

4-2019

A Portrait of Women's Property: An Analysis of Married Women's Property Rights in The Portrait of a Lady, The Spoils of Poynton and Howards End

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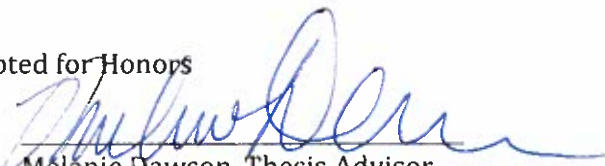
A Portrait of Women's Property: An Analysis of Married Women's Property Rights in *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Spoils of Poynton* and *Howards End*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

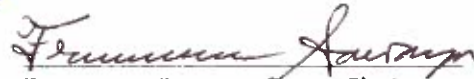
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April 29, 2019

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my honors committee, Professors Melanie Dawson, Francesca Sawaya, Deborah Morse and Alexander Angelov. Thank you for your support, guidance and inspiration. A special thanks to my advisor, Professor Melanie Dawson, for all of her time, dedication, and patience.

I. Introduction

Isabel was duly diverted, but there was a certain melancholy in her view. Henrietta, after all, had confessed herself human and feminine, Henrietta whom she had hitherto regarded as a light keen flame, a disembodied voice. It was a disappointment to find she had personal susceptibilities, that she was subject to common passions, and that her intimacy with Mr. Bantling had not been completely original. There was a want of originality in her marrying him—there was even a kind of stupidity; and for a moment, to Isabel's sense, the dreariness of the world took on a deeper tinge. A little later indeed she reflected that Mr. Bantling himself at least was original. But she didn't see how Henrietta could give up her country. She herself had relaxed her hold of it, but it had never been her country as it had been Henrietta's. (James 470)

Henry James's transatlantic novel, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880-1881), traces the adventures, courtship and marriage of Isabel Archer, an American-born young woman who travels to Europe in the pursuit of knowledge and experience. Entrapped in an emotionally abusive marriage to Osmond Gilbert, a manipulative art collector who marries Isabel for her money, she approaches the announcement of Henrietta Stackpole's marriage with skepticism and despondency. While a secondary character to the text, Henrietta, Isabel's friend from America, embodies female independence and self-determination. She pushes the boundaries of gender expectations as a traveling journalist. Giving up her native country in her marriage to Mr. Osmond, Isabel has surrendered her characteristic American self-determination and independence. She wishes desperately for Henrietta to be "original" by not falling into the trap of surrendering her country and marrying within the Old World. Acutely aware of the restraints marriage places upon the freedom and identity of a woman in the nineteenth century, Isabel assumes Henrietta will similarly suffer in her marriage to Mr. Bantling, an English gentlemen. In an era where being both "human and feminine" deprives a person of many rights, especially in marriage, Isabel wishes Henrietta could remain metaphysical, or intangible as "a light keen flame" or "a disembodied voice." Instead, through marriage, Henrietta will enter the corporeal world as a woman "subject to common passions," and thus will become subject to the English common law dictating property rights.

Yet, James gives the reader no reason to suspect Henrietta's marriage will be as dark and imprisoning as Isabel's. Henrietta and Mr. Bantling seem to understand each other, a rare triumph in a novel filled with marriages gone sour. As Ralph Touchett, Isabel's English cousin of American descent, tells Isabel at the beginning of the novel, "There's no more usual basis of union than a mutual

misunderstanding” (James 129). This characterization of marriage portends Isabel’s unsuccessful marriage and summarizes the faulty foundation of the text’s other marriages. While Isabel’s entrapment by a man she misunderstood tinges her worldview, James suggests that there is hope for happiness in Henrietta’s engagement. Mr. Bantling understands and embraces his independent fiancé’s initiative. Though Henrietta speculates he seeks to “find out the mystery and the proportions” of her through marriage, this characteristically Jamesian architectural and sexually suggestive language demonstrates Mr. Bantling’s desire to understand Henrietta’s mind, as opposed to just conquer it. No longer the same woman as when she arrives in Europe, Henrietta admits “I *am* changed; a woman has to change a good deal to marry” (James 470). Yet, even if Mr. Bantling ends up as gentlemanly as he appears, Henrietta, as a married woman, must reconcile herself to the idea of limited independence and agency. As Isabel’s tragic marriage demonstrates, a woman not only changes “a good deal to marry,” but also changes a great deal in marriage when her identity becomes subsumed into that of her husband’s.

Henrietta’s assertion that through marriage “I’ve as good a right as any one!” to the “inner life” paradoxically speaks to the female role in marriage. Spending the entire novel searching “to see something of the inner life” of Great Britain, Henrietta is unable to enter the exclusive inner circle, which is located in the houses of private families, which remain closed off to the curious eyes of the female journalist. In order to gain “that view of the inner life of Great Britain which she was so eager to take,” Henrietta must not simply observe, but experience the inner life of marriage. Not only does this experience place her in contact with her inner self through intimate passions, but it also draws her into the exclusive domestic space, a structure where privacy provides security but deprives its inhabitants of spatial freedom. Henrietta asserts that, in marrying Mr. Bantling, she possesses “as good a right as any one” in England to see the inner life. Once within the interior, domestic space, however, this woman, “who would not be wanting in initiative,” may discover how limited her rights are as a European wife. Though married women’s property rights were improving at the turn-of-the-century, they were far from liberating, and even farther from generating gender equality.

This thesis will explore the ramifications of changing women's property rights in England from 1880 to 1910. Through its reading of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880-1881), *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896) and *Howards End* (1910), this paper will expose the social tensions underlying property and ownership. All three novels consider the question of female inheritance and ownership. While the gendered injustices and unequal distribution of property in itself is problematic, "ownership" symbolizes more than a claim to a physical plot of land or antique object. According to Patrick Cockburn and others in "Disagreement As A Window Onto Property," "It is also about what exactly can be claimed in the name of 'ownership' – and by whom. It is about the tension between sources of authority in a society: between different parts of legal codes, between informal custom and formal, and most profoundly between morality and political power" (18). The politics of property within these novels participates in a larger discourse about ownership, authority and political power, problematizing the question of married women's ownership. For nine hundred years, English law and custom sustained the subjection of women (Perkins 1). The laws and politics of England historically privileged the male, who inherited authority through his ownership of the family property and title. Without the name or land of their ancestors, women were stranded in a liminal space, relying upon marriage to provide them an identity through their husband. Yet, in the Victorian era, the legal system began to change. With the passage of new legislation, women were able to exert legal ownership over property, expanding their economic and social reach. By tracing the increasing independence and propriety of women, this thesis narrates the trajectory of dependency to increasing self-possession for married women.

In the late nineteenth century, women gained new rights that altered their economic scope and afforded them a degree of legal autonomy from their husbands. Deprived of the right to vote until 1918, women struggled to obtain legislative change. In 1870 and 1882, after twenty-seven years of fighting for property rights, married women made headway in their battle for economic independence. The Married Women's Property Act of 1870 authorized married women to inherit property and retain legal ownership over the money they earned. Married women gained even more rights with the passage of the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, which significantly transformed their economic authority

by providing them the right to control property. As time passed, English Parliament passed more laws to ensure the economic security of married women. The 1890 Intestates' Estate act provided widowed women with economic security. Before this law's ratification, women waited in suspense upon the death of their husbands, hoping to be included in the will. This act guaranteed widowed women the right to money even if they were not mentioned in their husband's will (Cretney 480).

These legal victories for married women threatened to uproot a structure based on women's subordination that had governed England for nearly a millennium. Unsurprisingly, many Victorians expressed uneasiness about growing married women's property rights in the mid-nineteenth century. Though this anxiety eased as time passed, there were certainly tensions at the beginning of this transitional period. The entanglement of property with identity formation complicated ownership. Through acquiring property that once belonged to men, women threatened to upset the performance of gender through disrupting the performance of property. "Western liberal societies encode private property as a marker of masculine identity, responsibility, citizenship, purity, authenticity and self-possession" (Blomley xv). Men maintained security in their identities through their property, which served as a physical symbol of their manhood to themselves and others. By challenging the male right to exclude women from ownership, women threatened to evict men from their privileged position as property owners. According to K. Theodore Hoppen in *The Mid-Victorian Generation*, their privileged gender and relationship with property meant "Middle- and upper-class husbands enjoyed the best of all worlds: long absences on 'business' or pleasure, on the one hand, much emphasis upon the domestic life, on the other" (Hoppen 316). Newfound property rights for married women threatened the man's place within the home further by disrupting the established ideal of motherhood. "The family dominated Victorian life," and the "angel of the house," or wife, performed certain duties, such as tending to her husband and children. These tasks were deemed essential to the stability of the Victorian social structure (Hoppen 316). Thus, not only did women's newfound property rights challenge man's exclusive property ownership and masculine identity, but they also disrupted the foundational structure of Victorian social life.

Victorian authors participated in the debate over shifting property law and marriage contracts. As Jill Rappoport demonstrates in her examination of Trollope's work, "Victorian fiction also registers discomfort with the ramifications of women's changing property rights through consanguineal family relations (maternal, sibling)" (Rappoport 636). Specifically, she argues that the social tensions surrounding the Married Women's Property Acts inspired characters like Lady Lizzie Eustace in *The Eustace Diamonds* and Lady Laura Standish in *Phineas Finn*. Rappoport claims that these "novels' unusually penal plotlines suggest the threat that single women's independent economic actions might pose to established family structures" (Rappoport 638). While other critics, such as Janette Rutterford and Josephine Maltby, also examine women in property in Trollope's novels, Trollope is not the only author who conveys concern with shifting property rights. In fact, the fixation on "the woman question" in literature continued long after Trollope died in 1881.

Published in book form the same year as Trollope's death, *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James explores the consequences of women's inheritance and independent economic decisions. This novel was first published in 1880 and 1881 as a serial in *The Atlantic Monthly* (in the US) and *Macmillan's Monthly* (in England). Set in the 1870s, the novel takes place after the Married Women's Property Act of 1870, but before that of 1882. The unique circumstance of the story's serialized publication in two popular magazines reflects the novel's transatlantic adventure involving a woman's ruinous experience with marriage and property. A transatlantic writer himself, James details the courtship and marriage of a young American-born woman, Isabel Archer, in Europe. Focused on the exchange and ownership of property, this novel considers the way property participates in the creation of identity. As characters attempt to create, project and perform identity, they work to narrate their own lives and the lives of others through ownership. Beginning the novel an independent and curious young woman, Isabel Archer attempts to maintain an identity outside of the social closure dominating property and marriage. However, she cannot escape the time and place she occupies for long. Providing her with a substantial inheritance, her uncle and cousin draws the unwilling heroine into the politics and performance of property.

James resumes his interest in female property rights in 1896, when *The Spoils of Poynton* appeared under the title *The Old Things*. First published in *The Atlantic Monthly* as a serial, the novel was published as a book in 1897. In the novel, Agatha Gereth has spent her entire life collecting the “things” within Poynton—the Gereth’s home in the south of England, famous for its collection of beautiful objects. Disregarding his wife’s religious dedication to the “things,” Mr. Gereth dies and bequeaths the entire collection to their son, Owen. Fueled by this injustice and her passion for these antique treasures, Mrs. Gereth ruthlessly fights Owen and his Philistine, tasteless fiancé for the objects. The novel’s contested property claim exposes England’s larger political conflict over married women’s property rights. As Cockburn and others write, “Property conflicts often intersect with struggles over racial, gendered, economic, and cultural inequality and oppression” (Cockburn 10). Thus, the conflict over the spoils within Poynton signals broader social tensions at the end of the nineteenth century. The novel ends with the entire valuable collection of Poynton burning down when Mrs. Gereth can no longer prevent Owen from wrenching the things from her. Unlike the end of *Portrait*, in which Isabel’s cruel husband maintains ownership of her inheritance, *Spoils* provides a more optimistic view of the future of married women’s property. James suggests that if Mrs. Gereth, Poynton’s rightful spiritual owner, cannot keep her treasures, then no one can.

Later authors, like E.M. Forster, pick up where James leaves off, following the continued transformation of women’s economic reach within the British Empire. Often deemed Forster’s masterpiece, *Howards End* (1910) considers the shifting social conventions in turn-of-the-century England. The conflict of the novel takes place around property rights, specifically over the ownership of Howards End, the ancestral home of the enigmatic Ruth Wilcox. Upon her death, Mrs. Wilcox bequeaths her property to Margaret Schlegel—a young, single woman of German descent and relatively new acquaintance. Ignoring Mrs. Wilcox’s explicit order, the Wilcox family retains ownership of the country property, and Margaret never learns of her intended inheritance. Through her subsequent marriage to Mr. Wilcox, Margaret comes into possession of Howards End by the end of the novel. First published in 1910, *Howards End* revisits the question of women’s property rights about a decade after

the publication of *The Spoils of Poynton*. The timespan between the novels appears short, but proves pivotal to the difference between the novels' treatment of women's property. While James's female characters lose their property and aspects of their identities in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Spoils of Poynton*, Forster's novel concludes with Margaret in possession of herself and *Howards End*. The impressionistic ending reflects a growing sense of social justice and envisages a future of legal equality in relation to gender, property rights and social hierarchy.

The end of the nineteenth-century witnessed a host of changes in western culture, as "the woman question" stirred heated debates and new laws altered women's property rights. Despite changes to legislation, centuries of repeated practice left patriarchal hierarchies intact, rendering gendered economic inequality cemented in habit. Just as today, ownership of property allowed proprietors better access to wealth, legal rights and symbolized power over one's self and others. Physical possession spilled over into ideas of self-possession and control over the lives of other people. Hindered by patriarchal laws and practices that prohibited them from owning and controlling their own property, women worked within and for the property of their fathers, husbands or brothers. Despite being largely defined by their position as mothers and wives within the domestic space, married women lacked legal authority over the home—the very place they were expected to invest their time and effort. This placed them at the mercy of their husbands, who owned the family capital. Unable to own property, women lacked self-possession and ownership over their identities, which were bound to the domestic space. This deprived many women of self-ownership and independence.

The inability of women to achieve economic independence played a significant role in their systematic subordination. "Being physically and economically the weaker sex their dependence, the theory went, was for their own good" (Perkins 1). Sequestered within the domestic sphere, women struggled to support themselves financially. Deprived of the right to vote until 1918, married and unmarried women lacked representation in English Parliament. This rendered them voiceless as they struggled to dispute their marginalization. Married women struggled even more than single women to achieve economic independence. While widowed and single women enjoyed some of the same property

rights as men, married women were rendered wholly dependent upon their husbands by legislation. For most of the nineteenth century, a married woman could not own property. Any property she owned prior to marriage was transferred to her husband. He then assumed full ownership and control of their property, depriving her of the power inherent in property ownership.

According to English law, a wife's identity became legally consumed by her husband's identity. In his influential eighteenth-century disquisition *Commentaries of the Laws of England*, Sir William Blackstone discusses the common law of England. This treatise outlines the legal obligations of marriage at the end of the eighteenth-century as such: "The husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being, or legal existence of a woman is suspended during marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection and cover she performs everything" (qtd. in Perkin 1-2). This conventional attitude dictated marriage relationships in England, which rendered the wife both dependent upon and subordinate to her husband. The law itself evaporated a woman's identity when she married. She was no longer "protected" under the wing of the English government. This duty was transferred to her husband, who not only became her entire identity, but also her law, pedagogue and owner.

Given the confining nature of marriage, many women avoided matrimony. As Joan Perkins outlines in *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, a forceful anti-marriage sentiment spread through nineteenth-century England. The strength of this conviction "provoked calls not only for changes in the legal relations between husbands and wives but even for a boycott of the institution and a crusade against marriage" (Perkins 7). Yet, this movement proved a double-edged sword, as it also incensed the glorification of marriage among the institution's supporters. In fact, "Marriage remained the ideal" among Victoria women in the mid-nineteenth century (Hoppen 318).

Not every woman could afford to remain single. Working-class women often supported their families in factories, while middle-class women sought respectable employment as schoolteachers or governesses. In this relatively static class structure system, women had limited opportunities for high paying employment and upward mobility. If a woman came from a wealthy family, she might receive a

large inheritance to sustain single life. Yet, few women enjoyed this luxury. Unable to support themselves, they often married to receive economic support. In *All My Worldly Goods: A Feminist Perspective on the Legal Regulation of Wealth*, Anne Morris writes, “Marriage was a way of avoiding poverty, but the pursuit of a more tolerable life style required women to accept dependency on and subordination to their husbands” (48). Dependent upon and subordinate to their husbands, married women legally lost their identities and the few rights they had had before marriage. Nonetheless, women often married to achieve “a release from dependence on parents,” which further demonstrates their confining lifelong reliance on the economic and social support of others (Hoppen 318).

The question of property in marriage is central to an understanding of the nineteenth-century social power structure. Often, marriage participated in the economy of exchange, as women traded their independence for financial security and social status. “Marriage conferred status, sanctioned legitimate sex, and, with luck, provided companionship, children, perhaps even love” (Hoppen 318). Families placed pressure on middle- and upper- class women to marry within or above their social rank in order to receive the social and economic benefits of gaining property through marriage. Though women might rise in social rank, their husbands still outranked them as the legal property owner in their marriage. Lee Holcombe discusses the relationship between property ownership and power in *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England*: “Since property and status went hand in hand in English law, wives were reduced to a special status, subordinate to and dependent upon their husbands” (Holcombe 25). Unable to own property, married women essentially became the property of their husbands.

The interaction between marriage and property imbued ownership with certain pleasures. As Michael Foucault illustrates in *The History of Sexuality*, although commentators deem the Victorian era one of sexual repression, the discourse on sexuality proliferated, appearing in scientific studies and instruction manuals. The Victorians became obsessed with discovering, classifying, structuring and controlling sex. Through controlling the discourse on sexuality, the law controlled acceptable forms of passion and maintained established social conventions. One of the ways the state governed sexuality

was through marriage, which served as a sacred and life-binding contractual exchange. Yet, Elizabeth Cady Stanton explains that marriage differs from other legal contracts: “subject to the laws of other contracts, carefully made, the parties of age, and all agreements faithfully observed” (“Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s Address” 68-69 from Ganz 159). In short, a contract between a man and woman is more binding than that between two men. Through strictly structuring relationships within the domestic sphere, the state maintained ideological divisions of power. Thus, the marriage contract communes with property law in restricting and regulating the economic reach of women.

Marriage united both people and property for life, placing the ownership of both in the hands of the husband. As “the only legitimate outlet for passion,” marriage served as the sole socially approved site of sexual pleasure (White 59).¹ This association between marriage and sexuality extends to property, which becomes a site of pleasure, namely to those with ownership or those receiving ownership. In their property, owners project and express their identities. Property was both defined by and the defining factor of a person. In practice, the groom received more pleasure in property through marriage, as he became the owner of not just his and his wife’s property, but of his wife as well. In this way, the union of property and identity served as the economic offspring of a marital union, both taking the groom’s name.

Despite the legislation’s intentions, the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 failed to engender meaningful change. While the “earlier legal regime had denied married women independence and thus subordinated them to their husbands...even after the reforms married women remained dependent” upon their husband’s economic support (Morris 31). To a large extent, the continued subordination of women stemmed from the fact that the legal reforms did not impact behaviors or attitudes. There remained what Cockburn identifies as “a processual or performative perspective on ownership” in *Contested Property Claims: What Disagreement Tells Us about Ownership* (Cockburn 8). Property relations had been, and continued to be, “communicated, performed, [and] claimed—actively made and repeated” (Cockburn 8). English’s society’s perspective on property as owned and controlled by men was so entrenched in practice that gender inequality in ownership

continued to be perpetuated even after legal reform. Thus, in practice, the law did not alter the unequal economic or power distribution within marriage. With economic hierarchies intact, the power dynamics within society continued to favor both the man and husband.

The exclusion of women from independent property ownership reflects a wider societal phenomenon. Davidoff and Hall explain, "Absence of property as capital has been seen as the most powerful element in 'social closure,' that is exclusion from control over one's own life chances" (Davidoff, 15). Through preventing women from possessing property, the dominant social group, wealthy men, maintained sole control over economic resources. In this way, the distribution of property rights in nineteenth century England both organized and bolstered established power relations. As Nicholas Blomely writes in *Contested Property Claims*, "When we organize and distribute property rights...we organize and distribute social privileges and powers" (Blomley xiv). Through sustaining a hierarchical relationship between owners and non-owners, property rights preserved hegemonic structures on the basis of class, gender and race.

As the era's literature suggests, progress was slow but steady. Women increasingly gained more access to property and independence at the turn-of-the-century. *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Spoils of Poynton* and *Howards End* trace this change, as married women accumulated more property and independence in each novel. Henry James and E.M. Forster, both transatlantic, male authors, provide a unique perspective on changing married women's property rights in England. Their increasing support for married women's property ownership through their narratives demonstrates the changing attitudes towards gender equality in England.

