

*THE PORTRAIT OF MADAME MERLE:*  
GEORGE SAND, GENDER, AND THE JAMESIAN MASTER

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## Introduction

“It is the ladies,” writes Henry James in a discussion of George Sand, “who have lately done most to remind us of man’s relations with himself.”<sup>1</sup> The author’s “relations with”—and *of*—himself as a man who sought mastery of the art of fiction serve a central function in his life’s work, especially in his self-consciously monumental New York Edition. The self-presentations embodied in James’s critical and fictional literature derive from two principal concerns: 1) calculating the constitution of superior fiction through critical intercourse with other masters, and 2) navigating the question of gender amidst accusations of effeminacy.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the very quality in George Sand that inspires James’s observation about male self-reflection is her personal and literary “masculinity.” Among the writers James copiously critiqued, including Eliot, Hawthorne, Turgenev and Trollope, George Sand and Honoré de Balzac hold unique positions as objects of his loyalty, intrigue, and reverence. Both are figures James praises throughout his career, not only for their masterly skills—Balzac “is the first and foremost member of his craft” and Sand “the greatest of all women of letters”—but for what one might call their masterly performances of masculinity.<sup>3</sup> If Balzac presents a hyperbolic (antifeminist) masculine ideal, Sand, who “hangs together perfectly if judged as a man,” similarly supplies James with what Leland Person rightly identifies as “an artistic doppelganger.”<sup>4</sup>

In an 1868 essay on Sand, James posits Balzac and Sand as authors strikingly distinct yet destined to be compared by the “intelligent reader,” who

will, at times, be harassed with the feeling that it behooves him to choose between them and take up his stand with the one against the other. But, in fact, they are not mutually inimical, and the wise reader, we think, will take refuge in the reflection that choosing is an idle business, inasmuch as we possess them both.<sup>5</sup>

James's claim to "possess[ing] them both" reflects the intimate intellectual dialogue between his perceptions of Balzac and Sand and his fraught, ever evolving construction of an ideal authorial self. For James, to possess the strengths of both Balzac and Sand is to possess the ambivalently gendered literary authority produced by such a combination—one that is in fact desirable, not problematized by the merging of "mutually inimical" forces. As Person astutely argues in *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity* (2003), James's novels imagine a plurality of masculinities inspired, in great part, by his anxious engagement with Sand's unparalleled "improvisation" of maleness. Significantly, while James famously touts Balzac as his literary father, he never names a forebear among his favored female writers, with whom he maintains conflicted relationships. James relegates female literary influence to the realm of secrecy, or perhaps impossibility, most likely in an effort to preserve his carefully crafted, if ultimately unconvincing, masculine image. James's anxiety about the figure of the successful woman writer, the complex influence of his fascination with George Sand's "very masculine" "genius," and the notion of Sand as James's secret literary mother—or *father*—guide my inquiry into the self-projections that riddle the New York Edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*.

In the following essay, I argue that, together, Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond enact James's self-reflexive, doubly gendered mandate for literary mastery. In the first part, I chart the connective tissue between James's critical writings about George Sand and his characterization of Madame Merle, *The Portrait's* notorious secret mother. Ingredients central to James's understanding of Sand reemerge in Madame Merle, such that attributes about which—and often language with which—he judges Sand shape his

portrayal of the novel's "great artist" (432). In mapping Sand as a likely muse for Madame Merle, I address the analogously paradoxical positions within which James traps each woman, focusing my comparative analysis on questions of performativity, gender, and marriage.

In the second part of this essay, I rely on Carolyn Dever's *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins* (1998) to interpret Madame Merle's diversely metaphorical role as the text's secret mother. Returning to the framing questions raised in James's comparisons of Balzac and Sand, I extend my reading of Madame Merle to address the novel's navigation of gendered forms. I argue that James figures his own self-conscious agenda for achieving literary mastery, and the gender politics upon which that achievement depends, in the battle between Osmond and Madame Merle over the authority to craft Isabel's and Pansy's characters.

