specify, operates on the subject’s *physical person*, symbolically redefining it so that the subject may assume it as a signifier of their sexed being, taking it as and making it into that subject’s own body. For the subject who chooses to undergo Gender Confirmation Surgery, there is no body prior to GCS, only the wrong kind of physical person. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Although her monograph *The Museum World of Henry James* was published only in 1986, Tintner had been an early and influential entrant to the field: her first article on the topic of James’s “museum world” appeared in 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Although it is beyond the scope of the present essay even to begin to survey the social and discursive impacts of the novel form in its aspect as an aesthetic object with which a transgender subject confronting the problem of the “wrong body” might identify in order to achieve an otherwise impossible corporealisation, I want nevertheless to gesture here towards the potential of such an exploration in one highly specialised area alone – that of the tradition of James-and-aestheticism scholarship that I have introduced above. In *Professions of Taste*, Jonathan Freedman identifies a tendency in early- and mid-twentieth century “anti-Jacobite” critics to deploy a “language of effeteness and effeminacy” in their attacks on James’s writing, as if in “unspoken” deprecation of the homoeroticism – “*James’s* homoeroticism” – that they infer from James’s “putative aestheticism” (xvi; my italics). Freedman thereby makes clear his disapproval of what he characterises as the homophobia in question. Yet his own, fully explicit distaste in the face of the “wholly commodified” “cultural apparatus” of “the entire range of Anglo-American aestheticism” (xix), in which he includes – albeit with complex reservations – the fiction of Henry James, could be considered to repeat at a deep conceptual level the recoil and resistance of the anti-Jacobites’ “homophobic” reaction to James’s work, on the basis – which would need to be established – that commodity objects as well as aesthetic objects may in some cultural contexts lend themselves to phantasmatic assumption as symbolic bodily forms. Thus Freedman, as much as the critics from whom he intends to distance himself, may be understood as reacting, aversively, to James’s texts as to the body of a translocated subject. Implicit potential support for this account of the psycho-social politics of Freedman’s stance, and, perhaps, of the wider scholarly critique of the “culture of consumption” in which his work participates, might be identified in the slightly later strand of James scholarship that addresses itself to “the relationship between Henry James’s sexuality and his spectacular literary style” (St. Pierre, 110). In the major example of such an approach to have been published to date, Kevin Ohi characterises “[t]he queerness of Henry James’s writing [as] resid[ing] less in its representation of marginal sexualities … than in its elusive and multivalent effects of syntax, figure, voice, and tone” (Ohi, 2-3). If it seemed plausible to parse the distinction between the novel form and an individual novelist’s style in terms of the distinction that I have developed here between the physical person of the subject and the subject’s body, we might therefore make out in literary criticism such as Kevin Ohi’s a response to James’s body of work that confirms the identification that I am suggesting of the Jamesian text, or texts, with the translocated body of its author, as well as a refreshing demonstration, on Ohi’s part, of the possibility of trans-affirmative analysis in the (evident) absence of a silent norm of co-location. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Leland S. Person looks closely at Ralph’s imaginative investment in Isabel, but does not question the fundamentally masculine character of Ralph’s psychical sexuation. As a result, Person reads Ralph as a homosexual man who at once disguises and expresses his sexuality by identifying with a woman: “Ralph deploys [Isabel] for his own psychosexual purposes, delegating desire to her and to the men who desire her.... Feminizing desire in the process, Ralph covers homoerotic desire by heterosexualizing it” (91). In “Hawthorne’s Ghost in Henry James’s Italy: Sculptural Form, Romantic Narrative, and the Function of Sexuality,” John Carlos Rowe makes a similar argument about Henry James’s relation to female characters such as Isabel Archer: “James’s imaginary women [can be understood in terms of] an aesthetic identification of author and character that would enable James to sublimate a forbidden homoerosis” (129). Both Rowe and Person thus presume upon the existence of a male subject notwithstanding their observation of what I would characterise as the evidence that such a subject does not exist, i.e. an identification by the subject in question with a woman. In both critics’ analyses, the notion of “identification” at work is relatively “weak” – a question of imaginative affiliation or play, in which a male subject compares himself, wishfully and enablingly, to a separate female subject. In contrast, I understand identification in a “strong” psychoanalytic sense as a mechanism at the core of self-experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Near the end of the novel, his victory apparently secure, if unrewarding, Osmond does his best to keep his wife from going to her cousin on his deathbed in England, the risk thereby posed of Gilbert’s own extinction evidently a prospect that cannot easily be dismissed. “I dislike, from the bottom of my soul, what you intend to do,” Gilbert tells Isabel. “It’s dishonourable; it’s indelicate; it’s indecent.... Your cousin’s nothing to me; he’s nothing to us. You smile most expressively when I talk about *us*, but I assure you that *we*, *we*, Mrs Osmond, is all I know. I take our marriage seriously; you appear to have found a way of not doing so. I’m not aware that we’re divorced or separated; for me we’re indissolubly united. You are nearer to me than any human creature, and I’m nearer to you” (536-37). In “The Portrait of a (Trans) Narrator: Henry James’s ‘Terrible *Fluidity*,’” Scarlet Luk condemns these “sordid pronouns” of Osmond’s: “in painful truth,” Luk writes, “there is no grammatical cohabitation between himself and Isabel” (120). The section in which Luk makes these remarks – Luk’s own contribution to the tradition of anti-Osmond denunciations – is a weak spot in an otherwise original and important article. Luk offers a new analysis of the novel’s narrative voice as a location of “non-normative gender/s.” “The most remarkable formal consequence of [the narrator’s] subject position,” Luk writes, “is that their voice is unpossessed by either woman or man” (111). In the course of Luk’s argument, Luk describes the narrator as “fus[ing] with Isabel, tak[ing] on Isabel’s body as a host” (118). Luk does not make it entirely clear how this act of “transembodiment,” as Luk calls it, relates to the narrator’s radically “fluid” gender; nonetheless I find this account of the narrator’s identification with Isabel in order to achieve notional bodily presence striking, and I note that in this respect, if no other, Luk’s article touches on concerns closely comparable to my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. At such moments Gilbert appears virtually to model one possible solution to the difficulty of how the critic should style this character: “Pansy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)