II. The Portrait of Property

Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea...From five o'clock to eight is on certain occasions a little eternity; but on such an occasion as this the interval could be only an eternity of pleasure. The person concerned in it were taking their pleasure quietly, and they were not of the sex which is supposed to furnish the regular votaries of the ceremony I have mentioned...One of them, from time to time, as he passed, looked with a certain attention at the elder man, who unconscious of observation, rested his eyes upon the rich red front of his dwelling. The house

that rose beyond the lawn was a structure to repay such consideration and was the most characteristic object in the peculiarly English picture I have attempted to sketch. (James 18)

The Portrait of a Lady (1880-81) fittingly opens upon this “peculiarly English picture.” Three men delight in “the ceremony of afternoon tea” on “the lawn of an old English country-house” (18).

Withholding the characters’ names for several paragraphs, James prioritizes pleasure, observation, and the house—“the most characteristic object” within this curious English portrait. The house, like nearly every house in the novel, “had a name and a history.” Gardencourt romantically stands at a juncture between the old world and the new: here England’s storied past connects with the present pleasure of the three gentlemen who await the arrival of two women, Mrs. Touchett and Isabel Archer, the novel’s heroine. Unsettling gender expectations, the text describes the three men as passively “taking their pleasure quietly.” “Not of the sex which is supposed to furnish” the domestic space during teatime, the men receive “an eternity of pleasure” in performing the traditionally feminine ceremony and tenderly observing their houses.

Like the valuable houses of the other landed owners, Gardencourt is old, incommensurate and deeply appreciated by its owner, Mr. Touchett, who possesses a “real aesthetic passion for” Gardencourt and “knew all its points” (18). Removed from the crowded London streets, “Privacy here reigned supreme,” securing wealthy men within and excluding those they do not desire to see without. The “carpet of turf” extending over the lawn of this antique English country-house “seemed but the extension of a luxurious interior...the place was furnished, like a room, with cushioned seats, with rich-coloured rugs, with books and papers that lay upon the grass” (18). Appreciating the aesthetic beauty and comforts of the domestic space from outside the circumscription of the house’s walls, Mr. Touchett’s enjoys an elevated sense of pleasure in his property: his privileged position as observer and owner on Gardencourt’s lawn allows him to simultaneously delight in his freedom of space and security of place. This dual enjoyment of property ownership complicates the text’s ironic characterization of the trio as feminine. Though they take pleasure in their houses, the men do so as proprietors, projecting their own identities and desires onto their houses. The text compares the physiognomy of Mr. Touchett

to “the still more magisterial physiognomy of the house,” suggesting that his tender observance of and pleasure in Gardencourt reflects the narcissistic scopophilia of the patriarch’s male gaze.

Pleasure in observation takes several forms, including scopophilia and voyeurism. According to Freudian theory, scopophilia is the pleasure received from looking at another person as object. An active instinct of sexuality, scopophilia discovers the erotic in the desire to see. This drive takes others as objects, transforming them into subjects through an authoritative and inquisitive gaze. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey explains “scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect,” which proves a useful lens through which to read James’s work.ⁱⁱ The imaginary is both rooted in the image, something visualized, and in the imagination, something existing in an idealized form within one’s mind (“Lacan’s Imaginary Order”). Pleasure in looking then comes from two places:

The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen... The first is a function of the sexual instincts, the second of the ego libido... the tension between instinctual drives and self-preservation continues to be a dramatic polarization in terms of pleasure... In themselves they have no signification, they have to be attached to an idealization.” (Mulvey 836-7)

Through the object of the gaze, men identify with and receive sexual stimulation from the image, which exists as a superior self-reflection in the imagination. The pleasure in looking comes from the idealization of the image, in which the male gaze exerts its power and reproduces its self as a more complete image through identification with the other.

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, men project their male gaze upon both their houses and Isabel, the feminine object of desire for nearly every male character in the novel. Women and houses serve the dual function of providing men with a means for self-preservation and pleasure. Through rendering Isabel and property the object of the male gaze, the novel’s men project and secure their masculine identities. As Laura Mulvey explains in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey 834).

As “the other,” an interesting woman allows men to both observe their self-image and confirm their masculine identity. The men desire to see Isabel within their houses, reflecting their desire to secure

their pleasure in and privileged position as owner and master of the house. While everyone voyeuristically watches Isabel throughout the novel, Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood and Ralph Touchett make Isabel the object of their aggressive gaze: they wish to observe their control over her, receiving pleasure in watching her provide pleasure to them through touching their property; through touching their property, Isabel touches them.

The value in owning private property is not merely material. With property, one gains propriety, identity and the illusion of agency. Property impacts identity formation, especially in Western societies, where private property often serves “as a marker of masculine identity, responsibility, citizenship, purity, authenticity and self-possession” (Blomley xv). Ownership confirms one’s place within a nation, society and community. Those without property—such as married women, property-less men, colonized people—are “deemed less valuable” by society. These people are marginalized and reside at the bottom of “hierarchies of race, gender and class.” If identity is rooted in property ownership, those without property are rendered identity-less, and must assume the identities of those with the property: married women assume the last names of their husband; colonized people take on the flags and government of the colonizers; American men in Europe struggle to collect old, valuable European objects. Within the language and laws of the patriarchy, property signifies power, status and priority. Given the authoritative implications of property, ownership becomes pleasurable. Operating within the confines of this system, people understand the benefits of ownership extend beyond the material, as property signifies place in society, becoming an object of desire.

The men in this novel receive pleasure in owning and identifying their property, projecting their sexual impulses and masculine identity upon their property. Mr. Touchett is not the only man obsessed with his property in this novel; every male character exhibits a similar preoccupation with their possessions. Lord Warburton displays a similar affection for his home, Lockleigh. In fact, the two land owners dispute the value of their respective houses in front of Isabel. When Mr. Touchett tells her, “There’s nothing better than this [Gardencourt],” Warburton retorts, “I’ve got a very good one; I think in some respects it’s rather better” (28). Though these are Warburton’s first words to Isabel, he has

“kept an attentive eye” on her, voyeuristically watching the heroine from the moment he meets her (28). This contest over whose house is “better” alludes to a contest over their masculinity, social power and identity. In bragging about their homes, the men brag about themselves, hoping to attract Isabel’s desire in them through her pleasure in their house. Displaced by the tremors of social change, men project their self-image upon the property they possess, employing these physical structures as signifiers of stability.

Mr. Touchett advises Lord Warburton and Ralph to marry an interesting woman. The men feel the “great...social and political changes” in England that threaten to dispossess them from their homes, shattering their masculine identities and social power. With the impending passage of progressive legislation, including the Married Women’s Property Act, the traditions on which their identities are founded appear to be crumbling around them. In this moment of insecurity, they wish to be saved. In order to preserve their self-image, Mr. Touchett urges the bachelors “to take hold of a pretty woman... The ladies will save us” (James 23). Much like a secure house, a “good” woman will remain “firm” (James 23). Mr. Touchett believes that she will be neither “knocked sky-high,” nor “sent flying” like the ideas of change around them (James 22-23). This induces Warburton to “take hold” of a woman: “I’ll lay hands on one as soon as possible and tie her round my neck as a life preserver” (James 23). He must “lay his hands on” a firm, material buoy to confirm his identity and manhood during this time of instability and change. This association between houses and women continues throughout the novel.

The text implies that the men’s desire to see Isabel inside of their houses because it provides them pleasure and assures them that they are still in possession of their homes, masculinity and social privilege. They want to see and keep her in their houses—to observe her performing the traditional female role of pleasuring them in the property that they own—as an assurance of the domestic space’s security during a time when law and social unrest challenged the traditional notions of property and divorce. In this opening scene of *The Portrait of a Lady*, James foreshadows the entire trajectory of the novel, foregrounding issues of contested women’s property rights.

a. Inheriting Freedom

In the 1870s, laws and social conventions made it difficult for women to achieve independence. While characters like Henrietta Stackpole demonstrate that financial independence was possible for women, marriage was the most socially acceptable means for women to gain access to security. Given the social stigma against performing certain professions, which offered limited opportunities for upward mobility, and the Victorian belief that a woman's rightful place was in the family, women often married for the material support. Their entrance into the domestic setting provided them with security, but deprived them of independence, confining them to performing the proper sacrificial duties of wife and mother.ⁱⁱⁱ Ann Oakley writes: "The synthesis of 'house' and 'wife' in a single term establishes the connections between womanhood, marriage, and the dwelling place of family groups" (Lovell 77). Married women were expected to remain within the house, prioritizing the wants and needs of her husband and children her own.^{iv} Inheriting wealth was another option, however this alternative to married or working life was unavailable to most women.

Isabel Archer receives her first inheritance after her father's death at the beginning of the novel. This small sum comes from the sale of her grandmother's house in Albany, where Isabel and her sisters spend time in their childhood and where "she had uncontrolled use of the library" (33). The daughter of a freethinking man who wants his daughters "to see as much of the world as possible," Isabel "had had no regular education," "no permanent home," a free "acquaintance with literature" and "a very happy life" (39-40). This spatial freedom extends to her education, which takes place outside of the confinement of a traditional school building and its pedagogy. Protesting the "laws" of the strict "old house" operating as a school for children across the street, Isabel receives her education with relative freedom. This independence allows Isabel to experience both "the elation of liberty and the pain of exclusion" in operating outside of the old foundational "laws" of society (33). It is here that James first links exclusion with tradition. This association appears again later in the novel. In marriage, Isabel will exchange her liberty for the "old" and "pain of exclusion." This time, she is on the inside, deprived of the "elation of liberty."

Just as Isabel is free to roam around her grandmother's house, she is free to choose from any book in the library, a rare practice for women in the nineteenth century. As James writes, "The foundation of her knowledge was really laid in the idleness of her grandmother's house" (33). Thus, Isabel's knowledge lies in the freedom of pursuing that knowledge outside of traditional social structures and expectations. Without the physical restrictions of permanent places, like a home or school, Isabel enjoys an independent childhood of independence. Due to her liberal upbringing, Isabel remains "unacquainted with the supreme disciplines of her sex and age," allowing her to develop an appetite for knowledge and independence, a rare feat for the women before her (41). Thus, Isabel's high valuation of herself and her intellectual freedom corresponds with the spatial independence she enjoys in her childhood.

Isabel's upbringing does not instill within her ambitions for property acquisition through marriage. Instead, Isabel desires the acquisition of knowledge over that of material goods. "She carried within herself the fund of life, and her deepest enjoyment was to feel the continuity between the movements of her own soul and the agitations of the world" (41). Isabel's "deepest enjoyment" transcends any monetary sum. Instead, she possesses a "fund of life" within her that she wishes to "spend."^v Through employing economic terms like "fund" to describe Isabel's soul, James emphasizes that Isabel's most valuable inheritance has been that of desire for knowledge. The currency that motivates her soul is not physical, but immaterial and spiritual. Her "great desire for knowledge" through experience sparks her decision to join her Aunt Touchett on a journey to Europe as opposed to marrying a wealthy American industrialist. In short, Isabel values the spatial and mental independence of travel over the permanence and confines of the domestic house, unlike all the men in the novel.

Unlike many women in the 19th century, Isabel can afford to value the immaterial currency of knowledge over the physical signifiers of power like property, as her ambitions are not governed by the threat of poverty. With the meager inheritance she receives from the sale of her grandmother's house and her Aunt Touchett's monetary support, Isabel can pursue her dreams of spatial and personal exploration. She accepts Mrs. Touchett's "offer of Europe" on her own terms and conditions; either

woman can withdraw from their travel arrangements at any time. Together, the women are free to travel Europe, retaining both their physical and spiritual independence. The fact that Isabel receives this economic support from women proves essential to the independence she enjoys in the first half of the novel. The property these women provide Isabel, while still symbols of power within the patriarchal social order, does not force her to give up her freedom of choice. The sums are small, rendering her free from the obligations of social performance. Further, this economic support comes free from contracts or obligations. Unlike property inheritance via marriage, property inheritance freely given by women allows Isabel to maintain her identity. Isabel has the choice to accept or refuse this property and is under no constrictive contractual obligations.

Deliberately aloof from the recognition that physical possessions provide her opportunities to pursue knowledge, Isabel cares little for her financial situation. When Mrs. Touchett learns that Isabel lacks an interest in materiality. Isabel admits to her aunt, “I don’t know anything about money” (35). Though Isabel is “averse to being under pecuniary obligations,” and Mrs. Touchett pays for her expenses abroad without telling her niece (48). Isabel’s obliviousness to “the money-question” demonstrates her preference for the imaginary, as opposed to material concerns (48). This outlook reveals Isabel’s willful naiveté and desire to escape the patriarchal order, filled with “laws” much like those within the old school house that she avoided as a child. Mrs. Touchett points out the root of Isabel’s position: “that’s the way you were brought up—as if you were to inherit a million” (35). However, inheriting a million would deprive Isabel of her ability to locate her own sense of value from the margins of society. With her paltry property inheritance, the backing of her aunt and substantial “fund of life,” she thrives because of female material support. As social equals, she owes nothing to these women and must not assume their identities or morals when she receives their economic aid. These factors provide Isabel with a uniquely free position in society. Without a permanent home, a concrete education or schooling on finances, Isabel develops a preference for spatial and mental freedom.

“When you’re successful you naturally feel more at home,” Mr. Touchett tells Isabel when she first arrives at Gardencourt (58). Having established “a great financial house” in England and purchased a beautiful English home, Mr. Touchett achieves masculine success and feels at home in both the business and domestic sphere (171). Success for men was often displayed in the visible form of property. In *The Mid-Victorian Generation*, K. Theodore Hoppen writes:

In a country-house world in which everyone ‘knew their place’, the buildings themselves constituted tangible icons of hierarchy, for, as the fashionable architect, Sir George Gilbert Scott, put it in 1857, providence having ‘ordained the different orders and gradations into which the human family is divided,’ it was ‘right and necessary’ that landed proprietors should display their standing and their wealth in the form of brick and stone.” (334)

As “tangible icons of hierarchy,” the country-houses of the landed gentry served as material symbols of their success and position in society. By erecting or purchasing these monuments to themselves, proprietors displayed their moral and financial superiority. Thus, the house serves as visible symbol of a man’s identity, from which he can display his fortune and position to the world through his property. For this reason, Mr. Touchett and Lord Warburton argue about which man’s house is better; possessions become intimately connected with the identity of their owner. Noting the many proposals Isabel receives while in England, Mr. Touchett tells her “I told you you’d be a success over here. Americans are highly appreciated” (103). “Highly appreciated” for her unique and independent spirit, Isabel achieves female “success” as the object of three marriage proposals. As a woman, she understands that in accepting an offer she exchanges her personal liberty and identity for the property and identity of her husband. Determined to remain outside of the “home,” she tells Mr. Touchett, she is “by no means sure it [the feeling of being ‘at home’ through her ‘success’] will *satisfy* me” (103). While Isabel avoids marrying for property, the men that court her employ their property or lack of property to seduce her into marrying them. However, she is “by no means sure” that their homes “will *satisfy*” her definition of success.

The first two proposals Isabel receives are from Caspar Goodwood, an American businessman endowed with the “art...of managing men,” and Lord Warburton, an English lord and personage (106). Both men propose to Isabel before she receives her second inheritance, when she is living off of the

economic support of women and belongs to an independent class. As English common law and practice suggests, many factors accompanied a woman's decision to marry in the 1870s, including the name and property of a suitor (Hoppen 319). Those with property were at a decisive advantage within the marriage market, as people tried to improve their economic and social standing through marriage. This privilege was usually that of the man, who had more access to wealth through inheritance and employment. For this reason, Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood appeal to Isabel by offering her their names, property and protection. As a twenty-three-year-old unmarried woman without any access to wealth, Isabel inhabits a limited financial and social position in the world. These two conventional men share many characteristics, including their sense of active masculinity, materiality, aggressive observation and desire to possess Isabel. Though Goodwood earns his wealth through business and Lord Warburton inherits his land by birth, both employ property as a means of attracting Isabel. In marrying Isabel, they seek to permanently place her within their tangible possessions. Much like a Victorian country-house, Isabel could be jealously observed as a reflection of her husband, but only her husband could enjoy the exclusive privilege of knowing her intimately within the privacy of his property.

Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood both project their self-image upon their property. Possession of property transcends mere ownership, serving as a symbol of strong masculine power. Both men are obsessed with projecting and cultivating that image. If assessed within the symbolic structure, Goodwood's possessions signify his success, making his proposal economically strong. As "the son of a proprietor of well-known cotton-mills in Massachusetts," Goodwood was "a gentleman who had accumulated a considerable fortune in the exercise of this industry" (James 105). Yet, Goodwood's range of ownership extends beyond the material. His "Goodwood patent" places him in possession of intellectual property as well. He "had invented an improvement in the cotton-spinning process which was now largely used and was known by his name" (106). The fact that the patent is named after Goodwood reflects the marriage between his property and identity. Not only do his possessions and accomplishments serve as a reflection of himself, but they also become the literal

embodiment of his self-image. Like a wife or child, his property takes his name and serves as an emblem of his identity for both himself and others to admire. In attempting to marry Isabel, Goodwood attempts to transform her into the next “Goodwood patent,” laying claims upon her as his physical and intellectual property. In taking and being “known by his name,” she would assume his identity and reflect his masculinity to himself and others. Though Goodwood tells Isabel that he wants to marry her “to make [her] independent” because “an unmarried woman—a girl of your age—isn’t independent,” she responds:

I'm not in my first youth—I can do what I choose—I belong quite to the independent class. I've neither father nor mother; I'm poor and of a serious disposition; I'm not pretty. I therefore am not bound to be timid and conventional; indeed I can't afford such luxuries. (143)

As Isabel explains, the fact that her father bequeaths her a meager inheritance allows her to remain part of an “independent class” unmarked by the “conventional” social and moral obligations that accompany property and status. Signifiers of power, property operates within the laws and language of the patriarchal social order. Free from the burden of property, Isabel remains independent from the ponderous barriers that accompany ownership. In language that is both economic and ironic, Isabel claims she simply “can’t afford” the “luxuries” of proper behavior as defined by social custom.

Lord Warburton’s identity is similarly rooted in his materiality. Henrietta aptly sums him up: “He owns about half England; that’s his character” (255). While this characterization overemphasizes the literal reach of Warburton’s physical possessions, it exposes the core of his identity: his “personage” (94). As the eldest son in his family, Lord Warburton inherits dominion over his entire family’s ancestral estate and title. While his sisters simply live on *his* property and bear the family’s surname, Molyneux, Lord Warburton inherits an identity rooted in patriarchal history, one that provides him a unique position of power. Warburton’s possessions reflect the connection between ascribed status, property, and legal power. As Michael Gorra writes in *Portrait of a Novel*, Warburton represents a “personage” that “looms as a set of possessions and powers” (Gorra 74). Born as a man into a wealthy, noble family, Warburton receives the property and the legal powers that accompany his ownership and title. Warburton highlights these advantages in his proposal to Isabel, in which he

emphasizes the extent of his property. The offer centers upon where she will live, and he assures her “there are plenty of houses” he can put her in (James 99). While Isabel reflects that the idea of “the ‘splendid’ security” Warburton offers her is a great “opportunity” that many women would accept, the thought of accepting the proposal, of living in one of his “plenty of houses,” makes Isabel feel like “some wild, caught creature in a vast cage” (100). Equating houses to cages, James suggests the permanence and confinement of marriage for women, who perform a role to satisfy her husband while he looks on and aggressively observes his new pet.^{vi}

Mr. Touchett explains to Isabel that Lord Warburton “has a hundred thousand a year,” “owns fifty thousand acres of the soil of this little island,” “has half a dozen houses,” and “has a seat in Parliament” (72). Through this characterization of Warburton, the text links property and houses to English nationality and the state. Isabel’s uncle provides this catalogue of Warburton’s property in the same conversation that reflects, “[Lord Warburton] has ceased to believe in himself and he doesn’t know what to believe in... You see they want to disestablish everything; but I’m a pretty big landowner here, and I don’t wish to be disestablished” (71). In his characterization of Mr. Touchett and Warburton, James further establishes the connection between male identity and land, specifically houses. In this dialogue, James underscores “the considerable changes” affecting wealthy men in England, connecting the potential legal disestablishment of landed property with that of the masculine identity and family structure due to increasing women’s property rights.

With their identities rooted in their possessions, both Goodwood and Warburton seek to integrate Isabel into their property through marriage. According to the English laws and customs of the 1870s, a wife’s identity became legally subsumed by her husband’s identity. James considers this idea through the marriage proposals both Warburton and Goodwood, who urge Isabel to operate not only within their property, but also within their perspectives and laws. Lord Warburton continuously begs Isabel to enter his estate, Lockleigh, seemingly convinced that once he presents Isabel with the physical size and grandeur of his home, she will agree to marry him. Asserting his confidence in Lockleigh’s ability to produce “romantic effects,” Warburton “ventured to express a hope that she would come

some day and see his house” (68). He attaches a spatial eroticism to his house, insisting that Isabel enter his property and “see the place properly” (76). During Isabel’s visit to his home, Warburton continues to draw connections between himself and his house. While giving Isabel a tour of the house, Warburton’s talks “a good deal about the house,” but “reverted at intervals to matters more personal” (76). Isabel notes that his information about the property is not “purely archaeological” (76). Instead, Warburton confuses his description of the property with “matters more personal to the young lady as well as to himself,” and his “wish [that Isabel] could see more of it—that [she] could stay here a while” (76). The conversation’s oscillation between himself and Lockleigh links Warburton’s identity to his home. His desire to show Isabel the interior of his house suggests his desire to be intimate with her within the privacy of his property, Lockleigh. In emphasizing Warburton’s desire for Isabel to see the place in which he takes so much pleasure, James connects vision to desire and feeling. Warburton’s persistence that Isabel see and appreciate his property implies his desire for her to see his position, power and proprietorship; these qualities that deem his identity highly valuable by material and marriage standards. In entering into his house, Isabel symbolically enters into his identity. For a moment, she experiences the physical and mental enclosure of marriage, from which she retracts. Like the other dwellings in the novel, Lockleigh serves as more than mirror reflection of a character, it serves as a three-dimensional embodiment of social and political structures. Entering and remaining within a structure will label Isabel within this structure, confining her to the performance of a certain role within society. Connected to his identity, his house serves as an extension of his manhood and intimate space.

