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A YOUNG WOMAN AFFRONTING HER DESTINY, AUDIBLY

I FIRST READ HENRY JAMES' 1881 NOVEL *The Portrait of a Lady* as a 16-year-old high school student in Calgary, Alberta. I retain a vivid memory of picking the old Oxford Classics edition off the shelf in the library and reading it in the back corner of a school bus while traveling to a choir performance in Camrose, Red Deer, or perhaps Medicine Hat. The places of my own young reading life, so far from the glamorous European locales of James' narrative, have long since disappeared into the fading synapses of my brain, but the places of the novel—the lawns and chambers of Gardencourt, the streets and hills of Florence, the Osmonds' "house of suffocation" in Rome—have remained alive and green for me for almost thirty years.

Like so many of the novel's lovers, I have populated my personal vision of James' "house of fiction" not only with my own imagined versions of his cast of characters, but also with a stream of performative renditions, both real and fantasized. Prominent among them are Richard Chamberlain and Edward Fox as Ralph Touchett and Lord Warburton, flirting much more scintillatingly with one another than with Susanna Neve's bland Isabel Archer in the 1968 BBC TV adaptation; Barbara Hershey as Serena Merle, her smooth face ravaged by rage and pain as she tells John Malkovich's Gilbert Osmond that he will make her "howl like a wolf" in Jane Campion's 1997 film version; and the chorus of suitors wistfully singing "Take a Chance On Me" in my own musical theatre adaptation, *The ABBA Portrait of a Lady* (sadly, as yet unrealized). This summer another version of the novel was added to this list: Linda Marshall Griffiths' adaptation for BBC Radio 4. Like its heroine, Griffiths' radio adaptation is intelligent, valiant, fascinating, and (inevitably) flawed, and for me it encapsulates both the pleasures and perils of *The Portrait of a Lady* in performance.

James himself believed that *The Portrait of a Lady* was fundamentally

resistant to the performing arts. In an 1884 letter to Lawrence Barrett, an American actor who had expressed interest in adapting it for the stage, he declared that it belonged "essentially" to the class of the novel and that it seemed to him "incontrovertible into any thing [sic] different." He believed that the English-speaking theatre of his day was all action, plot, sensation, and situation, while *Portrait* was concerned with character, psychology, and the finer shades of human emotion. James' story of a brilliant young American who comes to Europe in search of experience is fundamentally an inward one. True, Isabel covers all the bases of a high nineteenth-century melodramatic heroine: she attracts and rejects a string of desirable suitors, including the English Lord Warburton and the American Caspar Goodwood; inherits a fortune from her wealthy uncle Mr. Touchett (at the instigation of his dying son, Ralph, the *amoureux transi* who both loves her and lives vicariously through her); and finally makes a disastrous marriage to the manipulative connoisseur Gilbert Osmond (with the encouragement of Osmond's erstwhile mistress, Serena Merle). More than by these sensational situations, however, James is fascinated by Isabel's evolving inner perceptions of her world and the other characters' appraisals of her. To render Isabel's psychological journey in the externalizing forms of drama, James told Barrett, would "despoil the story of such merits as it possesses and not give it sufficient others in their place." Previous radio adaptations have appeared tacitly to agree with his evaluation. Richard E. Davis' highly abridged version for NBC University Theater in 1949 and Rachel Joyce's three-hour adaptation for BBC Radio 4 in 2008 are both dominated by the avuncular tones of an actor charged with imparting large chunks of Jamesian narration. In the process, they seem to strive to bring the auditory medium as close as possible to the condition of the novel.

Griffiths' adaptation largely eschews this approach. All three of its one-hour episodes are introduced by the voice of James (John Lynch), but his tones are melancholy rather than commanding and most of the text he speaks is from the author's 1908 preface to the novel rather than the novel itself. As the first episode begins, Griffiths gives us James not as an omniscient reader of his characters' thoughts but rather as a figure analogous to Isabel's other suitors: a man struck with wonder, curiosity, and uncertainty at the spectacle of "this young woman affronting her destiny." "I will let her take me," he murmurs before disappearing from the rest of the episode and leaving the field to his characters. As Isabel (Joanna Vanderham) moves

forward from the shadowy doorway of her uncle's house to the sunny lawn at Gardencourt, we hear her rapid intake of breath: it is her life force, not that of her author, that animates this adaptation.