### **Performing Masculinity, Performing Art: George Sand and Madame Merle**

James's interest in George Sand spans the course of his career and is primarily documented in nine texts written between the years 1868 and 1914. The four texts which pre-date James's 1881 *Portrait*, as well as the two published in 1897 and 1902, contain a wealth of characterizations that reemerge in the fictional portrait of Madame Merle. One may discover perhaps the most conspicuous connections between the two ladies in Madame Merle's name. The French prefix, *Madame*, distinguishes Serena Merle as at once the only character with a French affiliation and the character best known for her performance—or Sandian "improvisation"—of identity, for she hails from the inglorious city of Brooklyn and resides variously in England and Italy, not in France. The "serenity"

that inspires the name “Serena” appears half a dozen times in James’s essays on Sand, who, for him, remained “to the last day serene and superior.”<sup>6</sup> The fact that we learn Madame Merle’s full name only twice over the course of the narrative heightens the personal mystery her character evokes: ““She’s too fond of mystery,”” explains Lydia Touchett; ““that’s her great fault”” (153). In Sand’s case, “one felt shut off from her by a sort of veil [sic] or film.”<sup>7</sup> As a self-proclaimed “sphinx”—a label that greatly appeals to James—Sand presents a magnetic sense of personal mystery, which James discusses variously as the “question” or the “riddle” of the lady—or rather, the gentleman, depending on the passage you read.<sup>8</sup>

The term “Merle” signifies a species of blackbird, a creature known, particularly in cultural contexts, for its melodious song. The songbird, moreover, constitutes one of James’s favorite metaphors for describing Sand’s literary capacity: the novelist “wrote as a bird sings”; “she told stories as a nightingale sings”; she “best answers to Shelley’s description of the skylark singing”; and she perfectly suits Victor Hugo’s estimation of her “sonorous soul which was, as it were, the Æolian harp of our time.”<sup>9</sup> Just as George Sand’s characters, according to James, “move to such a persuasive music that we watch them with interest,” so Isabel Archer ““w[as] marching away”” while Madame Merle ““was really beating the drum”” (284).<sup>10</sup> Sand, in what is arguably James’s loveliest formulation, “holds in her hands a stringed instrument composed of the chords of the human soul.”<sup>11</sup> Importantly, James also imagines Jane Austen as a songbird, but he leverages the symbol in a pejorative appraisal: “Austen, with all her light felicity, leaves us hardly more curious of her process, . . . , than the brown thrush who tells his story from the garden bough.”<sup>12</sup> If James considered the songbird an especially suitable tool for

portraying women writers, his employment of the metaphor to describe Madame Sand marks the most emphatic and laudatory of critical instances, for he perceives Sand as at once a “nightingale” and the “Æolian harp of our time,” who can play “the chords of the human soul.”

The musical instrument most often associated with Madame Merle, however, is the piano. We first encounter “the gathering shades,” as James phrases it in his 1908 Preface, “of this personage,” with her back turned and face hidden as she plays the piano in the Gardencourt parlour (14). Her exquisite soundtrack entices Isabel to discover the identity of the faceless musician. This undertheorized introduction at once heralds Madame Merle’s “sonorous” performance of the art of character and invites a reading of her figure’s gender indeterminacy. At first, Isabel can only conclude that “[t]his person was neither Ralph nor his mother” (151). Once she settles her eyes upon the stranger, “[t]his back—an ample and well-dressed one—Isabel viewed for some moments with surprise” (151). An androgynous body part yields our first visual impression of Madame Merle, while contributing to her aura of secrecy, for that “surpris[ing]” expanse composes the back of her person, and thus, the concealment of her countenance. This introduction, I would argue, underscores Madame Merle’s defining characteristic: she is always already performing her own absence.

In what contributes to her persistent self-mystification, Madame Merle flouts comprehension “in any detachment or privacy, [for] she existed only in her relations, direct or indirect, with her fellow mortals” (167). Her self—a present absence—is composed of the selves of others. Fittingly, existing only in one’s fictional “relations” constitutes the condition of the author. James strengthens Madame Merle’s association

with the figure of the author by emphasizing her engagement in the literary arts: for her, “something was always turning up to be written about” (166). The performativity, range, nature, and influence of Madame Merle’s artistry—from her piano playing to her “innumerable letters” to her wildly effective figuration of Isabel—correspond to the authorial attributes of George Sand as James critiques them. Sand, who creates “singularly loquacious and confidential” novels, exhibits “a greater fecundity, considering the quality of her work, than any writer of our day.”<sup>13</sup> What’s more, her “great quality from the first was the multiplicity of her interests.”<sup>14</sup> James devotes nearly an entire chapter of *The Portrait of a Lady* to meticulous elaboration of Madame Merle’s “fecund” artistry, the “multiplicity” of her aesthetic interests, and her “loquacious and confidential” discourses with Isabel, the consummate object of her artfulness. As if to exaggerate her expansiveness as such, James’s narrator observes, “[i]t was as if somehow she had all society under contribution, and all the arts and graces it practiced” (166).