Yet, Lord Warburton’s desire for Isabel to see things from his perspective mirrors his pleasure in seeing her see things from his perspective. In fact, when he proposes to Isabel, he says, “When you came to Lockleigh the other day—or rather when you went away—I was perfectly sure [of proposing]...I don’t go off easily, but when I’m touched, it’s for life. It’s for life, Miss Archer, it’s for life” (97). Seeing her inside of his property elicits his desire, making him “go off.” The text links desire to touch and sight earlier in the novel as well, when Warburton wishes for Isabel to touch him. In

response to Ralph's statement that Isabel "touches nothing that she doesn't adorn!" Warburton declares, "It makes one want to be touched, Miss Archer" (66). His desire for Isabel to touch him speaks to his physical attraction to her. Connecting Warburton's desire for Isabel to touch him with his desire to see her, James plays with the character's competing ideas of materiality. Warburton struggles to understand Isabel's "remarkable mind," wishing to make it visible. Though desirous of experience, Isabel shrinks from the material world. In making her touch him, Warburton's desire may seek to draw her into the tangible, physical world. He does not want to simply take pleasure in looking at her; he wants to see her providing him pleasure by acting upon him through his aggressive observation. Through associating sight with desire, James flirts with the pleasure of observation, specifically through the masculine gaze.

Pleasure in observation takes several forms, including scopophilia and voyeurism. According to Freudian theory, scopophilia is the pleasure received from looking at another person as object. An active instinct of sexuality, scopophilia discovers the erotic in the desire to see. This drive takes others as objects, transforming them into subjects through an authoritative and inquisitive gaze. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey explains "scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect," which proves a useful lens through which to read James's work. This theory incorporates Lacan's theory of the imaginary order, which is first established through vision during the mirror stage, when a child first sees itself in a mirror. This moment marks an identification steeped in recognition and misrecognition: held up by its mother, the child mistakes its image as more complete and perfect than its body is in actuality. "Its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject, which, reintegrated as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others" (Mulvey 836). Thus, the imaginary is both rooted in the image, something visualized, and in the imagination, something existing in an idealized form within one's mind (Cultural Reader). Pleasure in looking then comes from two places:

The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen... The first is a function of the sexual instincts, the second of the ego libido... the tension between instinctual drives and self-preservation

continues to be a dramatic polarization in terms of pleasure...In themselves they have no signification, they have to be attached to an idealization.” (836-7)
 Through the object of the gaze, men identify with and receive sexual stimulation from the image, which exists as a superior self-reflection in the imagination. The pleasure in looking comes from the idealization of the image. Through identification with the other, the male gaze exerts its power and reproduces its self as a more complete image.

Thus, Warburton’s insistence on showing Isabel his property reflects his greater desire to see her within his property. Idealizing Isabel’s presence at Lockleigh, Warburton casts his male gaze upon her, transforming her into both an “object of sexual stimulation through sight” and a woman through which he desires to project his identity. In absorbing Isabel into his self-image, Warburton becomes a more complete, powerful version of himself. As the feminized other, Isabel would confirm his masculine identity in the dichotomy of identification. For this very reason, Isabel shies away from his proposal. Lord Warburton’s materiality constrains her imagination. While she thinks his position is admirable, she does not wish to share it.

Lord Warburton’s proposal is accompanied by his sense of his masculine identity, property and social position. Indivisible from Warburton’s identity, they would also be indivisible to that of his wife’s. Accepting Warburton’s offer would mean accepting the laws and social expectations that accompany living within his house and perspective. Hoppen describes the responsibilities of a wife in nineteenth-century England: “Different homes demanded different talents. Yet even in the grandest, where money and servants were plentiful, husbands tended to assume their wives would be competent in handling accounts, paying bills, ordering supplies, approving menus, and dealing with crises of the most unexpected sort” (Hoppen 334). Isabel lacks financial experience; she is uninterested in running, let alone being inside, Warburton’s house; and, perhaps most importantly, she wishes to maintain her independence, something she could never do while selflessly serving Warburton through serving his house. She expresses her insufficiency to fulfill the demands of Warburton’s wife, telling him, “It’s not what I ask; it’s what I can give. I don’t think I should suit you; I really don’t think I should” (James 99). Unwilling to see the outside world from the inside of Lockleigh for the rest of her life, Isabel does not

wish to see things from Warburton's perspective. When she considers marrying him, she admits, "it would be very interesting to see something of his system from his own point of view" (95). However, while his perspective might be interesting, Isabel does not receive as much pleasure in seeing it as she does in seeing the world. Isabel feels "that a territorial, a political, a social magnate had conceived the design of drawing her into the system in which he rather invidiously lived and moved" (95). She is unable to reconcile herself to spending the rest of her life confined within Lockleigh and Warburton's interior perspective, which would confine her to the social duties performed by the wife of a landowner.

In accepting Warburton's offer, Isabel would accept his aggressive observation. She would live out his phantasies by prioritizing his pleasure over her own pleasure and touching his property in the performance of her everyday domestic duties. Continuing his use of phallic language in order to underscore the symbolic patriarchal ideology accompanying Warburton's offer,^{vii} James presents Isabel's perspective that, "there was something stiff and stupid which would make it a burden" (95). Being trapped within the walls of Warburton's house and mind would severely limit Isabel's freedom, making it a "burden" upon her independence.^{viii}

Isabel observes this burden in Lord Warburton's sisters, the Misses Molyneux. Submissive to their brother's every whims, the women live as symbols of pure, noble femininity, passively doing as they are told and acting upon no desires of their own. Declaring them "quiet and reasonable and satisfied," Isabel reflects "that if they had a fault it was a want of play of mind" (74). The Misses Molyneux revere, admire and fear their brother, the patriarchal head of the house. Despite her "desire to draw the Misses Molyneux out" of their brother's perspective by making them see his paradoxical position as a liberal lord, Isabel fails to sway the sisters' blind dedication to their brother; they ironically defend the contradictions between what Warburton says and what he does. Filled with the desire for knowledge and travel, Isabel cannot imagine herself subject to the laws and contracts of a married life with an English lord. Uncomfortable under his aggressive observation and within his confining social system, Isabel refuses to return to Lockleigh, associating the estate with Warburton's desire to situate her within his intimate space. His house and mind become like an oppressive cage, one

she fears. She expresses this anxiety on two separate occasions, telling Warburton, “I’m *afraid* there’s no prospect of my being able to return” (77) and Miss Molyneux, “I am *afraid* I can never come again” (120).^{ix} Her fear of Lockleigh reflects her fear of “separating [herself]” in marrying him. In accepting his offer of property and security, Isabel would sever herself from her true desires in life and herself. As his wife, she would assume his identity, becoming an extension of his self-image and property.

Unable to imagine living within the social confines of his house, she declines his offer. Fond of knowledge, Isabel cannot imagine thinking about Warburton with the same unwavering dedication and faith in which his sisters perceive him. As Ralph tells Isabel, “there were fifty thousand young women in England who exactly resembled them” (74). Though she initially declares that she “should like to be like that,” after “see[ing] them at home,” Isabel discovers that women in Lockleigh must think and behave a certain way that she does not wish to imitate. Elizabeth Machlan has written of *Portrait*, “If a house demands that she act in a way contrary to her wishes, she will simply find another house” (Machlan 398). Too independent to be confined within the ideology governing Lockleigh, Isabel rejects Lord Warburton’s “big bribe” of his property and title (James 105). The term “bribe” Isabel must sell herself into Warburton’s possession in exchange for property and social position. With “ambitions reaching beyond Lord Warburton’s beautiful appeal,” “the idea of a diminished liberty was particularly disagreeable to her at present” (104). Though Isabel considers Warburton’s home and position aesthetically admirable like that of “a hero of romance,” she does not find pleasure in the material confines of this conventional narrative. Valuing her immaterial “idea” of liberty over the beauty of Warburton’s material wealth, Isabel seeks to expand her mind beyond the walls of Lockleigh—to experience more of the world than the duties of a housewife would afford her. While Isabel does not yet know what her ambitions are, they do not include marriage for social or economic reasons. Though she reflects that these “indefinable” ambitions reach to something “possibly not commendable,” she remains free and “resisted conquest at her English suitor’s large quiet hands” (104). Refusing Warburton’s desire to touch and be touched by her, Isabel champions her individuality. Acting upon her own desire, Isabel believes she has “given a sort of personal accent to her independence by looking so

straight at Lord Warburton's big bribe and yet turning away from it" (105). Her rejection serves as an exercise of power. She refuses to participate in the system that subordinates her identity and desires to those of her husband.

Caspar Goodwood expresses a similar desire to aggressively observe Isabel. His masculine gaze is also associated with spatial and mental constriction, as he continuously violates Isabel's attempts to distance herself from him. Determined to bend Isabel to his will, he travels across the Atlantic three times to elicit a positive answer to his proposal from her. Overwhelmed by his oppressive presence, Isabel tells Goodwood that, "the best way to help me will be to put as many hundred miles of sea between us as possible" (143). Yet, through closing the spatial difference between them, Goodwood seeks to place Isabel under his controlling gaze. During his first visit to Europe, Goodwood attempts to "urge her [to marry him] against her will," telling Isabel, "I hate to lose sight of you!" (139). His insistence upon observing her reflects his erotic desire for her as well as his attempts to retain his masculinity. Her absence suggests a missing part of him, a castration that repeats the first trauma of entering into the symbolic order. It is this trauma that causes him to return to Europe three times, reliving his castration and attempting to complete his self-image within the patriarchal symbolic order.

It is Goodwood's insistence to "keep[] [Isabel] in sight," that makes her fear him. She responds to his desire to see her with alarm, telling him, "I'm after all very much afraid of you" (139). Just as Isabel is "afraid" of entering into Warburton's gaze and property, she is "afraid" of separating herself in marriage to Goodwood. She fears that he is her "grim fate," but, nonetheless, she evades his attempts to "take positive possession of her" (104). While several literary critics assert that Isabel turns away from Lord Warburton because she fears sex, this reading is too simplistic. James's emphasis on Isabel's desires reveal that she is not afraid of physical sexuality; she fears being defined by the physical world. As Goodwood's wife, Isabel would live within the defined physical place of his domestic space. Marriage would bring her closer to property ownership, providing a way for others to define her based on her husband's house and her ability to materially manage it. Instead, she strives to define herself through her immaterial pursuit of knowledge and experience in travel. Isabel wishes to retain self-

possession by shaping her mind, as opposed to allowing her material property to determine her identity for her. When she exerts her power over Goodwood by forcing him to leave her, Isabel experiences an orgasmic moment of excitement:

She was trembling—trembling all over. Vibration was easy to her, was in fact too constant with her... She intensely rejoiced that Caspar Goodwood was gone; there was something in having thus got rid of him that was like the payment, for a stamped receipt, of some debt too long on her mind...the sense was there, throbbing in her heart; it was part of her emotion, but it was a thing to be ashamed of—it was profane and out of place.” (144)

This language of sexual pleasure suggests that Isabel’s authoritative denial of Goodwood’s offer stimulates her imagination—not Goodwood’s presence. Interposing erotic language with that of the market, James reinforces Isabel’s pleasure in shedding the material temptations of marriage. As opposed to receiving payment from him via marriage, Isabel decisively frees herself from any obligation she may have to marry, paying back the “debt too long on her mind.” Liberating herself by rejecting Goodwood’s bribe, Isabel removes a weight from her imagination, allowing her to act upon her desire. This experience stimulates Isabel’s imagination in a way Goodwood’s cotton-mill fails to: “she cared nothing for his cotton-mill—the Goodwood patent left her imagination absolutely cold” (106). Though James signals Goodwood’s tendency to transform immaterial ideas—like intellectual property and marriage proposals—into economic substances—like “debt” or a profiting “patent”—Isabel eludes his grasp. Unimpressed by the wealth Goodwood offers her or their relationship based on economic exchange, Isabel experiences the pleasure of power in acting in favor of her “imagination.”

Championing her desires over those of the men around her, a woman’s thoughts may be “profane.” As Robert White explains in “Love, Marriage, and Divorce: The Matter of Sexuality in *The Portrait of a Lady*,” the Victorian discourse on sexuality “generally accepted, and generally celebrated, [the] belief that women, at least good women, were lacking in sexuality, were fortunately—for both husbands and wives—not troubled by desire” (60). Isabel’s desires are certainly “out of place,” as she rejects of the houses and properties that seek to ground her existence in the material. Her desire to be outside of any physical structure corresponds with her desire to function outside of the conventional. Machlan aptly describes the confining nature of houses: “built structures influence the thoughts and

acts of their inhabitants. Architecture then becomes an obstacle to personal freedom, much as genre, by some definitions, limits the scope of artistic expression” (398). Determined to create her own portrait outside of the patriarchal “genres” that govern each house, Isabel takes pleasure in freeing herself from the aggressive observation of the male gaze, which attempts to cage her within a certain time, place and structure. Valuing her personal freedom above all else, Isabel avoids the architecture that builds up barriers around her identity. In his attempt to depict the true desires and experiences of a woman within the nineteenth century, James too pushes his art beyond the generic scope of literature at the time. Instead of providing the reader with the ending to a happy marriage plot, he permits his heroine to experience what the novels she reads does not.^x

In describing the identities and proposals of Warburton and Goodwood by likening them to property and the phallus, James connects the ideas associated with these two men: the proposals, property and phallus become the holy trinity of the aggressive symbolic order and enclosure. It is thus unsurprising that Isabel seeks to distance herself from Warburton and Goodwood. Resolute on maintaining her independence and identity, Isabel rejects the proposals of both men before promptly leaving the countries in which they reside. By intertwining property, possession and physicality into the marriage proposals of Goodwood and Warburton, James suggests that each, while motivated by desire, is presented to Isabel as a bribe. The patriarchal symbolic order employs laws and property to signify the terms and conditions of marriage, making courtship a burdensome topic for Isabel, who prefers to operate outside of the conventional realm. Isabel is not interested in receiving property via marriage because of the spatial and mental oppression that she would suffer in exchange. She seems determined to continue rejecting marriage proposals. But, when she inherits a ponderous fortune, everything changes.

b. Isabel Inherits a Burden

The second instance of inheritance appears in the middle of the novel, when Mr. Touchett bequeaths Isabel a fortune of seventy thousand pounds upon Ralph’s request, transforming her into an heiress. Ralph makes his father, “the man of business,” one last “financial proposition” when they

discuss the elder man's will (160). Rooted in the language of the economy, the inheritance is purely material and tied to the laws that govern property. Ralph argues that with "an easy income," Isabel will "never have to marry for a support," rendering her "free" (160). While Ralph hopes this inheritance will free Isabel from economic dependency, he inadvertently burdens her with the conventional obligations that accompany ownership. As a woman, Isabel is expected to marry for property but refuses to do so. Though property provides men the power to pursue a wife, Isabel's inheritance leaves her victim to even more insidious pursuit by fortune hunters. Despite Isabel's desire to see the truth, James admits her desire to see the ugly is limited. In the marriage market, marriage is not the myth of romance, but takes place "in an environment where it is taken for granted that marriage is an exchange of property."^x

Compared to Isabel's first inheritance, this fortune is massive and forced upon her by men. These dual aspects of this inheritance place it within the confines of the oppressive patriarchal social order. The money operates within its sign system, tethering Isabel to the obligations of a stricter social class, one with more laws dictating the behavior of young women. The inheritance transforms Isabel from observer to an object of observation. The first time James introduces the reader to Isabel, he describes Ralph—sitting passively on the lawn of Gardencourt receiving "infinite pleasure" from the ceremony of teatime—as the "object of [Isabel's] observation" (25). Yet, here, and within Mulvey's paradigm, "a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 837). As a woman who has just stepped into the Old World, filled with legal and social sexual imbalances, Isabel cannot retain the active gaze, despite her desire to do so.^{xii} Ralph and Mr. Bantling must accompany the two women all around the "minute island" because they are constantly being watched and judged; she wonders, "Isn't anything proper here?" (James 114). The men she meets seek pleasure in seeing her in their homes and among their things. Yet, she does not wish to touch the material—knowing that in gaining possessions, she surrenders her identity to the patriarchal Old World standard of passive female propriety. Before she receives the fortune, Isabel tells Ralph: "I don't wish to touch the cup of experience. It's a poisoned drink! I want only to see for myself" (134). By convincing his father to bequeath Isabel half of his fortune, Ralph

forces her to “touch” the material world, as opposed to merely observe it. The “cup” is filled with patriarchal ideology, making it “a poisoned drink” for Isabel, whose life source stems from her ability to function independently of materiality. Once she touches the material, she touches the laws and signs of the patriarchal structure. By stripping her of identity within the “independent class,” the massive fortune renders Isabel the object of observation.

While this inheritance frees Isabel in certain ways, it hampers her in others. Though Ralph intends his generous gift to provide Isabel with wings and independence, it is “at first oppressive” because it forces Isabel into the social class of an upper class English heiress (182). When her niece transforms into a rich young lady, Mrs. Touchett explains the new laws or “duties” of her current position. Mrs. Touchett tells Isabel: “Now that you’re a young woman of fortune you must know how to play the part—I mean to play it well” (183). While “the girl’s first duty was to have everything handsome,” her “second duty” is to learn how to tend to her possessions: “You don’t know how to take care of your things, but you must learn” (183). Before inheriting her fortune, Isabel acts upon her ability to freely choose between the things one should and one shouldn’t do. However, as an heiress, she enters the sign system and stage of property ownership. The things she owns must express her identity, an idea that counters Isabel’s desire for independence. She must “submit” to the weight of this system, but “her imagination was not kindled; she longed for opportunities, but these were not the opportunities she meant” (183). Just as she “submitted” to her aunt’s directions, she submits to playing “the part” for others, allowing their desires to overwhelm her own. As the object of the gaze, all eyes are on her.

Yet, inheritance becomes a false sign of self-determination, presenting itself as an opportunity for freedom and independence. Mrs. Touchett explains the paradoxical aspects of Isabel’s fortune:

Now, of course, you're completely your own mistress and are as free as the bird on the bough. I don't mean you were not so before, but you're at present on a different footing—property erects a kind of barrier. You can do a great many things if you're rich which would be severely criticised if you were poor. You can go and come, you can travel alone, you can have your own establishment: I mean of course if you'll take a companion—some decayed gentlewoman, with a darned cashmere and dyed hair, who paints on velvet. You don't think you'd like that? Of course you can do as you please; I only want you to understand how much you're at liberty...I

think, however, that it's a great deal better you should remain with me, in spite of there being no obligation. It's better for several reasons, quite apart from your liking it. I shouldn't think you'd like it, but I recommend you to make the sacrifice. (190)

This advice, cloaked in words like “free,” “travel,” and “liberty,” masquerades as a statement of Isabel’s good fortune. Her large inheritance grounds Isabel, placing her “on a different footing.” Like a “bird on the bough,” Isabel is in a constant anticipatory condition. She cannot spread her wings and soar, but remains tethered to the branches. As Mrs. Touchett offers evidence of Isabel’s freedom then contradicts her statement: Isabel can travel and own a house, as long as she does so with a guardian. While no concrete “obligation” compels Isabel to remain with Mrs. Touchett, “several reasons” demand “the sacrifice” of her true independence. Despite her desire to leave her aunt, Isabel remains with her: “she had a great regard for what was usually deemed decent, and a young gentlewoman without visible relations had always struck her as a flower without foliage” (190). Poised for all to observe and judge, Isabel must have “visible relations” in order to be “deemed decent.” No longer an active “bird” in the sky, Isabel becomes a passive “flower,” who must decorate herself with symbols of status.

As James elucidates through Isabel’s entrapment within the symbolic order, “property erects a kind of barrier” not only between Isabel and the world, but also between herself and her desires. Determined not to allow her suitors to cage her within their homes, Isabel escapes the barriers of property by rejecting their marriage proposals. However, when she inherits her own “property,” in the form of wealth, Isabel becomes caged by her unwillingness to spend the money herself. As a wealthy woman, Isabel lives behind the “barrier” of the social customs that accompany her wealth. At odds with society’s demands and the male gaze, her desire for knowledge and independence outside of the domestic sphere must be conquered. While this wall protects Isabel from financial hardships, it also draws a barrier within her; her fear of separating from herself comes a reality despite her efforts. In detailing the paradoxical condition of Isabel’s inheritance, James suggests that property operates under the illusion of freedom. The more economically independent one becomes, the more one succumbs to exclusion from the world. Though Isabel appears “completely [her] own mistress,” she becomes the steward of her property.