The sound of breathing echoes throughout the whole drama. The quick gasps that punctuate the determinedly jocular speech of the consumptive Ralph (Sacha Dhawan) contrast with the long, deliberate inspirations with which Gilbert (Joseph Millson) responds to comments that displease him, such as Isabel's description of his *objets d'art* as "things." Isabel herself responds to the presence of her persistent suitor Caspar Goodwood (Samuel Edward-Cook) with a panting mixture of anger, arousal, and fear. This use of breath to convey the emotional and physical struggles that shadow James' urbane dialogue is just one of the effective choices by which Griffiths and her director, Nadia Molinari, marry James' inward-looking novel to the aurally extroverted medium of radio. Director and writer also use sound, as well as words, to underline some of the novel's most important systems of imagery. In the adaptation's second episode, for example, we repeatedly hear the bustle and "movement" of the Italian streets contrasting with the "stillness" of Gilbert's hilltop villa, even as Isabel struggles to choose between these two possible options for her own life. The writer and director also intercut scenes in order to bring out the psychological parallels between apparently disparate characters. When they juxtapose Serena Merle's wistful reminiscences of the unrealized aspirations of her youth with Ralph's plea to his father to help Isabel "meet the requirements of her imagination," the listener is forcibly reminded that Serena and Ralph—so often opponents in the novel's narrative—both meddle in Isabel's fate because of their disappointments with their own. At such moments, the sonic medium offers new windows into James' "house of fiction."

At the same time, the radio drama format opens cracks within that august edifice. James' description of his art as architectural is not misplaced; *The Portrait of a Lady* is painstakingly constructed, each seemingly insignificant brick bearing some of the whole structure's weight. With only three 50-minute episodes in which to tell the entire story, Griffiths and Molinari inevitably remove important parts of the building. Some supporting characters from the novel, such as Isabel's friend Henrietta Stackpole (Lara Rossi), play considerably reduced roles; others, like Pansy Osmond's suitor Ned Rosier, are mentioned but do not appear; still others, like Henrietta's beau Mr. Bantling, disappear altogether. These cuts must have seemed like

reasonable ways of saving precious storytelling time, but they create significant holes in the adaptation's crucial third act. When Henrietta appears to urge Isabel to leave Gilbert, we struggle to remember her from episode one; when Pansy declares her preference for Mr. Rosier over Lord Warburton, we cannot either understand or criticize her choice. The need to move rapidly through this final part of the story creates deeper issues for the adaptation, too. Without time to stage the disastrous effects of Isabel's marriage, Griffiths tries to solve the problem by placing an expository monologue about it in Ralph Touchett's mouth. This choice immediately paints Ralph as a perceptive saint and Gilbert Osmond as a consummate villain, undoing the drama's earlier, subtler portrayals of these two men and their equivocal desires.

One might mention more trivial flaws, too, such as the noticeably shaky American accents of many of the British cast members. Given the uncertain national identities of *The Portrait of a Lady*'s key characters, however, the actors' rapidly shifting vowel sounds are a strength as well as a weakness, embodying the unstable distinctions between European and American selves that lie at the heart of James' world. Only in radio, moreover, is one likely to hear an actor of Indian descent, like Sacha Dhawan, play Ralph, or an actress of African heritage, such as Lara Rossi, play Henrietta. Both performers acquit themselves exceptionally; their brief scenes together—playful, rebarbative, and affectionate—are a highlight of the adaptation. Sadly, we do not yet live in a world where actors of colour like Dhawan and Rossi will be obvious candidates to reprise these roles in the new television adaptation supposedly being mooted by Number 9 Films. Only in a medium that hides their faces do non-white actors have straightforward access to these canonical roles—and yet such casting choices, rendered visible, could rekindle the electricity of James' cultural border-crossings as a familiar mixture of white American and British performers is now unlikely to do.

Perhaps it is the very concealment of the actors' faces that makes this radio adaptation truly Jamesian. We cannot tell from Millson's expression whether Gilbert Osmond's deep, melancholic, and sympathetic love for the city of Florence is genuine or put on to impress Isabel. We cannot see the look on the face of Dhawan's Ralph when he responds to the knowledge that he is losing Isabel to Gilbert Osmond by telling her—with a sound that might be a laugh or a sob—that the Roman Forum was once "a place of carnage." We do not know whether Vanderham's Isabel looks thrilled, terrified, or de-

spairing when she flees from her final encounter with Caspar Goodwood to return to Rome and her marriage. On the radio, the inner lives—the "private apartments," as James put it—of these characters remain just a little out of reach. Then again, perhaps it would be truer to say that they remain open to the requirements of our imaginations.