Contrasting Isabel's open possibilities in the first half of the novel with her increasingly dismal enclosure in the second half, James emphasizes the way material possessions impose more barriers than freedoms. Isabel's imagination is burdened by her property, pregnant with latent conventional social expectations. She retreats from these barriers much as she withdraws from Goodwood's and Warburton's marriage proposals. Confined within a certain genre of living, Isabel tells Ralph:

I try to care more about the world than about myself—but I always come back to myself. It's because I'm afraid... Yes, I'm afraid; I can't tell you. A large fortune means freedom, and I'm afraid of that. It's such a fine thing, and one should make such a good use of it. If one shouldn't one would be ashamed. And one must keep thinking; it's a constant effort. I'm not sure it's not a greater happiness to be powerless." (193)

Much as Isabel is "afraid" of the aggressive masculine gaze, she fears the freedom the large fortune provides her. With everyone looking at her to see what an independent young woman with a large fortune can and will do with her life, Isabel feels pressure to make "a good use of it." Property and the power that accompanies it becomes "a constant effort," depriving Isabel of her happiness. While she relishes in the power she gains in rejecting the aggressive observation of suitors, the heroine crumbles in the face of the power her newfound capital gives her. Through Isabel's different responses to exerting power, James emphasizes that the material power she receives ushers in the legal and social burden of those patriarchal symbols of power. In fact, James provides the reader no details of Isabel's purchases. The presence of these purchases is felt in their absence; the reader joins in on observing Isabel. Most notably, Isabel does not buy a house, but continues traveling. It is at this moment that Isabel's liberal upbringing haunts her. Unfamiliar with, and even repulsed by, the ugliness of material capital, Isabel fears the management of her own fortune. James suggests that though Isabel believes purchasing a house will enclose her, her unspent fortune becomes her cage.

While Isabel rejects self-expression through material possessions in the beginning of the novel when she is poor, she sees her fortune as an aesthetic ornamentation to her identity as she grows more accustomed to her inheritance. James explains the affect of ownership upon Isabel's imagination: "Her fortune therefore became to her mind a part of her better self; it gave her importance, gave her even, to her own imagination, a certain ideal beauty" (194). The persuasion of Ralph, Madame Merle, as well as

the influences of ownership change Isabel's foundational perspective on the world and her self. James suggests that through participating in the system she once rejected, Isabel begins to consume the ideology she rejects in poverty. Now judging her worth with the signifiers of the patriarchal order, Isabel sees her property as endowing her with "importance" and "a certain ideal beauty." Under the pretense of sharing power, Isabel is beguiled into believing and practicing the laws and dogma of the oppressor.

Though it appears her property provides Isabel with more power, James suggests that ownership merely provides her with the illusion of power. Her property does not only act upon Isabel's imagination. James warns the reader: "What it did for her in the imagination of others is another affair, and on this point we must also touch in time" (194). Rendering her the object of the male gaze and imagination, Isabel's unexpected inheritance is an anomaly, affording her extra attention. While Ralph pleasures in voyeuristically watching Isabel's actions, Osmond places his passive aggressive observation upon her, in the hopes of attracting her wealth. "The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is style accordingly" (Mulvey 837). Both men hope to see their identities reflected in Isabel's relationship to property.

When Ralph urges his father to "divide my inheritance into two equal halves and give [Isabel] the second," he divides himself, projecting part of his being onto Isabel (James 160). In "Sheathing the Sword of Gentle Manhood in *The Portrait of a Lady*," Leland Person writes:

Given the essential narcissism of Ralph's subjectivity, however, it is not surprising that those relations tend to be consumptive. For the aggressive action—the physical and sexual consumption—that characterizes Caspar Goodwood, Ralph substitutes voyeurism, or specular consumption of beautiful objects such as Isabel. (90)

Though Ralph's narcissistic attempts of doubling himself through Isabel as a means of self-preservation through scopophilia may appear more poignant than Goodwood or Warburton's, his male gaze stems from a similar place of desire. However, unlike Isabel's other two suitors, Ralph understands he cannot physically touch Isabel. Suffering from consumption, her cousin watches Isabel reject two masculine suitors. Unable to establish his position as a patriarch in business or in property ownership, Ralph sees potential space for his propertied identity to live through Isabel and providing him with a unique

spectacle or experience. The only way to consume her, to draw her into his orbit, is through dividing his inheritance and giving her half of it. Given James's repeated emphasis on the connection between individual identity and property, Ralph's division of possessions works as a division of himself.

As his last name *Touchett* implies, Ralph touches Isabel's life by forcing her to touch him through bequeathing her half of his inheritance. Forcing his patrilineal identity upon her, Ralph invests his manhood in Isabel, receiving both erotic and narcissistic pleasure in watching her travel and reject suitors, something he cannot do as an invalid male. As Leland Person writes, "Sending that second self out into the world and the market economy of sexual relations, Ralph cross-dresses as a woman and thus invests in a doubly gendered subject position" (92). While Ralph does not attempt to physically touch Isabel like Goodwood and Warburton, his money touches her life in a similarly material and confining way. Michael Gorra writes, "In James the greatest crime remains that of imposing your will upon another person, of using him or her to implement your own desires" (Gorra 315). By living vicariously through Isabel, Ralph imposes his identity upon her for his entertainment, forcing her to touch the cup of experience. Person interestingly demonstrates the nuance of this identity transference: "As long as Isabel's womanhood remained in a state of suspense—'over the heads of men'—Ralph's manhood, to the extent he invested it in her, remained in suspense, too" (Person 92). Ralph's gift thus serves as the most aggressive offer in the novel; unaware of Ralph's act until the end of the novel, Isabel cannot reject Ralph's divided capital or masculine identity. Isabel occupies a unique position as an independent woman with an inherited fortune, masculine identity, and no husband or father. Like a propertied man, Isabel gains sole control over her entire fortune and becomes subject to the desires of fortune hunters. With limited experience managing wealth, and no desire to do so, Isabel is unfit and unprepared for this instantaneous inheritance of power and responsibility. Thus, her inheritance becomes specular in ways Ralph cannot foresee. At the same time, as a young person in a woman's body, she must still endure the perpetual constraints and threats of being a nineteenth century woman in the Old World. In gaining only half of Ralph's patrilineal manhood through receiving half of his inheritance, Isabel occupies a liminal space between man and woman: she possesses the material

capital, power and susceptibility to fortune hunters that accompanies the upper class masculine identity, but does not receive the benefits of the male rights or father to observe in order to learn how to manage this money. Without a matrilineal tradition in the Old World or knowledgeable mother figure to guide her, Isabel finds herself both constrained by patriarchal social expectations of her gender and class as well as occupying a liminal void. Though purchasing a house is within Isabel's economic capacity, her failure to do so parallels her struggle to acquire structure and stability in her anomalous economic and social condition.

Isabel's unspent fortune reflects her hesitance to use her wealth. As Isabel soon learns, not everyone shares her disinclination to exploit her and her capital. Isabel's inheritance sparks the imaginations of two other characters—those of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond. The ambitious Madame Merle values status via property above all else. When she learns that Mr. Touchett has died, “the idea of a distribution of property—she would almost have said of spoils—just now pressed upon her senses and irritated her with a sense of exclusion” (180). Isabel's reaction to Mr. Touchett's death and property distribution is distinctly different than that of Madame Merle. Upon learning of her inheritance, “she suddenly burst into tears,” deciding that, “The money's to remain in the affairs of the bank,” untouched (181). The text suggests that though Isabel is afraid to use for fortune, Madame Merle is not. Her “desire” to marry a wealthy man with an immense amount of property and a great name “had never been satisfied” (180). Thus, she looks on at the dispersion of inheritance with “eyes, a little dilated” and refers to Isabel's inheritance as “delicious” (181). These images of sexualized consumption predict her successful efforts to marry Isabel to Gilbert Osmond, her secret, former lover and father of her illegitimate child, Pansy. No one knows the child belongs to Madame Merle, who prioritizes her social ambitions over her role as a mother. Madame Merle has played the part of a female socialite, and well. Unlike Isabel, Madame Merle dreads exclusion from property more than confinement within it. Telling Isabel it is “crude” not to “care anything about [her suitor's] house,” Madame Merle has “a great respect for things!” which she believes convey “one's expression of one's self” (175). Though Madame Merle claims to want to inhabit the house of a wealthy man, her reasons

for desiring this property are purely social as opposed to motherly, as her refusal to acknowledge Pansy as her daughter suggests.

Though she is eager to gain the status that proprietorship provides via marriage, Madame Merle remains hungry for the spoils she has worked hard for in developing her flawless social charms. Madame Merle's lack and longing for property make her "social art" so perfect and complete (216). James narrates, "She was in a word too perfectly the social animal that man and woman are supposed to have been intended to be" (167). Something about Madame Merle's perfection rings false, however. She is the nearly impossible actualization of the ideal Victorian—the woman manuals and ideology promised existed, but no one had ever truly seen. Yet, even after achieving this feminine ideal, Madame Merle is excluded from the status afforded to women through socially savvy marriages. Still unrewarded for playing the role of a perfect lady perfectly within the marriage market, Madame Merle uses her influence over Isabel to ensure her daughter, Pansy, receives the benefit of property in courtship.

Isabel misreads Madame Merle as a trustworthy female ally, taking her introduction and assurance of Osmond Gilbert's admirable qualities to heart. Characterizing Osmond as "one of the most delightful men I know," Madame Merle informs Isabel that he has "No career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything" (172). Burdened by her fortune, which lies unspent in the bank, Isabel is attracted to Osmond partly for his lack of proprietorship. It is not until after Isabel finds herself in a dark and loveless marriage with Osmond that she realizes "Madame Merle had married her" (430). This statement provides multiple avenues for interpretation. On a literal level, Madame Merle uses her influence as an older, social role model to convince Isabel to marry Osmond. Idealizing Madame Merle's position as a single woman, Isabel sees the older woman as "a vivid image of success," trusting her assurance of Osmond's exceptional character. Though Isabel is unaware of Madame Merle's sexual affair with Osmond when she discovers her impact on her marriage decision, James foreshadows the emotional, immaterial union of Madame Merle and Osmond. As Countess Gemini, Osmond's sister, later informs Isabel about Madame Merle and Osmond's relationship,

“They’ve always been bound to each other; they remained so even after she broke off—or *he* did. But he has always been more for her than she has been for him...Now see how much better women are than men! She has found a wife for Osmond, but Osmond has never lifted a little finger for *her*” (455). Though never legally recognized as marriage, the unspoken bond shared by Osmond and Madame Merle proves the most fertile. Pansy, who Osmond falsely claims to be the product of his previous marriage, is the only healthy child that is born of a relationship in the novel. The legally official, but distant marriages achieve no such success: Isabel loses her unborn child and Mr. and Mrs. Touchett produce the sickly Ralph. Although the text seems to condemn Madame Merle and Osmond’s manipulation of Isabel’s desires, it also suggests that their emotional bond serves as the strongest spiritual marriage in the novel. Thus, in her marrying Isabel to Osmond, Madame Merle also enters a spiritually complex marriage with Isabel. Both women endure Osmond’s emotional manipulation, unsuccessfully work to please him and do not enjoy the pleasures of Isabel’s fortune.

James suggests that Madame Merle’s unsatisfied desire for status through marriage and property ownership inspires her malicious plan to turn Isabel into a proprietary bride for her ex-lover and child. The Countess Gemini informs Isabel of Madame Merle’s pleasure in her marriage to Osmond, as it “has given his daughter a great little lift. Before that [Pansy] lived in a hole,” without a portion to elevate her in society. Hoping to exploit Isabel’s wealthy connections and fortune, Madame Merle sacrifices Isabel to Osmond partly because of her bargain to help each other, but largely to provide Pansy the opportunity to marry a wealthy, socially revered proprietor. With a portion of Isabel’s fortune, Pansy may achieve the unrealized ambitions of Madame Merle’s youth. Introducing the “idea of a distribution of property,” James suggests that the unequal and unfair gendered distribution of property in *Portrait* leads to the heroine’s downfall. Unable to own property on her own, Madame Merle constantly visits friends, but lacks a house and wealth. Determined to provide Pansy with wealth via marriage, Madame Merle manipulates Isabel to marry Osmond. Even when Madame Merle provides her family with property, she remains outside the physical and social margins of enjoyment. Her selfless act for her husband and child reflects a twisted variant of ideal Victorian

motherhood, underscoring the fact that even when women follow the social ideals of femininity, motherhood and marriage, they remain unsatisfied. These ideals, while nearly impossible to live out, mean that even when a woman gains property through marriage, she receives no pleasure from this ownership and status.

Those without a true claim to property are feminized and categorized as “the other,” as Madame Merle’s own judgments suggest. Madame Merle distinguishes men with identities from men lacking identities. American men have “no natural place” in Europe; they are “parasite[s], crawling over the surface” trying to penetrate the land (206).^{xiii} When she first discusses Gilbert Osmond with Isabel, Madame Merle calls him an American man in Europe without his “feet in the soil” (205). He signifies nothing, as he has “no career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything” (206). Without these signifiers of property, Osmond lacks a masculine identity. Though he never admits it, his actions, values and ambitions reflect his desire to escape this social castration and to represent nationhood, empire and superiority.

Attracted to Osmond’s apparent lack of materiality, Isabel finds his relationship to property compelling. Isabel misreads Osmond’s character, believing he lacks a desire for the materiality of her other suitors. Familiar with the oppressive barriers of physical houses, Isabel discovers pleasure in looking at Osmond’s old antiques and art. Posing behind history and culture, Osmond presents his materiality in an unfamiliar way, one that does not, at first, appear dangerous. As a man of leisure with no income, Osmond collects things as opposed to houses, disguising his lack of wealth in presumptions of culture. Madame Merle compliments Osmond upon his taste: “Your rooms at least are perfect. I’m struck with that afresh whenever I come back; I know none better anywhere. You understand this sort of thing as nobody else does. You’ve such adorable taste” (208). Through Osmond’s aesthetic arrangements, he poses as a dedicated artist and collector. Isabel is charmed by Osmond’s appreciation for rare, old items. She tells him, “Everything seems to me beautiful and precious” (219). Seeming to value his things for their immaterial, spiritual importance as opposed to physical displays of status, Isabel wishes to enter into Osmond’s perspective.

The narrator reveals early in the narrative that Osmond's "art" is merely imitation. Osmond tells Isabel, "one ought to make one's life a work of art" (261). He lives his entire life as a pose, jealous of those with more property than him. Privileging the reader with details of Madame Merle and Osmond's scheme and ability to read the invidious signs of manipulation that Isabel cannot, James signals to Isabel's entrapment. Descriptions of Osmond's house in Florence prepare the reader for who, or what, lies inside. The exterior of the house "had a somewhat incommunicative character. It was the mask, not the face of the house" (195). The "massively cross-barred" windows' "function seemed less to offer communication with the world than to defy the world to look in" (195-6). As Lacan explains, the desire not to display desire still constitutes as desire. The desire not to show desire reflects "the default feminization of the picture, which is treated as something that must awaken desire in the beholder while not disclosing any signs of desire or even awareness that it is being beheld, as if the behold were a voyeur at a keyhole" (Mitchell 44). Through living his life as if it is a work of art, Osmond attempts to draw desirous gazes, and eventually draws Isabel's. Osmond's feminization attracts Isabel, who reads his exterior as natural and anti-aggressive. Compared to Isabel's other visceral suitors, Osmond does not attempt to touch her or force her to marry him. Instead, his passivity elicits desire in her imagination. Through feminizing Osmond's role and masculinizing Isabel's part in the courting process, James confuses gender marriage roles. As James's narrator ominously predicts Isabel's fatal mistake the first time he introduces the reader to Osmond's home, explaining, "It is not, however, with the outside of the place that we are concerned" (James 195). Along with Isabel, the reader enters the interior of Osmond's home, becoming intimate with his elaborate pose and materiality. Osmond's very passive mystery draws Isabel's imagination towards him. James expresses her desire to understand him, writing "there were things it would have given her pleasure to hear the child, to make the child say," and "She was obliged to confess it to herself—she would have taken a passionate pleasure in talking of Gilbert Osmond to this innocent, diminutive creature who was once so near him" (269). Envious of his daughter's intimate knowledge of Osmond's perspective, Isabel desires

to be as near to Osmond as possible. James suggests that Isabel believes Osmond's mind is as beautiful as the interior of his homes.

Isabel rationalizes her decision to marry Osmond to herself in James's most prized forty-second chapter. Reflecting upon her courtship with Osmond, she thinks "she had imagined a world of things that had no substance. She had had a more wondrous vision of him...she had not read him right" (357). His collection of things had had no material confining "substance" to Isabel, who is accustomed to her female perspective through literature and experience. While she previously lacked material substance and looked upon as a wondrous vision, she now turns this judgment and gaze upon Osmond. Without realizing it, Isabel's wealth exchanges her immaterial position with a material one, rendering her more like Goodwood and Warburton. She thinks, "A certain combination of features had touched her, and in them she had seen the most striking of figures" (357). Osmond's ability to touch Isabel and her desire to touch him similarly reflects her previous suitors' tactile desires. Thrown suddenly into a confusion of gender and identity in her "unexpected inheritance," Isabel's decision to marry Osmond is both an exertion of power and reflection of her unconscious desire to be once again rendered powerless.

The Married Women's Property Act Marriage Act of 1882 was not passed by *Portrait's* publication, allowing James to demonstrate the full transfer of property through marriage in Osmond and Isabel's union. Treating Isabel and her property as a canvas for his meaning and instrument of power, Osmond consumes Isabel's identity, transforming her and her inheritance into an extension of himself. Decorated entirely by Osmond, the house reflects his tastes, desires and identity, as opposed to Isabel's. He furnishes both her and the house using her funds. Isabel reflects, "But for her money she would never have done it...At bottom her money had been a burden, had been on her mind, which was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience, to some more prepared receptacle" (358). Caught in a liminal space between masculine and feminine identity, Isabel struggles to reconcile her power and status with her limited rights and experience. Isabel's rejection of Warburton and Goodwood predict her desire to "transfer the weight" of her finances "to some more prepared receptacle." As a newfound capital owner, Isabel has no experience or interest in managing or

spending her wealth, she decides to “lighten her own conscience” and “make it over to the man with the best taste in the world” (358). In turn, Osmond takes over the traditional role of the wife. He manages the house, decorates every room in the house, and organizes social events.

However, Osmond is far from being the ideal sacrificial housewife. As Isabel’s husband, he also owns all of Isabel’s wealth, spending it freely. Though Osmond appears delicate, clever, tasteful and passive, James describes his mind as “a firm hand,” “a serpent in a bank of flowers,” a “rigid system,” a beautiful “organ” (358-60). These phallic descriptions demonstrate that Osmond’s mind is his erotic organ, and Isabel must live within it. Isabel’s desire to see life through Osmond’s perspective is based on a misunderstanding of his identity. As Osmond’s wife, Isabel’s identity becomes Osmond’s, but his mind proves a passive aggressive organ that demands more of her than she foresees when she agrees to marry him. Likening his mind to the Palazzo Roccanera, she suffers in “the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation” (360). Though she admits Osmond never physically harms her, the mental abuse Isabel endures is described in material, architectural terms. James writes, “She had lived with it, she had lived in it almost—it appeared to have become her habitation” (358). Enclosing her within the privacy of the domestic space he rules alone, Osmond suffocates Isabel by consuming her entire identity. Picking the privileged qualities of each gender, Osmond dominates Isabel’s life, refusing her a meaningful position in their relationship or house. Osmond decorates the domestic space, manages the finances, exerts dominance over his wife, champions tradition, seduces guests with his sense of exclusion, raises Pansy and forbids Isabel from acting without his permission. The beauty of his mind lies in its ability to both passively and aggressively enact his desires upon others. Without access to and caring little about her property or the domestic space, Isabel cares only for her freedom. But there is no role she can play to obtain freedom in her marriage. “Her mind was to be his—attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer park” (362). She was to be one of his “things,” lacking all substance and meaning besides what Osmond gave to it.

Throughout his descriptions of the Osmond’s married life, James does not provide an instance of physical touch between the couple. Instead, touch is reserved for the immaterial realm of the

physical, visual and legal. Osmond receives nearly sadistic pleasure in watching Isabel beg for her freedom from the material and social constraints that dominated their lives. In seeing her reduced and scorning her, “her husband’s personality, touched as it never had been, stepped forth and stood erect” (362).

Interestingly, the metaphorical embodiment of Ralph’s masculine identity, Isabel’s wealth comes materialized as masculine. Her decision to marry Osmond is so painful to Ralph because, when she marries, she hands over his masculine identity to Osmond, something that makes both men hate each other (446). The text suggests that the origin of Isabel’s wealth makes Osmond vehemently object to her visiting Ralph before he dies at Gardencourt. Ordering Isabel not to separate from him in act, Osmond commands Isabel not to travel “across Europe alone, in defiance of my deepest desire to sit at the bedside of other men” (446). Upon discovering Osmond’s affair with Madame Merle, Isabel chooses her own deepest desires over those of her husband, immediately leaving Rome for Gardencourt. Her return from Gardencourt at the end is a very contested part of the novel.

The men in Isabel’s life continue to show their desire to possess her. On his deathbed, Ralph tells Isabel, “You must stay here” at Gardencourt (479). Determined to keep her within his house even after his death, Ralph’s command, while presented as a way to protect Isabel from Osmond’s wrath, astonishingly suggests that Ralph hopes to continue watching Isabel even as a ghost. Isabel tells Ralph that she will remain at Gardencourt “as long as seems right” (479). During Isabel’s visit, Warburton also expresses his desire to see her in Lockleigh once again, despite his betrothal to another young woman. He “coloured a little as he” suggested that she come to his house; he “would see that there should be literally no one else” besides his sisters (484). Both Ralph and Warburton’s requests for Isabel to stay at their houses suggest their desire to continue aggressively observing her. Even after years have passed, their unfulfilled desire remains forceful. While these first two voyeuristic and possessive suggestions do not confirm Isabel’s desire to return to Rome, her experience with her final suitor, Goodwood, makes her return to Osmond. Goodwood forces a kiss upon her: “she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence,

justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession” (489). The kiss is far from romantic. In fact, it reminds Isabel of drowning. This overwhelming physical presence frightens Isabel, who no longer trusts the men that aggressively wish to see her among their possessions and within their homes. Without a home of her own, every place feels like a cage to Isabel. But one cage, which legally binds Isabel, is better than three equally confining prisons of masculine materiality. Choosing the “straight path” back to Osmond, Isabel returns to the Palazzo Roccanera in Rome (490). Her decision signals her acceptance of the “straight” laws of marriage as binding; she and her property are tied up with Osmond forever. Surrounded by men who wish to observe and contain her, Isabel has no safe place to turn. Though critics often debate Isabel’s decision to return to Rome at the end of the novel, the text implies that marriage property laws offer her no alternative choice.

III. The Spoilage of “Thingness”

‘Things’ were of course the sum of the world; only, for Mrs. Gereth, the sum of the world was rare French furniture and oriental china. She could at a stretch imagine people’s not ‘having,’ but she couldn’t imagine their not wanting and not missing. (James, *The Spoils of Poynton* 49)

The Spoils of Poynton narrates the tortured battle over a woman’s beloved antiquities. Recently widowed, Mrs. Gereth attempts to retain ownership over the ‘things’ she has spent her life passionately collecting, loving and looking after. Though she and her husband collect and care for the rarities together, he bequeaths everything to their son, Owen, when he dies. When Owen decides to marry Mona Brigstock—a girl his mother finds both artless and tasteless—Mrs. Gereth cannot fathom transferring ownership to the couple, which values the objects for their monetary worth. Disgusted by Mona’s “big commodious house,” Mrs. Gereth wants Owen to marry Fleeta, a girl who appreciates and shares her passion for the collection’s aesthetic beauty. Nonetheless, Owen intends to marry Mona and assume proprietorship of Poynton. Refusing to silently accept her dispossession, Mrs. Gereth wages war against her son and his fiancée. Mrs. Gereth gathers “a little army of workers” and steals the entire collection back, stealthily moving it to the house her husband has left her outside of the country, Rick’s (83). Legally entitled to the possessions his mother has stolen from Poynton, Owen attempts to restore

his inherited possessions. He asks Fleda to mediate between himself and his mother in order to help him restore his property, falling in love with Fleda in the process. This request places Fleda in an uncomfortable position between the man she desires and his aggressive mother, whose things she loves even more than Owen. Incorrectly assuming that Owen has broken off his engagement with Mona and acted upon his feelings towards Fleda, Mrs. Gereth immediately sends the antiquities back to Poynton. Unfortunately, Mona hears of the restoration and immediately marries Owen, who writes to Fleda telling her to take “as a remembrance something of mine—something of real value” from Poynton (208). When Fleda arrives at Poynton, she discovers that the house has been reduced to ash by a fire. Poynton and all of its precious things disappear the moment Fleda goes to remove one of the collection’s most precious items. In its disappearance, the English country house, the social power-symbol of the Victorian era, rejects the ownership of Owen and Mona as well as the attempt to divide its collection. The text suggests that the property’s power lies in its wholeness and appreciation. Without its complete arrangement and Mrs. Gereth’s loving observation, the English country house loses its ability to serve as a source of stability and power for Victorian society.

The disintegration of Poynton reflects the declining emphasis on the importance and interiority of the family structure. According to Julia Brown, “The imperiled state of Poynton in James’s story suggests the imperiled state of the Victorian home” (Brown). At Gardencourt, privacy reigns, but at Poynton the Gereth’s family and marital tensions are publicized by the move of the antiquities from Poynton to Rick’s to Poynton again and by the conflagration that consumes Poynton at the end of the novel. While the ideal Victorian woman sacrificed her desires for those of her husband and children, Mrs. Gereth sacrifices her son for the aesthetic pleasure of her ‘things.’ She forfeits her son, her pride, and her husband’s patrilineal wishes in order to retain possession of the ‘things’ that spiritually, but not legally, belong to her. Mrs. Gereth’s sense of duty to and deeply intimate connection with Poynton’s precious things trump all else. In arranging the precious things, she seeks to arrange her own identity outside of the old patriarchal world of the past and artificial modern future. The tortured plot of *Spoils* tracks the movement of and responses to Poynton’s things. While the text expresses the characters’

desires to possess the “things” at the center of the conflict, it does not reveal the latent value of the collection. Though Mrs. Gereth, Mona, Fleda and Owen all desire Poynton’s things, the characters attribute value to the collection for different reasons.

The novel’s tensions take place over and within the family home, reflecting the disrupting effects married women’s property laws had upon the traditional family structure. Publishing the novel a little over a decade after the passage of the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882, James bases *The Spoils of Poynton* off of a true, publicized legal conflict in the news in 1893.^{xiv} According to Bonita Rhoads in *Henry James and the Plunder of Sentiment*, “Contemporary readers in England would have understood the novel as a direct commentary on social transformations they were witnessing in their own lives” (148). The Act of 1882 and the 1890 Interstates’ Act, which provides a widow the right to money if not mentioned in her husband’s will, guarantees Mrs. Gereth security after her husband dies. This is an improvement from Mrs. Touchett’s predicament in *Portait*, who relies upon her husband’s generosity when he passes away in 1872.¹ Yet, these provisions of security do not appeal to Mrs. Gereth, who prefers the freedom to enjoy the treasures she has spent her entire life collecting. In his will, Mr. Gereth bequeaths his wife “maintenance and a cottage in another country” (James 43). This cottage is Rick’s, a home with things that do not reflect any of the subtle taste that Mrs. Gereth has created at Poynton. Despite Mrs. Gereth’s intimate appreciation for her things, “No account whatever had been taken of her relation to her treasures, of the passion with which she had waited for them, worked for them, picked them over, made them worthy of each other and the house, watched them, loved them, lived with them” (43). The social custom of relegating the widow to the margins of society allows Mr. Gereth and Owen to disregard Mrs. Gereth’s efforts in the creation of domestic space. As a woman, she cannot take pleasure in the property she manages and arranges. The aesthetic beauty she imparts upon Poynton remains unrecognized and unrewarded by the patriarchal tradition of primogeniture. Nonetheless, though change spread slowly, the new laws began to positively influence the married women’s claim to property. The residual impact of the Act of 1882, “the most important

single reform” of the nineteenth century, upended the home by altering the property rights and status of married women in England (qtd. Reynolds in Rhoads 149).

This dramatic legal change upset the stability England’s custom of primogeniture, which ensured that men inherited and owned property, while women merely lived in it. Favoring the continuation of the male line through family titles and property, the English legal system failed to represent the felt reality of women’s affection for their property. Norma Basch summarizes William Blackstone’s influential assertion that English marriage laws, “best served the one critical function of marriage—the creation of lawful heirs...marriage was an arrangement of property for the propertied and their children, who were conduits for family wealth” (Basch 46). Primogeniture ensured that family estates and titles remained within the family across generations. In “The Law and Custom of Primogeniture” (1872), G.C. Brodrick explains, “the male issue shall be admitted before the female, and that, when there are two or more males in equal degree, the eldest only shall inherit, but the females all together” (qtd. Brodrick in Rutterford 175). Through marriage, laws on primogeniture controlled male ownership and female stewardship. While the eldest son continued the legacy of his ancestors, women married to enjoy access to the property and wealth of her husband’s family for a limited time. Her claim to property came via marriage and reliance upon her spouse, while his was granted at birth. By keeping private land within the family and favoring the inheritance of the eldest son, this tradition ensured that property was rarely divided, distributed and devalued. The fact that marriage was the socially approved site for sexual pleasure attaches an aspect of eroticism to property access through marriage. The unequal gendered distribution of property parallels the unequal gendered distribution of pleasure derived from that property. On one hand, as property owners, men were free to take pleasure in their property for life. On the other, women were attendants of their husband’s property; any pleasure they took in it was, by extension, pleasure taken in him. His death signaled the end of his legal proprietorship and thus, the end of the pleasure his wife could legally take in his property. However, the increasing strength of married women’s property rights threatened to fracture this system, which depended upon the privileged inheritance of males and the transference of entire properties to one heir.

While men like Lord Warburton in *Portrait* inherits his family's traditional title and entire estate in the 1870s, Owen struggles with the changing attitude towards women and property.

James sets the property dispute of *Spoils* around the valuable things inside of Poynton, the Gereth's home in the south of England, renowned for its artfully arranged antiquities. Mrs. Gereth and her husband spend their entire lives searching the world, saving money and making sacrifices for each object within their home. Spiritually connected to the collection in its entirety, Mrs. Gereth infuses her property with its own subjectivity, allowing the objects to assume identities and lives of their own. In *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, Bill Brown discusses the "thingness" of Mrs. Gereth's valuable collection, which gains its own life through its aesthetic value and agency in the narrative. The "thing" is "irreducible to the physical object: it is at once physical and metaphysical, sensible and suprasensible, both object and thing," occupying the liminal space where "objects assume lives of their own, captivating humans with the mesmeric power of their aesthetic value" (Brown 33, 41). Mrs. Gereth's possessions are characterized as individuated "things." She tells Fleda and Owen, "There isn't one of them I don't know and love...Blindfold, in the dark, with the brush of a finger, I could tell one from another. They're living things to me; they know me, they return the touch of my hand" (James 53). Anthropomorphizing her "things," Mrs. Gereth has an intimate relationship with her collection; she loves and understands each thing better than anyone else could. According to Brown's model, James's aesthetic creates a "dialectic of person and thing, and a dynamic of materialist affectivity" that establishes feeling through being touched by things (Brown 140). Mrs. Gereth not only imagines touching these objects in a dark, private space, but she also fantasizes about the objects touching her back. This erotically charged tactile relationship extends beyond the physical and into the metaphysical, where "'things' circulate as an idea in excess of any physical referent" (Brown 141).

Thing theory suggests that Mrs. Gereth experiences a spiritual appreciation for the aesthetic beauty and touch of her things. In this way, the text explores feelings of pleasure through things in an era when "most commentators on sexuality insisted that marriage was the only legitimate outlet for passion" (White 51). By indulging in her desires through her things, Mrs. Gereth challenges the

Victorian belief that women were not troubled by desire or sensuality. Paul B. Armstrong writes that "although inanimate, the things 'live' because they carry traces of [Mrs. Gereth's] life. It is herself she touches in touching them and herself who returns her touch" (qtd. in Sarris 59). The text distinguishes Mrs. Gereth further from her female predecessors in the pleasure she enjoys in her own possessions and self. Distinct from the Victorian "angel of the house," Mrs. Gereth refuses to prioritize the desires of her husband and family above her own. James marks Mrs. Gereth's intimate relationship her property as different than that of Isabel's uncomfortable relationship with her wealth. Unlike Mrs. Gereth, Isabel does not experience pleasure in acquiring, judging or arranging material possessions like the novel's male characters do. Through depicting Mrs. Gereth's self-identification with and pleasure in the things, the text signals to the evolving gender dynamics within the English home.

This idea is complicated further through Fleda, who also takes pleasure in seeing and touching Mrs. Gereth's things. The first time Fleda visits Poynton she "dropped on a seat with a soft gasp and a roll of dilated eyes" (James 47). Overwhelmed by the "perfect beauty" of the house, she "perfectly understood how Mrs. Gereth felt...the two women embraced with tears over the tightening of their bond" (47). Sharing Mrs. Gereth's passion for the aesthetic pleasure granted by the things, Fleda shares the creator's physical pleasure in the items: "The very fingers of her glove, resting on the seat of the sofa, had thrilled at the touch of an old velvet brocade, a wondrous texture that she could recognise, would have recognised among a thousand, without dropping her eyes on it" (80). Running her hand sensuously over the "old velvet," Fleda delights in the very "touch" of its "wondrous texture." The "thing," the brocade, caresses her back. Even when separated by a gloved hand, Fleda's fingers experience an intimate, tactile connection with the things. The text complicates Fleda's aesthetic appreciation for the things with her repressed attraction to Owen; it is ambiguous whether Fleda's passion for the objects sparks her feelings towards Owen, the legal owner of Poynton. Yet, her deep admiration for the antiquities reaches beyond her affection for Owen. Though she craves ownership over the things, she does so because of her spiritual attachment to the things. Mrs. Gereth and Fleda share a physical and spiritual connection with the things, uniting them in an understanding of beauty

that no one else shares. Thus, in *Spoils*, James provides an example of something he does not in *Portrait*: female friendship. Interestingly, this sorority develops around the rare, antique objects within Mrs. Gereth's home. Though they belong to different generations and social classes, the women forge a community of spirit in their shared aesthetic appreciation and perception of the treasures' thingness.

Mrs. Gereth identifies with the collection she artistically renders at Poynton. When her husband is alive, Mrs. Gereth claims that the things at Poynton, "were our religion, they were our life, they were us!" (53). As his wife, Mrs. Gereth has shared in her husband's identity, "religion" and "life." However, when Mr. Gereth dies, she is freed from her shared property with her husband: she claims that the things are "now...only me" (53). Mr. Gereth's absence allows Mrs. Gereth the opportunity to claim sole ownership and identification with the property. Although the law supports Owen's claim to Poynton, Mrs. Gereth senses her opportunity to rebel against the patriarchal state. The text allegorizes the struggles of women to separate their property and identity from that of their husbands, especially in the domestic space, which they were expected to occupy but not govern.

While Bill Brown argues that, "Mrs. Gereth's accomplishment lies not in the act of acquisition but in the art of composition," her ability to acquire the objects as a woman is an accomplishment in itself (148). While the art of aesthetic composition is the most visible presence of Mrs. Gereth's achievements, James's emphasis on the "art of the treasure-hunter" underscores that Mrs. Gereth's ability to judge and possess property serves as the core, latent value, of her work.^{xv} Unlike Isabel in *Portrait*, Mrs. Gereth is not afraid of finding and possessing objects. The text displays the extent of change in female property ownership in Mrs. Gereth's willingness to exert her ownership over the antiquities she loves, which she then masterfully arranges to reflect her own identity. The narrator highlights Mrs. Gereth's status as the artist and originator of Poynton, contending, "What Mrs. Gereth had achieved was indeed an exquisite work; and in such an art of the treasure-hunter, in selection and comparison refined to that point, there was an element of creation, of personality" (47). In arranging Poynton's things, she attempts to control her identity with the materials of the English domestic space.

Through her taste for aesthetic beauty, Mrs. Gereth creates Poynton as much as Poynton creates her. Because she is the active mind behind the beauty of Poynton, her identification with her creation is like that of an artist to her work of art. Mrs. Gereth's intimate relationship with Poynton reflects the "things" ability to act upon, to touch, people. Supplying the domestic space with personalized meaning, she both identifies with and lives through her aesthetic creation. She impacts Fleda deeply, "who spoke of the contents of the house only as 'the works of art'" (61). Art functions in a similar way to things, which are also used "to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and to shape our fantasies" (Brown 4). The things in Poynton operate as art when touched and arranged by Mrs. Gereth, who provides them with the potential to make combined meaning. In her arrangement and defense of her collection, Mrs. Gereth remakes the traditional understanding of a married women's identity.

Through Mrs. Gereth, James challenges the fallacy of "natural" gender roles by characterizing her as an aggressive woman with a narcissistic attachment to her things. Much like the men in *Portrait*, Mrs. Gereth experiences pleasures in looking at and touching her objects. In this respect, James likens Mrs. Gereth to the men in *Portrait*, characterizing her as masculine in her aggressive observation and self-identification with property. Yet, as a woman, Mrs. Gereth cannot have the same relationship to her property as men. Warburton, Mr. Touchett and Osmond enjoy the visual aesthetics of their homes, which, through ownership, they narcissistically imagine as an extension of their manhood, a completion of their fragmented masculine identity. Mrs. Gereth's self-identification with Poynton's "things" similarly stems from the human desire to use things to create both meaning and identity; through them, she fantasizes being recognized as rare and precious.

According to Mulvey, the pleasurable effect of the imaginary self-image depends upon its ability to render the subject "more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body" (Mulvey 836). Asking, "What had her whole life been but an effort toward completeness and perfection?" Mrs. Gereth stresses her desire to achieve a sense of completeness through her collection. Her aim to collect and arrange the fragmented old world reflects a deeper desire to make meaning within her own life as a

widowed woman through art. Yet, James highlights that the gendered limits Mrs. Gereth's pleasure in her property. As Gayle Rubin writes in "The Traffic of Women," the organization of gender has characterized the feminine personality as masochistic, self-hating and passive, qualities that Mrs. Gereth does not display in her proprietorship. Rubin writes of the gendered double standard, "Masochism is bad for men, essential to women. Adequate narcissism is necessary for men, impossible for women. Passivity is tragic in man, while lack of passivity is tragic in a woman" (916). Trapped inside of a society performing exclusive gender identities, Mrs. Gereth is unable to exert the same authority of ownership over her possessions. The law forbids Mrs. Gereth, a woman, from retaining sole and permanent ownership over the property with which she self identifies.

James suggests that Mrs. Gereth's relationship with her property is more intense and limited than that of Owen. While Warburton tells Isabel that he is happy to live in any one of his houses, Mrs. Gereth is unable to part from a single object. Further, she literally experiences a separation from self when she is forced to leave her things at Poynton; she calls the moment she "passed the threshold of Poynton for the last time, the amputation" (79). Mrs. Gereth's hypersensitive attachment to her things reflects her tentative position as their owner. Treating her things with the love and dedication of a mother to her children, Mrs. Gereth's metaphysical identity is constantly threatened. In this way, James reveals the instability of female property ownership.

Paradoxically, though Mrs. Gereth views her complete self-image in her property, she sacrifices her social self-image to retain possession of her entire collection. While the men in *Portrait* enjoy their property because of what it communicates to others about them, by contrast, Mrs. Gereth appreciates the things because of her personal connection with them. Though "proud and fastidious all her life," when Owen threatens to take her things away, Mrs. Gereth "shows so little distaste for the world's hearing of the broil" (65). Her hate for "the effacement to which the English usage reduced the widowed mother," inspires her to "want to make Owen and Mona do everything that will be most publicly odious" (65). In exposing their usurpation of her possessions to the world, Mrs. Gereth seeks vengeance against her son and society for its disposal of her identity as mother and artist of Poynton.

She cares little if she shatters the silent interior of the ideal Victorian home, exposing what James calls “the ugly English custom” of the “mother deposed” (James, “Notebook” 215). While her effort to create a complete whole is born of narcissistic tendencies, she cares for the aesthetic objects more than she cares for herself. They have fully become her. She does not communicate her identity through her things to society, but lives through her things. Thus, possession becomes a means towards self-possession, as opposed to merely self-expression.

Considering the applicability of thing theory to the text, Mrs. Gereth further identifies with the things in their objectification within the home. Owen and Mona’s inability to appreciate Mrs. Gereth’s things reflects their inability to appreciate Mrs. Gereth’s status as a mother and owner of Poynton. Removing Mrs. Gereth like a piece of antiquated furniture that has performed its duty within the house and must now be replaced, Owen attempts to take full possession over Poynton. Refusing to marry Owen until every object is returned to the house, Mona wants the things because they are legally Owen’s property, and, by extension, legally her own (44). In defending her things, Mrs. Gereth seeks to save them from being unappreciated and defaced by the Mona’s possessions, “grimcracks in this awful age...they’d be thrust in here on top of my treasures, my own” (54). Mona’s commodious possessions and “prizes for the blind” would desecrate Mrs. Gereth’s prized collection (37). They would “spoil” the value of her aesthetic creation. In begging Fleda to help “save *them*,” to save *her*, from dispossession, Mrs. Gereth recognizes Fleda’s appreciation of her in her understanding of her things. She calls upon Fleda to be her spiritual heir: “*You* would replace me, *you* would watch over them, *you* would keep the place right” (54). Fleda’s ability to see both the material and immaterial beauty of Poynton’s thingness reflects her sympathy with the dispossession of English widows as a poor unmarried woman.

Originally published under the name “The Old Things” (1896), the novel places Poynton’s rarity at the center of the conflict. Willing to “starve” for her collection, Mrs. Gereth would rather consume rare objects than food. Yet, her willingness to “starve” also points to the precious objects as Mrs. Gereth’s life source, through whose consumption and arrangement she makes meaning in her life. This lack and desire for old things is not exclusive to Mrs. Gereth. At the end of the nineteenth century,

rare objects became even scarcer, as industrialization led to the mass-production of identical commodities. Mrs. Gereth participates in the era's frenzied consumption of old objects, which James refers to as the "fierce appetite for the...material odds and ends of the more labouring ages" (James 26). Like "the Americans abroad" in James's other novels, who "buy[] old things" and travel to Europe to escape modernity, Mrs. Gereth summons the past through collecting these handcrafted items born of intimate production (Gorra 150). The "old things" evoke ideas of authenticity and art connected to the artist, upholster or brazier. These values, hovering behind the object's materiality, participate in the aesthetic beauty and thingness of Mrs. Gereth's property.

In renaming the story *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), James emphasizes the superiority of the collection to the object-part, while referencing the violent conflict over the valuable battle prizes. Recording his authorial intentions in the novel's Preface (1908), James writes: "On the face of it the "things" themselves would form the very centre of such a crisis; these grouped objects, all conscious of their eminence and their price, would enjoy, in any picture of a conflict, the heroic importance" (27). Endowed with a conscious and heroic importance when "grouped" together, the things receive their value through their status as a collection. The "face" of the things "present[s] not just a surface, but a *face* that faces the beholder."^{xvi} Looking back at the viewer, the "things" extend beyond their pure materiality; they become human-like, reaching into the magical realm of animism. James describes the things vaguely, allowing "the face" of the shapeless collection to blur, morph, and thus, become a thing.

Through his decision not to describe the objects, James reinforces the "thingness" of the collection. Despite the centrality of Mrs. Gereth's things to the text, they remain immaterial. Ironically, they are constantly named, looked at, admired and touched, but never fully described. In *What Do Pictures Want?* W.J.T. Mitchell provides a straightforward definition of "things." According to Mitchell:

Objects are the way things appear to a subject—that is with a name, identity, a gestalt or a stereotypical template, a description, a use or function, a history, a science. Things, on the other hand, are simultaneously nebulous and obdurate, sensuously concrete and vague... [they] require more than one name, more than one identity" (Mitchell 156). Departing from the descriptive tendencies of Realism, James refuses to catalogue each object at Poynton. It is

James's very refusal to label these contentious things that allows them to animate the text and become living things, as opposed to one-dimensional objects.^{xvii} By rendering things "sensuously concrete and vague," the text preserves their doubleness as material products and conduits for meaning. The "things" morph together, assuming human qualities and passive agency through their status as a complete, yet indiscriminate, whole.

Refusing to describe the objects at Poynton, James's novel plays with the reader, performing a conceptual strip tease. Never revealing the source of aesthetic pleasure that drives Mrs. Gereth to disown her son and Fleda to shed "tears" of "submission to the perfect beauty" (47), James tantalizes the reader in his refusal to catalogue the unnamed things. In "The Plot against Narration: Disavowal in *The Spoils of Poynton*," Christine McBride writes, "As a form predicated on the compulsive withholding of all-important objects—often explicitly cast as secrets—this Jamesian plot might seem to furnish the example *par excellence* of narrative repression" (McBride 251). Though the narrative challenges McBride's assertion that the Jamesian plot provides narrative repression, her allusion to the secretive effect of the limited descriptive details points to the purposeful sensuality that characterizes Mrs. Gereth and Fleda's erotic relationship with Poynton. Withholding the secret of Mrs. Gereth's art, the text encourages participation in the pleasure of Poynton, not by literally seeing, but by seeing through feeling—the way Fleda enjoys the collection. In this way, James reveals the metaphysical aura and value of Mrs. Gereth's art of composition, which Fleda characterizes as "a presence, a perfume, a touch" (203). Through alluding to sensual pleasures of Poynton, but withholding their secrets, James refuses to participate in the practice of *scientia sexualis*, a term Foucault employs to describe the Victorian discourse on sex in *The History of Sexuality*. Instead, the text encourages the reader to participate in the mystery and knowledge of the *ars erotica*, drawing truth from pleasure itself.^{xviii}

James's descriptive technique discretely conveys sensual pleasure in material things.^{xix} The portrayal of scenery in *Spoils*, while less replete, follows the same form as that in *Portrait* in its initiation of mysterious knowledge. Gorra argues that the "scenery in [*Portrait*] is never inert, never just a block of description. James always uses it to serve some dramatic purpose, to tell us something about his characters' perceptions or desires" (Gorra 142). Through his vague descriptions of Poynton,

James develops the consciousness of the novel, employing the power and mystery of the sexual knowledge to create an *ars erotica*, which Foucault defines as, “the erotic art” from which “truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience” (57). Unlike the Victorian practice of *scientia sexualis*, in *ars erotica*:

Pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul... In this way, there is formed a knowledge that must remain secret, not because of an element of infamy that might attach to its object, but because of the need to hold it in the greatest reserve, since, according to tradition, it would lose its effectiveness if divulged... Consequently, the relationship to the master who holds the secrets is of paramount importance... The effects of this masterful art... are said to transfigure the one fortunate enough to receive its privileges: an absolute mastery of the body, a singular bliss, obliviousness to time and limits, the elixir of life, the exile of death and its threats. (Foucault 57-8)

By refusing to explicitly provide the reader with the secret of the novel’s artful erotic, James esoterically reveals the spirituality of pleasure through the aura of Poynton, which Mrs. Gereth and Fleda experience in both their bodies and souls. Mrs. Gereth is the master that initiates Fleda into pleasure through teaching her slowly the technique and mystery of her art.

When Mrs. Gereth mistakenly sends the spoils back to Poynton, believing Fleda and Owen are engaged, the two women despair their loss. However, Fleda passionately remembers the antiquities in a way that reflects Foucault’s theory of the *ars erotica*. Reflecting that the objects are “complete” and “perfect” in themselves, she “wanted indeed no catalogue to count them over,” maintaining the secret of their appearance (194). “Most touched” by Poynton’s “beauty,” she shares in Mrs. Gereth’s “passion” and “religion” (194). This aesthetic admiration knows no boundaries and provides no “utility” to Fleda’s life; it simply provides her “joy” in their relationship to themselves (194). Living with them through her memory she “thought of them without a question of any personal right... They were nobody’s at all—too proud, unlike base animals and humans, to be reduced to anything so narrow” (194). The things are transfigured into aesthetic pleasure that cannot be reduced to a confession of their secrets or to pure materiality. Reflecting upon the inability of Poynton to be owned, Fleda thinks, “It was Poynton that was theirs; they had simply recovered their own. The joy of that for them was the source of the strange peace that had descended like a charm,” this singular bliss (194).

This loaded language suggests that Poynton has gained absolute mastery of its own materiality, operating in the realm of pure spiritual pleasure. By seeing and appreciating the immateriality of Poynton, Fleda sees and appreciates the immaterial artistic pleasure of property. The women's identification with Poynton suggests that they share Poynton's material transcendence. According to Janice Kirland, "Fleda Vetch and Adela Gereth, deprived of Poynton and its treasures, retain the exercise of their individual talents and their loyalty to each other, forecasting the increasing independence of women's lives" (13). Without the material presence of Poynton, the women worship its immaterial thingness in its absence. They remain connected in their appreciation of artistic beauty, living independently together at Rick's.

The text negotiates the question of who will receive Poynton by the end of the narrative. Beginning the novel after the death of Mr. Gereth, Poynton's former patriarch, James marks the crucial moment for potential changes in tradition. Mr. Gereth's death suggests the passage of an old, authoritative patriarchy, and an opportunity for Mrs. Gereth to exert her right to property. Yet his will serves as a legally binding, tangible reminder of the persistent influence of the past upon the gender rights of the present. According to Deborah Wynn, "It is property's potential for alienation (in all senses of the word) and the resulting social degradation that James is keen to explore in this novel, which is why Poynton's spoils, the actual objects, are less important than their movement between characters and locations and the ways in which they stimulate desire" (145). Though Wynne argues that *Spoils*, "is not so much a novel about the concept of property rights but an exploration of the ways in which identity is related to the material world and the notion of property ownership," the issue of female property rights cannot be unraveled from identity and ownership (143). Mrs. Gereth herself cites her right to the things as the reason she steals them. She informs Mrs. Brigstock, "I had taken from Poynton what I had a right to take" (176). Relegated within the domestic home as a mother and wife, Mrs. Gereth's identity and desire is interwoven with Poynton and the space she has created there. Her right to self-possession is contingent upon her right to property.

As the things move from Poynton to Rick's and then back to Poynton, the characters assert their rights over the property in order to assert their identity. The text contrasts Owen's legal right to Poynton with Mrs. Gereth's moral right to the antiquities. Owen does not share his mother's pleasure in aesthetic appreciation. Instead, he values the property for its material and socially symbolic benefits, such as attracting a wife. When Mrs. Gereth removes the things from Poynton, Owen realizes "they're awfully valuable" (92). Their absence decreases his value in Mona's eyes; she demands the full reinstatement of Poynton's things before marrying Owen (92). Mrs. Gereth tells Fleda that Owen "had from a boy never cared, had never had the least pride or pleasure in his home" (44). James underscores Owen's lack of appreciation for the collection through his suggestion that items can be separated from the entire collection. He tells his mother to "take away with her the few things she liked best" (65). The idea of removing the most valuable objects and leaving the rest behind, "the odiousness of sacrificing the exquisite things one wouldn't take to the exquisite things one would" is unfathomable to his mother (71). Breaking apart Poynton's collection will deprive it of its aesthetic surplus, its "thingness." In this way, James likens the effect of separating Poynton's things to that of separating a family's land and distributing it amongst members. Either action would deprive the property of its power and position as a symbol of status. As no longer a site of self-possession and exclusive ownership, the property becomes profane or ordinary instead of sacred.

Mona's claim to Poynton is similarly rooted in the law. Owen's proposal to Mona demonstrates the remnants of primogeniture, as their marriage becomes a property arrangement. As the inherited patriarch of Poynton, the house and its belongings become his own. According to custom, the two are inseparable in Owen's marriage offer. When Mrs. Gereth receives a letter from Owen expressing his intentions to bring Mona to Poynton she shrieks, "he wants her to see the house!" (49). James's technique of connecting sight to desire signals that Mona's visual assessment of Poynton will determine whether "she approved what he had to offer her" (49). Fleda reflects, "Mona didn't know, or Owen didn't, whether Poynton would really please her. She was coming down to judge" (49). The power of property rights is reiterated when Mrs. Gereth removes all of the treasures from Poynton. Offended at

Mrs. Gereth's attempt to deprive her of her legal right to Poynton through marriage, Mona refuses to marry Owen. Employing legal jargon in her explanation to Owen, Mona claims that he has, "obtained her under false pretenses," which nullifies their contract and commitment to each other (94).

Though Wynn argues that Mona embodies the New Woman in her aggression, modern materiality and desire for property rights, Mona's lack of sympathy with Mrs. Gereth and her things demonstrates her alliance with the patriarchal powers of the past that seek to relegate the mother. In "The Social Vision of The Spoils of Poynton," Richard Lyons emphasizes the importance of Mrs. Gereth's stance against Mona:

The conflict prefigured in James's reference in the notebooks to "the ugly English custom" involves something more than a contest between persons. The "relegated" mother must make her stand against the whole weight of approved social practice. She fights against powers and forces, against the institutional pressures that maintain a shadowy presence behind the action: in the father's will, in the implicit marriage contract between Owen and Mona and, above all, in the threatened solicitors that Mona keeps urging Owen to set upon her. The human embodiment of these forces is Mona, who is as persistent, blank, and inhuman in her force of will, with her button eyes and big planted feet, as the legal system itself. (145)

This understanding of Mona demonstrates her inability to understand the work that Mrs. Gereth has put into her position as the mistress of Poynton. Mona views the acquisition of Poynton as a matter of legal rights as opposed to of spiritual rights, emphasizing her materiality and disconnection from the novel's other female characters. Mrs. Gereth fears Mona's inhabitation of Poynton because she believes her materiality will desecrate and ruin the space's aesthetic pleasure.

Unlike Mona, Fleda values Poynton for its aesthetic beauty. Fleda asks Owen if Mona is selflessly sacrificing her engagement with him to "restore the Spoils of Poynton" because she understands the objects "immense value" in completing Poynton's aesthetic aura. This question demonstrates her understanding of the importance of Poynton's unity. Owen responds: "She wants them herself...she wants to feel they're hers...If she can't get them she doesn't want anything at all" (142). Nonetheless, Mona's all-or-nothing attitude towards the property and Owen also emphasizes the value of the wholeness of the collection. Poynton's social power-symbol as an English country house only operates when the property remains intact and the family displays a unified front. Despite her spiritual connection with Poynton and Mrs. Gereth, Fleda occasionally against Mrs. Gereth's interests

to help Owen. This threatens their sororal communion in Poynton's thingness. When Owen tells Fleda, "I want you take from me...is the thing in the whole house that's the most beautiful and precious," "the 'gem of the collection,'" Fleda does not tell Mrs. Gereth of her intentions to remove an item from Poynton (208). In asking Fleda to remove "something of real value," Owen unwittingly spoils Poynton's value by separating it from itself. Fleda's participation in this separation reflects her attempt to help Owen take his things back from his mother. Though Mrs. Gereth is the creator of Poynton, Fleda reflects, "she was herself the great piece in the gallery" (81). In removing Mrs. Gereth from Poynton, Owen displaces the "something of real value" in the home. The fact that Fleda's furtive visit to Poynton to extract the Maltese cross occurs at the same time a large conflagration consumes the house reflects her contribution to Mrs. Gereth's displacement. Without the touch and appreciation of the mother, the power of the house's "thingness" is lost.

James suggests that Poynton burns because it has lost its "thingness," life and power in its loss of Mrs. Gereth. Mrs. Gereth is the rightful owner of Poynton because of her self-identification with and creation of the collection. When Poynton's things are turned over to Mona and Owen, they leave the realm of the metaphysical and enter that of materiality and commodity exchange. The couple cannot see, feel or understand the pleasure and *ars erotica* within Poynton; thus, the house will not disclose its secrets. In building a sororal relationship around their shared spiritual connection with Poynton's things, Mrs. Gereth and Fleda establish the strongest physical and emotional connection within the novel. If these two women cannot receive pleasure through the aesthetic appreciation and ownership of the precious things, then Owen and Mona will not have the opportunity to profane them. In its consideration of inheritance, property transference and marriage, *Spoils* exposes the wrongful inequality of legal ownership through its preference towards ownership based on spiritual connection and pleasure.

IV. The Sisterhood of Howards End

It is monstrous, Miss Schlegel; it isn't right...To be parted from your house, your father's house—it oughtn't to be allowed. It is worse than dying. I would rather die than—Oh, poor

girls! Can what they call civilization be right, if people mayn't die in the room where they were born? My dear, I am so sorry—" (Forster 62).

Howards End (1910) by E.M. Forster details the attempted transference of property between two unlikely women. Mrs. Wilcox is an older English mother and wife, whose passion for her ancestral home, Howards End, transcends the physical focus of her materialistic-minded family. On the other hand, Margaret Schlegel is a young, unmarried, bohemian woman of German descent who raises her orphaned sister and brother. Both women possess strong spirits and, though each commands their family's respect in different ways, they serve as the level-minded authority figures within their respective homes. Their friendship comes at an opportune time: Mrs. Wilcox seeks a spiritual heir to inherit Howards End, while Margaret's home, Wickham place, is being pulled down and converted into profitable flats. Though Margaret assures Mrs. Wilcox that "there is nothing distinctive about" Wickham Place and that the Schlegels "shall soon find another" home, Mrs. Wilcox feels the weight of Margaret's loss and becomes "inclined to hysteria" (62). For the imaginative Mrs. Wilcox, houses are not easily replaceable buildings. She attaches spiritual, existential importance to homes that have been inhabited by families for generations. Reflecting on when Howards End was nearly pulled down, Mrs. Wilcox admits that the house's destruction "would have killed me" (62). Mrs. Wilcox's reaction demonstrates her metaphysical connection with Howards End. No longer tied to the spirits of the past, the impermanent homes that crowd London serve as transient commercial stopping places. To Mrs. Wilcox, "to be parted from your house... is worse than dying," as it separates a person from one's very soul and sense of place in the ever-changing modern world.

Though Mrs. Wilcox bequeaths her beloved family home to Margaret, the Wilcox family explicitly disregards her request, deciding to keep Howards End within the family. The text considers the political implications of property transfer outside of the family and challenges the Wilcox's decision to override a woman's dying wishes. Forster suggests that the true inheritor of Howards End and should be its spiritual owner, as opposed to its familial descendent, challenging orthodox understandings of property rights. Ruth Wilcox, the family's ethereal mother, animates her ancestral

home, *Howards End*, with a spiritual aura. According to Barbara Morden, *Howards End* can be read as a “condition of England novel,” meaning that the text contains a “sustained metaphor in which the topography of landscape, gardens and houses, as well as family relationships and interpersonal dynamics signify the state of the nation at a time of crisis and change” (Morden). In England, the question of female property ownership remained an issue of concern. Forster allegorically addresses the nation’s uncertainty about female property rights and the inheritance of England in *Howards End*.

As a work of literature, *Howards End* serves as a microscope under which to scrutinize privileged laws governing the transfer of property rights to women at the turn of the century. Forster’s novel negotiates social anxieties through the possession of property, specifically of *Howards End*.^{xx} Property rights have the ability to sustain or disrupt dominant relations of power, wealth and identity, transforming property into “a site of politics and contestation” (Bruun xv-xvi). The contested claims over *Howards End* embody a larger social struggle in England. Torn between feminine spiritual and masculine legal ownership, *Howards End* is caught up in the question of equitable property distribution. By animating inheritance issues over *Howards End* and placing the property at the center of the novel, Forster suggests that whoever gains possession of *Howards End*, also gains possession of the power that accompanies property ownership in England.

The Wilcox family embodies materialism and capitalism. Henry Wilcox, the father and patriarch of the Wilcox family, and Charles Wilcox, the eldest son, are implicit in the family’s materiality. The Wilcox’s lack both an appreciation for and spiritual connection with *Howards End*; instead, they are motivated by a purely materialistic desire to own and possess the property. They wish to add it to their large collection of uninhabited homes. Emblems of the modern imperial spirit, the Wilcox men seek to possess as much land and capital as possible, namely as colonizers at the “offices of the Imperial and West African Rubber Company” (141). Forster describes these offices as indistinguishable from “the Porphyryion, or Dempster’s Bank...Everything seems just alike in these days” (141). Evoking images of these interchangeable capital giants, the text demonstrates the emotional distance placed between the Wilcox men and the oppression at the source of their wealth.

Instead, they divide West Africa up on a “map...looking like a whale marked out for blubber” (141). Devoid of spiritual attachment to any place, the Wilcox men treat their property in England with as much detachment as they do West Africa, considering Howards End just another material possession. Symbolically associated with the modern motorcars they drive, the men hurtle into the future, blocking out the “dim, bucolic past” (146). Unlike Ruth Wilcox, Henry and Charles Wilcox champion materialism, extol the external, and reject the past.^{xxi}

Far more connected with the past, Ruth Wilcox, the original owner of Howards End, embodies the metaphysical aspect of female ownership. The first time Forster introduces the reader to Ruth Wilcox, she is described as “trailing noiselessly over the lawn...She seemed to belong not to the young people and their motor, but to the house, and to the tree that overshadowed it” (18). Unlike the Wilcox men, Ruth has no association with the “motor.” Her identity blends in beautifully with the nature and life of Howards End. The text likens her to “the house” and ancient “tree” of Howards End, demonstrating her close connection with the property, her spiritual center. Forster continues to characterize Ruth as a woman who “worshipped the past,” “cared about her ancestors” and possessed an “instinctive wisdom the past can alone bestow” (18). This ethereal and metaphysical character is in communion with England’s ancestors and past recalls forgotten Platonic idealism. These descriptions emphasize the importance of the mind and soul over the external, material body, something that the Wilcox men and much of England have buried. Her relationship to Howards End as a both physical and metaphysical place, as a “thing,” conveys its power. Mrs. Wilcox’s decision to defy social and legal customs by bequeathing Howards End to Margaret demonstrates their shared appreciation for this “thingness.”

The fact that Mrs. Wilcox is able to own and control property as a woman stems from the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870 and 1882. Though the Wilcox family visits Howards End, the property clearly belongs to Mrs. Wilcox as opposed to her husband. As opposed to threatening the established family structure, Mrs. Wilcox’s ownership mediates tensions within the family. Despite continued anxiety about the female’s proprietary role, Mrs. Wilcox serves as the most caring and

competent owner in the novel. Neither her family nor society questions her ownership of Howards End. Her status as the property's legally and socially acknowledged proprietor, impossible for Isabel Archer in *Portrait* thirty years ago, reflects England's increasing acceptance of women's property rights.

Forster employs religious rhetoric when detailing Ruth Wilcox's relationship with her home, which she considers the spiritual epicenter of her own life as well as of the lives of her ancestors. Ruth's obsession with Howards End is not materialistic in nature. The home has been passed down in her family for generations and serves as a manifestation of the sacred—or, what Mircea Eliade might call, her “Axis Mundi”^{xxii}—than a mere house bought and sold in the consumer marketplace. The spiritual animation of Howards End and its connections to the distant past suggest its connection to the primordial human, which infuses material objects with metaphysical power. Infused with these religious properties, Howards End is a place that Mrs. Wilcox spiritually prioritizes above all else, including her family. Her time with Mrs. Wilcox causes Margaret to conclude: “Mrs. Wilcox, though a loving wife and mother, had only one passion in life—her house—and that the moment was solemn when she invited a friend to share this passion with her... ‘Another day’ will do for brick and mortar, but not for the Holy of Holies into which Howards End had been transfigured” (18). Mrs. Wilcox values her property above her family. Though she loves her children and husband, Mrs. Wilcox's only deep “passion in life” is her house. Ironically, the domestic space itself becomes valued over the domestic duties Mrs. Wilcox is expected to perform within it. This change in valuation reflects the change in women's identities through property ownership. Though continuing to perform domestic duties as a “loving wife and mother,” a woman establishes and controls her own passions and can invite other women to share them with her without the permission and observation of her husband.

The passage above contains religious language, pointing towards Mrs. Wilcox's spiritual communion with her property. Just as the Church is more than “brick and mortar,” Howards End occupies a similarly spiritual place for Mrs. Wilcox. This emphasis on the spirit over the external physicality of the house reflects Platonic idealism, which posits that the soul is superior to the material body.^{xxiii} As materialist and scientific theories began taking precedence in the modern world, Platonic

idealism, upon which Christianity and other Western religions are based, was deemed questionable and even false because these ideas could not be physically observed and empirically studied (Angelov, “Natural Religion”). Everything, including the body, became reduced to the materially observable, to “brick and mortar.” Yet, despite the materialistic pressures of society, Mrs. Wilcox “transfigure[s]” *Howards End* into “the Holy of Holies,” language evoking Judeo-Christian imagery.^{xxiv} Both the phrase “transfigured” and “the Holy of Holies” emphasize *Howards End* as a sacred location, central to Mrs. Wilcox’s spirituality. These religious allusions also refer to the past spirituality of mankind, suggesting that *Howards End* and Mrs. Wilcox are connected to past religious figures and locations.

While women had made progress, their gender limited their access to property ownership and income, making independence difficult. However, through property ownership, Forster suggests women can transcend this highly materialistic and constrained view of gender and take pleasure in their own minds and company. The superiority Forster attributes to Mrs. Wilcox’s spirituality compared to her husband’s materiality signals his optimism about the spiritual transcendence of material confines through social and legal change. *Howards End* serves as Mrs. Wilcox’s oasis in a world that otherwise seeks to “other” and control her body.^{xxv} While Forster employs Judeo-Christian rhetoric to describe Mrs. Wilcox’s relationship with *Howards End*, he also suggests that the spirituality of the home reaches further back into the past.

Howards End contains elements of superstition and magic, aspects of polytheistic religions erased by the spread of Christianity. The ancient wych-elm at *Howards End* serves as a symbol of Mrs. Wilcox’s home’s connection—and thus, her spiritual connection—to England’s even more distant past. Mrs. Wilcox explains to Margaret, “There are pigs’ teeth stuck into the trunk... The country people put them in long ago, and they think that if they chew a piece of the bark, it will cure the toothache” (54). Their superstitious actions assign “the country people” to the past in an increasingly modern world. Mrs. Wilcox continues to explain, “The teeth are almost grown over now, and no one comes to the tree” (54). Just as religious superstition, ungrounded in empirical evidence, has become an antiquated practice, so too will living in the country, away from the consumer culture enveloping London, where

the Wilcoxes have a series of flats. Valuing animism and spiritual connections, Mrs. Wilcox is likened to an ancient priestess at Howards End. The emphasis is on spiritual beauty as opposed to physical appearance, allowing Mrs. Wilcox to communicate with gods through her property, a function purposefully and orthodoxly limited to men in order to maintain gendered power dynamics. Mrs. Wilcox's ability to step outside the traditional constraints of gender identity speaks to the ways property ownership permits married women to operate independently of their familial and social expectations.

Mrs. Wilcox decides to transfer Howards End to a "spiritual heir," who shares her appreciation for the house's "thingness." She finds her successor in Margaret, who shares her imagination and ability to see beyond the materiality that has infested modern London. Margaret befriends Mrs. Wilcox during her illness. While Christmas shopping together, the older woman's desire "to give you something worth your acquaintance, Miss Schlegel" (60). Margaret responds, "you cannot pay me back with anything tangible...I want more people, but no more things" (60). Surrounded by the "vulgarity" of "vacillating shoppers and tired shop-assistants" forgetful "that it was a divine even that that drew them together," Margaret does not want any more wasteful material products. Fortunately, Mrs. Wilcox's exchange cannot be bought or sold; it can only be freely given. Howards End's animistic qualities and connection to the spiritual make home intangible, almost human. In the same scene, Mrs. Wilcox is appalled to discover that Margaret is looking for a new house, as her landlord plans to tear down Wickham place. She insists "more vehemently than ever" that Margaret, "Come down with me to Howards End now...I want you to see it. You have never seen it. I want to hear what you say about it, for you do put things so wonderfully" (62-3). Highlighting the importance of Margaret seeing Howards End, the text links houses and appreciation through sight. Just as Mrs. Gereth insists that Fleda see Poynton in order to truly understand the beauty of the house, Mrs. Wilcox longs for Margaret to see Howards End. The text suggests Mrs. Wilcox wants Margaret to articulate the existential and unseen that characterizes Howards End. At first declining Mrs. Wilcox's offer, Margaret begins to experience the "imprisonment" of the "Satanic" city (63). London's "infernal sky" and narrow "streets oppressing like the galleries of a mine" instantly overcome her (63). Much like the frightening sense of

imprisonment that overcomes Isabel in Warburton's house, and "darkening of the spirit" that characterizes Isabel's experience within Osmond's oppressing house, Margaret views the city as a confinement upon her imagination. But, her "imagination triumphed" (64). Margaret chases after Mrs. Wilcox, "a woman of undefineable rarity," eager to join her on this "queer and imaginative" adventure to her precious ancestral home. Unfortunately, the Wilcox family interrupts the two women as they prepare to board the train into the country. Involved in a "motor smash," the Wilcoxes leave Margaret "alone" on the train platform "before imagination could triumph" (64-5). The next chapter opens with the death of Mrs. Wilcox, and Margaret never accompanies her newfound friend to Howards End. Nonetheless, apparently moved by Margaret's dispossession and imaginative spirit, Mrs. Wilcox bequeaths her Howards End. Problems arise when the matriarch finds her spiritual counterpart outside of her family. Mrs. Wilcox's attempt to transfer Howards End to Margaret sparks her family's fierce opposition. In political terms, this attempted transference of spiritual property to a woman outside of the family circle and English heritage challenges the traditional power and economic distribution upheld by laws for centuries.

Margaret values the metaphysical idealism that Ruth champions, but does not live solely in the past. Margaret's response to Mrs. Wilcox's story about the wych-elm marks her spiritual kinship to the older women, as well as her ability to recognize the value of certain aspects of modernity, making her a perfect spiritual heir to the property. Margaret answers that she "love[s] folklore and all festering superstitions" (54). Further, when Mrs. Wilcox asks her "Do you think that the tree really did cure toothache, if one believed in it?" Margaret explains, "Of course it did. It would cure anything—once" (54). This dialogue is symbolically loaded for many reasons. The reader discovers that Margaret shares Mrs. Wilcox's appreciation for folklore and superstitions, instead of merely deeming them outdated. However, by describing superstitions as "festering," Margaret reveals her belief that superstition can quickly become more intense and potentially dangerous when fueled by anxiety or the exertion of power, such as ideas of racial or gendered inferiority. Furthermore her inclusion of the word "once," suggests that she is skeptical the wych-elm still possesses its magical properties, as people have now

placed their belief in science, turning to medicine to cure toothaches. This demonstrates the dwindling belief in spiritualism and animism in the modern world, yet Margaret's belief in its potential for power. The text characterizes Margaret as occupying a liminal space, bridging a gap between the old and the new.

Though Margaret shares Mrs. Wilcox's spiritual bent, as a modern woman, she possesses the faculty for self-expression. In this way, she resembles Isabel's American independent mind as opposed to the silent submission of the Misses Molyneuxes, suggesting an expanded range of self-expression for women residing in England. Margaret rants to Mrs. Wilcox about her "inexperience" in the world, concluding her monologue by apologizing because she has "started preaching!" (55). Mrs. Wilcox sympathizes with Margaret's "preaching," telling the younger woman that she, "put the difficulties of life splendidly...it is just what I should have liked to say about them myself" (55). While Mrs. Wilcox struggles to articulate her position on life, Margaret adroitly theorizes and expresses her views. She verbalizes the very sentiments that Mrs. Wilcox feels, but cannot put into words. Mrs. Wilcox's inability to articulate herself signals to the affects of growing up a woman in the Victorian era, when ladies learned to listen to the desires of others, but not express their own. Considered in light of her spirituality, Mrs. Wilcox's struggle to actively participate in the conversation reflects the marginalized domain of faith and metaphysical discussions in the modern world. While she refuses to be converted to materialism by her family, her views are overshadowed by the dominant discourse of consumerism and Imperialism. Margaret's ability to verbalize her position marks her as different than Mrs. Wilcox. Without the feminine values and constraints that characterize Mrs. Wilcox's youth, Margaret is more equipped to assert her place in the world, which proves invaluable later in the text when she occupies *Howards End* in defiance of Mr. Wilcox's orders.

Though Margaret does not visit *Howards End* until after Mrs. Wilcox dies, the older woman realizes her completion in Margaret. The text emphasizes the strength of sororal bonds through powerful female relationships. Unlike the women in *Portrait and Spoils*, the text's central three female characters—Margaret, Helen and Mrs. Wilcox—employ property to support one another. As Helen tells

her sister, “You and I have built up something real, because it is purely spiritual” (140). This summation of their relationship extends to Mrs. Wilcox’s relationship with Margaret; they too shared a spiritual kinship. In *Margaret Fuller: Whetstone of Genius*, Mason Wade writes on sororal relationships in the nineteenth and twentieth century:

It is so true that a woman may be in love with a woman and a man with a man. It is pleasant to be sure of it, because it is undoubtedly the same love that we shall feel when we are angels... It is regulated by the same laws as that of love between persons of different sexes, only it is purely intellectual and spiritual, unprofaned by any mixture of lower instincts... its law is the desire of spirit to realize a whole, which makes it seek in another being that which it finds not in itself. (Wade 90-1).

The laws governing Mrs. Wilcox and Margaret’s relationship are not those of the state. They operate in a “purely intellectual and spiritual” realm. Much like Mrs. Gereth and the men in *Portrait*, Mrs. Wilcox expresses “the desire of spirit to realize a whole.” While she finds this in *Howards End*, she recognizes that her property will lose its completion and perfection upon her death without a spiritual mistress to love and live in the house. Mrs. Wilcox instinctively feels her spiritual union with Margaret. Unlike Mrs. Gereth, she is unconcerned with the aesthetic material value of her home. Instead, she recognizes it as a safe-haven for women and a site of sororal spirituality.

Mrs. Wilcox’s unorthodox decision sparks disbelief and outrage within her family, who refuses to follow her deathbed wishes. Her husband and children point out the incongruity of this transference of property to justify overriding the woman’s direct expression of her desire for Margaret to inherit *Howards End*. As materialists, they observe the physical, observable differences between Mrs. Wilcox and Margaret Schlegel. Mrs. Wilcox is an older English woman, mother and wife, who does not want to vote and thinks “action and discussion” should be left to men (58). On the contrary, Margaret is a modern woman: she is young, talkative, debates art, and serves as the head of her family. Once more, the two women belong to different families and do not become friends until the very end of Mrs. Wilcox’s life. Given the surface-level differences between the women, the Wilcoxes refuse to believe that Mrs. Wilcox intentionally leaves *Howards End* to Margaret. Continuing to point to material reasons for Mrs. Wilcox’s decision, her family claims she must have written her wishes “in illness,” as “it was contrary to the dead woman’s intentions in the past, contrary to her very nature, so far as that

nature was understood by them” (73). Yet, as Forster demonstrates, the Wilcoxes do not “understand” Mrs. Wilcox’s “very nature” or “intentions” because they evaluate her nature through their own lens, without attempting to sympathize with her spirit. Her daughter, Evie, ironically claims, ““Mother believed in ancestors too—it isn’t like her to leave anything to an outsider, who’d never appreciate” (74). It is because Mrs. Wilcox “believed in ancestors” that she chooses to leave Howards End to someone who will spiritually “appreciate” the home, even if that someone is “an outsider” to her family and the English tradition.

While the text marks an increased appreciation for motherhood from *Spoils*, the mother’s desires are still overruled by her family and the law. The Wilcox family realize that “something unique had fallen out [their] life,” as they lost a woman they could “never replace” (69). Lacking connection to “the personal note in life,” the family suffers “panic and emptiness” when Mrs. Wilcox dies; her children suffer the most, “as a wife may be replaced; a mother never” (69). The role Mrs. Wilcox plays as mother reflects the importance of the domestic space to her family, who look to her as the spiritual head of their family. Without Mrs. Wilcox to hold the family together, the text suggests that they become overwhelmed by the emptiness of their material lives, “suffer[ing] acutely” (67). Despite their intense love for Mrs. Wilcox, Mr. Wilcox and the children do not appreciate the meaning behind her desire to transfer Howards End to Margaret. Their inability to understand the moral principles behind Mrs. Wilcox’s wish reiterates their failure to see beyond the materiality of Howards End, further confirming their mother’s decision to name Margaret the home’s heir.

Considering Mrs. Wilcox’s existential difference from her materialist family, she might, in fact, be considered “an outsider” of both the family unit and English society as a whole. Forster explains:

To them Howards End was a house: they could not know that to her it had been a spirit, for which she sought a spiritual heir. And—pushing one step farther in these mists—may they not have decided even better than they supposed? Is it credible that the possessions of the spirit can be bequeathed at all? Has the soul offspring? A wych-elm tree, a vine, a wisp of hay with dew on it—can passion for such things be transmitted where there is no bond of blood? (74)

Mrs. Wilcox seeks a “spiritual heir” to inherit “her spirit,” Howards End, a role that her biological family cannot assume. As she disregards the idea of biological inheritance, Mrs. Wilcox simultaneously

disregards the laws of primogeniture, which transform property into a status symbol, reserving ownership for an elite few regardless of their appreciation for the home itself. To Mrs. Wilcox, it is irrelevant that she and Margaret share “no bond of blood” or that Margaret is of German heritage. Mrs. Wilcox wishes to transmit her “passion” and “possessions of [her] spirit” to a woman she considers her “soul[‘s] offspring” and “spiritual heir.” While the Wilcoxes may enjoy physically possessing Howards End, they will not spiritually understand the house. Their valuation of Howards End is purely material, which Mrs. Wilcox “rebukes” in her unofficial documentation of her wishes. In her article, “Only Connect: Howards End and Theories of Justice,” Melanie Williams writes, “Though the assumption underlying familial transmission of realty is historically defensible (to protect family interests from the acquisitive interloper), the attempted redistribution of realty beyond the family in this book is a powerful rebuke of a faltering valuation of spiritual place and nascent feminine autonomy” (Williams 256). Forster reminds readers that law is the product of political intentions. Strictly governing property transfer, inheritance, gender relations and ownership through laws, the state seeks to exert control over the bodies and minds of its people. As law becomes embedded in practice, it appears customary, becoming a false sign of the Natural or Historical and thus, unchangeable. Through upending traditional understandings of property inheritance, the text suggests that the rightful owner of Howards End is Mrs. Wilcox and Margaret, who appreciate the spiritual place as a space for feminine independence. The Wilcoxes’ objection to Mrs. Wilcox’s desire to redistribute Howards End to Margaret reflects traditional patrilineal expectations. Especially infuriated at his mother’s note as the eldest son, Charles wishes he could “deal with” Margaret, who he believes, or would like to believe, manipulated Mrs. Wilcox. In accordance with tradition, the Wilcoxes see family connection as the only legitimate reason for inheritance, demonstrating their inability to envision Howards End as a spiritual space as opposed to a mere material property. Significantly, the family outwardly objects to Margaret as a “German cosmopolitan,” as opposed to as a woman. Nonetheless, the text underscores the latent presence of married women property rights, as Mrs. Wilcox’s family undermines her desires by citing the patrilineal laws of property and Mr. Wilcox’s true ownership over the property. Given Mrs.

Wilcox's blatant disregard for societal standards and norms, her family not only disregards her intentions, but also burns her scribbled note, erasing the visible traces of her property transference.

Her family's nullifying response to Mrs. Wilcox's desire further demonstrates their association with materialism, capitalism and gender inequality. They deem her desire to bequeath Howards End to Margaret as "treacherous to the family, to the laws of property, to her own written word... Was her husband, to whom it legally belonged, to make it over to her as a free gift?" (74). Though Mrs. Wilcox wants to transfer her property to a female, spiritual heir, the property legally transfers to Mr. Wilcox upon his wife's death. Experiencing a period of uncertainty, wherein Mr. Wilcox debates his moral obligations to his wife's wishes, he ultimately decides to uphold his legal claim to Howards End. By defying social and cultural standards, Mrs. Wilcox is considered a traitor to not only her family, but to the mythos of the English state. Blatantly disregarding "laws of property," she expresses her transcendence of the material world and its rigid, spiritually restrictive patriarchal laws. "That note, scribbled in pencil, sent through the matron, was unbusinesslike as well as cruel, and decreased at once the value of the woman who had written it" (74). Describing Mrs. Wilcox's "value" as "decreased" at once speaks to the power and defensiveness of capitalism. Since she attempts to undermine the system, it strips her of her authority. Her property belongs to her until she threatens the social order that the dominant, materialist English myth champions. Although the note clearly conveys Mrs. Wilcox's wishes, the family concludes that it is "not legally binding" because of surface-level, material technicalities: it has "no date, no signature," is "scribbled in pencil" and "houses ought to be done by a lawyer" (Forster 74). Because "legally, [Mr. Wilcox] should be justified in tearing it up and throwing it into the fire," he does just that (74). The legal standard trumps "a personal appeal," something that Forster admits, "the practical moralist may acquit...absolutely," but "he who strives to look deeper" may question (74). As a function of the patriarchal symbolic order, the law is on the side of the Wilcox family as opposed to Mrs. Wilcox, championing the materialist and patriarchal society that initially overrides Mrs. Wilcox's attempt to bequeath her property to her spiritual heir. Yet, Margaret's eventual

assumption of Howards End reveals that Mrs. Wilcox's spirit prevails, burning brighter than the fire that seeks to extinguish it.

The spiritual connection between Mrs. Wilcox and Margaret is solidified later in the novel, when Margaret marries Henry Wilcox, Mrs. Wilcox's widowed husband. She literally assumes the name "Mrs. Wilcox," Mrs. Wilcox's position within the Wilcox family, and, at last, Howards End. Margaret uses Howards End as a refuge when Helen, pregnant out of wedlock, needs a safe place to stay. Mr. Wilcox's insists that Helen can no longer "remain in society," but the sisters discover that Howards End is everything London is not: a place for peace, understanding and human connection (212). While Margaret's assumption of property reflects power of metaphysical to transcend legal boundaries, it simultaneously undermines the extent to which the novel challenges principles of inheritance and spiritual property distribution. Margaret inherits Howards End, but must do so within the traditional legal confines of marriage. Nonetheless, this marks an important break from earlier novels, including *Spoils*, in which Fleda, the spiritual heir to Poynton, is deprived of physical property ownership. At the same time, if Fleda had married Owen, she would likely find herself in a similar position as the owner of Poynton through her husband. Thus, while Margaret's eventual ownership of Howards End distinguishes this narrative from earlier novels, the fact that she acquires it through the legal system slightly undermines this accomplishment.

While the Wilcox men observe Helen's pregnancy and condemn the source of life within her, Margaret sees the beauty in the life of her sister's body and unborn child, even if the child has been conceived outside of hegemonic social standards. Her sincere "belief in the eternity of beauty" causes Margaret to criticize the futile attempts of Mr. Mansbridge, a doctor that attempts to categorize and "solve" natural bodily events, such as Helen's pregnancy and death of the father of her unborn child, Leonard Bast (234). Margaret reflects that, "Science explained people, but it could not understand them" (234). This understanding, essential to Forster's message for people to connect with each other on a spiritual level, takes patience, time and a willingness to learn from the past, while looking towards the future.

Margaret's sororal relationship with her sister mirrors her relationship with Mrs. Wilcox, which is similarly founded upon a spiritual female understanding. Within the safety of Howards End, the sisters reflect upon how though they feel like "a couple of...affectionate tourists," sitting below the wych-elm makes it easy to forget that they are "tourists who pretend each hotel is their home" (223). Though this reflects Madame Merle's assertion in *Portrait* that, "a woman, it seems to me, has no natural place anywhere," *Howards End* reverses this claim, as Margaret and Helen assume their place within the home by the end of the novel. Though they feel estranged from England and Germany, Howards End serves as a liminal, untouchable haven for the sisters. Miss Avery, the home's mysterious attendant, has preemptively unpacked the Schlegel's books and furniture. With their things in it, Helen reflects that "the hall seems more alive even in the old days, when it held the Wilcoxes' own things" (209). Admiring Miss Avery's decoration of Howards End with the Schlegel's things, Helen inquires, "This *is* Mr. Wilcox's house?" (211). Though the legal property of Mr. Wilcox, Howards End becomes the Schlegel's thanks to Miss Avery's fulfillment of Mrs. Wilcox's wishes. Observing the "curious" way "the carpet fits," the placement of their "mother's cheffonier," and their father's "sword" (211). Though Margaret tells Miss Avery that she "never intended [her property] to be touched," though arranging the Schlegel's things at Howards End, Miss Avery fills the house's emptiness. Her actions inspire the sisters to reconnect by reflecting on "the knowledge that they could never be parted because their love was rooted in common things" and past (212). The material presence of their things allows the sisters to realize their spiritual connection with one another, reminding them that, "all the time their salvation was lying round them" in each other. Faced with law and traditions of England, they refuse to cede their position to the outdated customs that seek to punish Helen for adultery, but not Henry Wilcox. Inside of Howards End, the sisters reconnect: "the inner life had paid" (212). In "The Life of Things in the Place of Howards End," Russel Rankin follows Forster's attention to the connective properties of things. Rankin demonstrates that in *Howards End* and in several essays, such as "For the Museum's Sake," "In My Library," "The London Library," and "Does Culture Matter?" Forster suggests that, "Knowing the life of cultural things (especially those handed down generationally), experiencing

true intimacy with them, leads ineluctably to knowing others who similarly know such things and apprehend their narrative lives. Properly perceiving and experiencing thinghood can therefore enable us to form real community with others, creating an interest in their wellbeing and encouraging us to care for them” (204). Mrs. Gereth and Margaret’s shared appreciation for the Howards End transform it into a “thing” that connects them. Margaret eventually assumes the behaviors, name and property of Mrs. Gereth, much like a son within the patrilineal tradition inherits the behaviors, name and property of his father. Forming a matrilineal community around the metaphysical “thingness” of Howards End, the women carve out a sacred female place within the material modern world for spiritual transcendence.

Interestingly, the men in Howards End fail to exert control over property, their own lives or the lives of others. Charles, like Owen, lacks an appreciation for his mother’s house. Yet, “though he disliked the house, [he] was determined to defend it” (220). In order to get Helen “out of the way before she disgraced [the Wilcoxes] further,” Charles tracks down Tibby, the Schlegel’s leisurely younger brother, appealing him to act as his “sister’s protector” (220). Though Tibby “without intending it...betrayed his sister’s confidence” by providing Charles with Leonard Bast’s name, his mistake predicates the impending downfall of Charles. The text points to the men’s lack of spiritual communion with each other and Howards End as the source of their failure to exert their authority over Mrs. Wilcox, Miss Avery and the Schlegel sisters. Though the women present a united spiritual and economic front through the transference and maintenance of Howards End, as Charles reflects, “the gulf between [he and Tibby] was economic as well as spiritual” (220). When Charles murders Leonard in an act of manslaughter, he and his father can no longer continue avoiding the consequences of their aggression. The insurance company cannot cover Leonard’s death with capital. No longer able to leave “a little dust and a little money behind,” Charles is sent to prison (178). After working “very hard all his life” and “notic[ing] nothing,” Henry is left speechless, without the ability to produce and control signs and participate in the discourse of English power.

Left in control of Howards End, Margaret lives there with Helen, her young son and the now passive Mr. Wilcox. In embracing her sister’s pregnancy and helping her raise her child at Howards

End, Margaret continues Mrs. Wilcox's tradition of treating Howards End as a spiritual oasis outside of the material world. Forster suggests that the women's possession of Howards End reflects their newfound self-possession of both their bodies and legal identities. "I feel that our house is the future as well as the past," Margaret remarks at the end of the novel, suggesting that the physical and spiritual oppression of women is not Natural or Historical, but manmade (240). England's past and future are both embodied in Howards End, and the Schlegel sisters can lead an independent life within this sacred female space. While the women occupy and control Howards End, Helen remarks, "London's creeping," pointing to "red rust" peaking out from behind the end of the rural meadow. Associated with modernity's craze for motion, capitalistic ideology and consumerism, London threatens the peaceful space of Howards End. In the last sentence of the novel, Helen exclaims: "We've seen to the very end, and it'll be such a crop as never" (243). A literal reading of this statement reveals that there may never be a crop as large as the current crop again. The city is consuming the rural and ideal space. Though Margaret and Helen enjoy their privileged proprietary positions, the text suggests that like the tide, women's sanctity in property will be threatened again.

While Mrs. Wilcox, Margaret and Helen seem drawn towards the past and infuse objects with imaginative spirit, their masculine modern counterparts reduce everything to its material worth. Forster approaches the question of female property ownership and legitimate inheritance in his novel through the ownership and transference of Howards End, a property that embodies the past, present and future state of England. As the Wilcox men demonstrate in their loss of identity once the modern world catches up to them, there are significant cultural implications in the lack of a metaphysical, idealist core. Without the ability to connect spiritually with others, the world is reduced to simple scientific observations, categorizations and a sense of meaningless nothingness.

Through drawing upon her metaphysical vantage point, Margaret is able to navigate and produce a new women's mythology, one that draws upon the importance of the past and the spirit, while reconciling itself to the unknown and seemingly unstoppable force of capitalism and consumer culture. As Nicholas Blomley writes, "To remake property relations is to remake the relations that make

space and place” (xv). *Howards End* suggests that women possess the ability to save England from the meaningless of the physical and material modern world, if society only gives them the space and place to initiate change.

Unlike Isabel Archer and Mrs. Gereth, Margaret Schlegel achieves control over Howards End due to generations of female cooperation towards property ownership. Though her legal possession of the property flows from her marriage to Mr. Wilcox, she becomes a matriarchal figure of this home, taking responsibility over her sister, her nephew and Mr. Wilcox’s spiritual wellbeing. *Howards End* suggests that Miss Avery and Mrs. Wilcox, women from the previous generation who loved Howards End, ensured that the Schlegel sisters would inherit the house. Characterizing Mrs. Wilcox as an omniscient goddess, Margaret tells Helen, “Except Mrs. Wilcox, dearest, no one understands our little movements...She knows everything. She is everything. She is the house, and the tree that leans over it...She knew about realities. She knew when people were in love, though she was not in the room” (222-3). The mysterious, omnipotent presence of Mrs. Wilcox within the house suggests that she has metaphysically guided Margaret and Helen to Howards End. A similarly omniscient older woman, Miss Avery unpacks the Schlegel sister’s belongings, refusing to obey any one in the Wilcox family besides Margaret. As the prophetic force, symbolic attendant or, perhaps, reincarnation of Mrs. Wilcox, Miss Avery stands as the guardian angel over Howards End. Calling Margaret “Mrs. Wilcox” and working for the Schlegel sisters during their first night at Howards End, Miss Avery executes Mrs. Wilcox’s desire even when her family refuses to do so (223). Her presence almost frightens Margaret, who feels “it is disquieting fulfill a prophecy” (215).

The text implies that generations of past women have made women’s property rights realities in England. While Mrs. Wilcox and Miss Avery seem to supernaturally conspire to ensure the sisters’ inheritance, their associations with the past imply the efforts of women throughout history to gain self-possession through property rights. This trans-generational sororal bond connects the four women spiritually through their shared pleasure in and appreciation for Howards End. Though the members of the past generations of women may appear silent and passive, their actions culminate in the Schlegel

sisters' possession of Howards End and Helen's self-possession over her own body. Helen tells Margaret: "We know this is our house, because it feels ours. Oh, they may take the title-deeds and the doorkeys, but for this one night we are at home" (214). While the novel's male characters still possess legal ownership over Howards End, the novel ends with the Schlegel sisters peacefully living at the house that "feels ours." Unlike Isabel Archer, Mrs. Gereth and Fleda Vetch, Mrs. Wilcox and Margaret conquer the system through shared spirituality. The sororal bond the women share allows Margaret to end the novel as the spiritual heir and legal owner of Howards End. In the last chapter of the novel, Mr. Wilcox makes legal arrangements with his family to "leave Howards End to my wife absolutely" (241). Margaret reflects that, "there was something uncanny in her triumph" (242). The text implicitly attributes this uncanny factor of Margaret's position as legal and spiritual owner of Howards End to Mrs. Wilcox. As Dolly nervously contributes the family discussion, "It does seem curious that Mrs. Wilcox should have left Margaret Howards End, and yet she get it, after all" (242). Unaware of Mrs. Wilcox's intentions until then, Margaret discovers that the prophetic vision of female property ownership has come true.

Though the ambiguous end of Howards End conveys the uncertain future of married women's property rights, Helen speaks the last lines of the novel. Providing the novel's unmarried, idealistic mother with the final dialogue, Forster propels Mrs. Wilcox's prophecy, visualizing a future for women without the patriarchal laws and social customs of the past. The birth and presence of Helen's son implies that Margaret will bequeath the property to him when she dies. This boy would likely have never have assumed property in the past as the "illegitimate" son of Helen and Leonard Bast, a lower-class metropolitan man. The descendent of yeomen, Bast spiritually returns to the country through his son, this time as a property owner. Though this child is not the product of a long patrilineal heritage of landed gentry, he will inherit the physical and metaphysical property of *Howards End*. In this way, the text predicts an abolishment of property barriers along class and gender lines, marking it as distinctively different than *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Spoils of Poynton*.

Transcending the oppressive constraints of legal property barriers with each novel, the novels' women experience an increasingly open and liberating relationship with property ownership. Ending with Margaret's spiritual and legal inheritance of Howards End, Forster's novel conclusion provides an optimistic vision of married women's property rights compared to the endings in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Spoils of Poynton*. In *Portrait*, Isabel obtains wealth legally through inheritance, which she immediately transfers to man, unwilling to use it herself. Without the stability of her own house or female guidance, Isabel is caged by the very wealth intended to free her. Though she legally possesses the wealth, her lack of spiritual connection to it results in her ruin. On the other hand, Mrs. Gereth and Fleda share a passionate affection towards Poynton's antiquities. Mrs. Gereth even admits that she would happily transfer the entire collection to Fleda, a woman who appreciates both her and her things. Despite their spiritual attachment to the treasures, the state provides Owen and Mona the legal rights to the things. The house seems to have intentions of its own, however, and burns down. This suggests the validity of Mrs. Gereth and Fleda's spiritual ownership, signaling to a slight improvement in women's property rights.

Unlike Isabel's inheritance of wealth, Margaret's inheritance of Howards End signals a freedom from the constraints of material masculine identity. Margaret gains full possessions of her property, identity and self. While Mrs. Gereth and Mrs. Wilcox both deeply connect with women over the metaphysical value of their possessions, only Mrs. Wilcox witnesses the eventual transference of her property to the woman she selects as her spiritual heir. Thus, Margaret's spiritual and legal assumption of Howards End bridges the gap between the two novels, signaling the transformation of married women's property rights in England over the forty-year timespan between *Portrait* and *Howards End*. As they gain further control over the spaces in which they feel spiritually attached, the Schlegel sisters experience a sense of self-ownership in 1910 that Isabel Archer would never imagine in the 1870s, but would certainly have enjoyed.

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ⁱ Though marriage was deemed "the only legitimate outlet for passion," the Victorians were enthralled with the sexuality of "the other" (59 White). The female body serves as one source of erotic curiosity.

ⁱⁱ This theory incorporates Lacan's theory of the imaginary order, which is first established through vision during the mirror stage, when a child first sees itself in a mirror. This moment marks an identification steeped in recognition and misrecognition: held up by its mother, the child mistakes its image as more complete and perfect than its body is in actuality. "Its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject, which, reintegrated as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others" (Mulvey 836).

ⁱⁱⁱ Marrying for property meant gaining access to wealth, as women often managed the family's finances and ran the home, yet women lived their lives for and within the domestic sphere (Branca).

^{iv} In “The Victorian Woman – Off the Pedestal and Into History,” Patricia Branca demonstrates that middle-class married women played major roles in the management of the home in the nineteenth century. However, historians generally agree that married women were expected to remain within the house.

^v In “Love, Marriage, and Divorce: The Matter of Sexuality in *The Portrait of a Lady*,” Robert White explains that “to spend” was the “nineteenth-century slang term for orgasm” (63). Isabel wishes to experience a union between “the movements of her own soul” and the “agitations of the world.” In short, she wants to make love to the world. The freedom she predicts at the beginning of the novel serves as spatially erotic for Isabel. This association returns later in the novel to explain Isabel’s attraction to Osmond as both sexual and attractive because it allows her to give her wealth to a man that will spend it for her in an aesthetically pleasing way.

^{vi} I want to define the term “aggressive observation” as active voyeurism, in which the man/woman’s pleasure in looking is felt on a physical and intimate level by the object of the gaze, compelling them to transform in some way, connecting it to the sensation of touch.

^{vii} James emphasizes the corporeal physicality of both men by likening them to the phallus. In his edited New York Edition of 1908, James indicates the phallic aggression of Goodwood’s presence: he had a “disagreeably strong push, a kind of hard presence, in his way of rising before her;” “He was tall, strong and somewhat stiff; he was also lean and brown” (James 42, 104-5). The forceful, phallic presence of this “fresh formidable figure” (James 112), “seemed to deprive her of her sense of freedom” by threatening to diminish her liberty (James 104). Similarly, James emphasizes Warburton’s sexual potency through phallic descriptions of his body, which “loomed up before her, largely and brightly” (James 95). Both Goodwood and Warburton’s physical displays of masculinity mirror Lacan’s theory of the symbolic order. Aligned with the superego and the phallus, the symbolic order follows the imaginary order and articulates desire (Felluga). Through language and signs, the symbolic order constitutes the social world of communication, ideology and acceptance of the law and contracts. The physiognomy of both men falls within the patriarchal symbolic order, articulating desire through their physical phallic presence. Yet, the symbolic order also marks and references “the traumatic moment of its birth: the castration complex,” which serves as a constant threat to the masculine identity (Mulvey 837). However, their physical potency and associations with the symbolic extend beyond their physiognomy and into the materiality of their property, which serves as an extension of their self-image and masculinity.

^{viii} Warburton’s houses lack the spirituality Isabel seeks. During their private tour of his property, Warburton “showed her the house” (James 75). Isabel decides that though some of the houses “best points had lost their purity” due to modernization, Lockleigh creates “a noble picture... as a castle in legend” (James 75). James includes Warburton’s brother, the Vicar of Lockleigh, in his description of the premises. This minor character fails to reappear in the novel, emphasizing his part in the physical presence of Lockleigh. While “the marks of the Vicar of Lockleigh were a big, athletic figure, a candid, natural countenance, a capacious appetite and a tendency to indiscriminate laughter,” after talking to him for a mere five minutes, Isabel gives up her vain “search for a rich ecclesiasticism” (James 75). His physical potency and aggression as a “mighty wrestler” within “the privacy of the family circle,” reflects the material weight of Lockleigh. Though Isabel likes Vicar, she admits that “she was in the mood for liking everything” and “her imagination was a good deal taxed to think of him as a source of spiritual aid” (James 76).

^{ix} I have added my own italics for emphasis.

^x Robert White explains James’s opinion that English and American writers were constrained by conventions that rendered the storyteller’s art “almost exclusively feminine” (64). James writes, “Half of life is a sealed book to young unmarried ladies, and how can a novel be worth anything that deals only half with life? How can a portrait be painted (in any way to be recognizable) of half a face” (qtd. in White 64).

^{xi} I quote here from “Frank Must Marry Money: Men, Women, and Property in Trollope’s Novels,” in which Rutterford explores the men in Trollope novels “who are attempting to marry for money, or to the extent that marriage is viewed in his novels as a transaction that men undertake in order to raise money” (Rutterford 186). Critics call these men “adventurers.” Interestingly, later in the novel, Isabel reflects “that the man in the world whom she had supposed to be the least sordid had married her, like a vulgar *adventurer*, for her money” (James 432).

^{xii} In this Old World, property and opportunities for mobility are even more limited than in America, especially for women. These gendered customs elicit her shock, as when she discovers that Henrietta, who “has travelled over the whole American continent,” is also “hampered” by English standards of propriety (James 114).

^{xiii} Madame Merle claims that without consumption, Ralph would represent nothing to other people except a man with a “very pretty collection of old snuff-boxes” (James 206). She argues that the phrase “Mr. Ralph Touchett, an American who lives in Europe,” is one that “signifies absolutely nothing” (James 206). On the other hand, his father—who owns Gardencourt and has penetrated the European economy, establishing himself as a rich, successful businessman—has a “massive... identity” (James 206). Mr. Touchett has acquired property and “represents a great financial house,” providing him with the value of a masculine identity (James 206).

^{xiv}

^{xv} James describes his discovery of the story that inspires Spoils in a similar way, claiming that “art [is] all discrimination and selection...in search of latent value” (James 23). “The artist finds in his tiny nugget,” his core material, buried beneath the heaps of junk at a flea market (James 23).

^{xvi} I am quoting here W.J.T Mitchell’s remark on the gaze of pictures and the “personified, subjectified, animated object” according to Marx and Freud in *What Do Pictures Want? : The Lives and Loves of Images* (finish citation), 30.

^{xvii} Mitchell continues to distinguish “objects” from “things,” in *What Do Pictures Want?* He explains: The thing appears as the nameless figure of the Real that cannot be perceived or represented. When it takes on a single, recognizable face, a stable image, it becomes an object; when it destabilizes, or flickers in the dialectics of the multistable image, it becomes a hybrid thing (like the duck-rabbit) that requires more than one name, more than one identity. The thing is invisible, blurry, or illegible to the subject. It signals the moment when the object becomes the Other, when the sardine can looks back, when the mute idol speaks, then the subject experiences the object as uncanny” (Mitchell 156).

^{xviii} Foucault writes, “sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short...sex was constituted as a problem of truth” (56). Foucault argues that throughout history, “there have been two great procedures for producing the truth of sex” (56).

^{xix} In French finishing school, James learns about the art of portraying sexual passion in literature, which he applies with subtly in *Spoils*. “Always...[preferring] discretion to display,” James embeds the sexual between the lines of his novels, especially his late novels, where sex serves as the focal point of the developing conscious: “Each of them catches its breath at its power and its mystery, catches it and then finds it again in the newly powerful understanding of the knowledge it brings of the world, the other, and above all the self” (Gorra 93).

^{xx} Following Claude Lévy-Strauss’s assertion that myths display a universal desire to achieve cognitive reconciliation, Roland Barthes applied “semiology,” or the science of signs, to myth. Political power hides itself through the “*second-order semiological system*” present in the language of myth. Power lies in the creation and manipulation of signs, as those who control sign systems and discourse control the myth and narrative of a nation.

^{xxi} The Wilcox men are further tied to materialism, modernity and the future through their association with the motorcar. Consistently employed throughout the novel as a symbol of speed, consumerism and modernity, the image of the “motor” invokes ideas presented by modernists like Filippo Marinetti in *Manifesto of Futurism*, which champions machines, extols the external and urges for the destruction of history. The Wilcox men demonstrate these ideals, especially through motorcar accidents. In their motorcar, the Wilcox men collide with a horse and cart and kill a cat, refusing to take responsibility for their mistakes and simply paying for the damage inflicted. This symbolizes their conflict with ideologies of the past, such as that of idealism. By reassigning responsibility to insurance companies, the Wilcox men embody shortcomings of materialism through their commodification of life and their inability to connect with others on a spiritual level, as they resort to material compensation. (Parts of this analysis are based on ideas from an essay I wrote: Llewellyn, Kelsey “The Mechanical Beast of Prey: An Analysis of Motorcars and Modernity in *Howards End*.” Rural England. 5 May 2017.)

^{xxii} See Mircea Eliade. “Religion as Response to the Sacred.” In Daniel Pals’ *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*. pp. 271-308.

^{xxiii} This mirrors the contrast between the “seen and unseen” throughout *Howards End*. Henry Wilcox is often described as unable to reconcile the “unseen” with the “seen,” and prefers regarding everything in an observable, materialist sense.

^{xxiv} Jesus undergoes the miracle of Transfiguration on a mountain, and is joined in radiance by Elijah and Moses, two important spiritual leaders of the past (Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-14:25). “The Holy of Holies” refers to the innermost and most sacred room of the Tabernacle.

^{xxv} Edward W. Said performs a similar analysis on the condition of English nationality and empire through examining Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* in his article, “Jane Austen and Empire.” Said’s interpretation of *Mansfield Park* explores English ideology through “the function of space, geography, and location” in the novel. The Bertram’s rural English estate, Mansfield Park, metaphorically symbolizes England; both “homes” require colonial possessions and “the other” to maintain the moral and financial stability that serve as the defining factors of each center location. In the article, Said directly states the importance and applicability of his analysis to E.M. Forster’s *Howards End*. He writes *Mansfield Park* prefigures “a later English history as registered in fiction” and “can be read as pointing forward to...the Wilcoxes’ Imperial and West African Rubber Company in Forster’s *Howards End*.” (Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. First ed., Knopf, 1993.)