When Madame Merle

was neither writing, nor painting, nor touching the piano, she was usually employed upon wonderful tasks of rich embroidery, cushions, curtains, decorations for the chimney-piece; an art in which her bold, free invention was as noted as the agility of her needle. She was never idle... (166-7)

James describes both Madame Sand and Madame Merle as “free” and “comprehensive,” or “complete.” Sand’s literary mind, he writes, “seems not to have isolated and contracted itself in the regions of perception, but to expand with longing and desire.”<sup>15</sup> Likewise, until Gilbert Osmond asserts his own authority over Isabel, “Madame Merle’s expansive presence under[goes] no contraction” (429). In other such instances, James uses the same terms to characterize both women’s treatment of their subjects. For example, Madame

Sand possesses a novelist's "tender appreciation of actuality," a quality Madame Merle explicitly appreciates in Isabel: "'you've the great thing—you've actuality'" (170).<sup>16</sup>

For James, Sand's "great literary faculty was a matter of intuition," not training, and her art was an airy "improvisation," not a product of fastidious attention. Similarly, Madame Merle's arts follow not from formal instruction or application, but from being "so wise and so easy, and still mak[ing] so light of it": she "made no more of brushing in a sketch than of pulling off her gloves" (166). Just as Madame Sand "never postured at all as a woman of letters," so Madame Merle "appeared to impute scant worth to anything she did" (167).<sup>17</sup> While James emphasizes their comparable humility, however, he also identifies a shared idiosyncrasy of self-defensiveness. In citing the few traits that hinder the "generosity of her genius," James notes Madame Sand's "peculiar power of self-defence, her constant need to justify, to glorify, to place in a becoming light, to "arrange," . . . , those errors and weaknesses in which her own personal credit may be at stake."<sup>18</sup> This "need to justify" by careful symbolic "arrange[ment]" reappears in *The Portrait*, in which the narrator reiterates Madame Merle's practice of refusing to retract an awkward statement, of instead amending each conversational blunder by re-presenting it "in a becoming light."<sup>19</sup> This habit strikes one as unsurprising, however, since she manifests Madame Sand's "masterly study of composure": whereas Madame Sand "clos[ed] her door . . . against the very approach of irritation and surprise," so "it was disconcertingly difficult to surprise" Madame Merle (164).<sup>20</sup>

The portrait of Madame Merle, most importantly, represents an artist-heroine who shares the complexly gendered distinctions James perceives in Madame Sand. In his reviews and essays on the author, James constantly attempts to distinguish between the

“masculine” and “feminine” aspects of her aptitude. In one such attempt, he claims Sand has “all a woman’s loquacity, but...never a woman’s shrillness.”<sup>21</sup> With characteristic ambiguity, he judges, “[w]hat was feminine in her was the quality of her genius; the quantity of it—its force, and mass, and energy—was masculine, and masculine were her temperament and character.”<sup>22</sup> James attributes the songbird’s “great weakness”—her “peculiar want of veracity” and the resulting “falsity of tone” in some of her stories—to the fact of her (French)womanhood.<sup>23</sup> “There is something,” he writes, “in George Sand’s genius [that is] very masculine; but our final impression of her always is that she is a woman and a Frenchwoman”; and women “do not value truth for its own sake, but only for some personal use they make of it.”<sup>24</sup> This dubiously feminized act of tale-telling, the exercise of “investing objects with a graceful drapery of her own contrivance,” is the very skill Madame Merle necessarily cultivates in her desperate effort to contain the secret of her maternity.<sup>25</sup> In fact, her character’s fundamental narrative function is to help paint the ‘portrait of a lady’ by performing seductive fabrications—about herself and others, but, above all, about her maternal relationship to Pansy—to direct the development of Isabel Archer. If Madame Sand “constantly strikes these false notes,” Madame Merle strikes almost exclusively “false notes” for what James phrases as the “personal use [she] may make of [them].”<sup>26</sup>

Analysis of the “great strength and great weakness” mirrored in the Madame Sand and Madame Merle of James’s imagination illustrates the paradoxical position into which he casts them. While George Sand’s feminized failings lay in her occasional “falsity,” her masculinized strength lies in being “the great *improvisatrice* of literature,” a quality James rearticulates as her “determination to address herself to life at first hand.”<sup>27</sup>

According to James, “making acquaintance with life at first hand is, roughly speaking, the great thing that, as a woman, Madame Sand achieved.”<sup>28</sup> He goes on to clarify that “[s]uch a disposition was not customary, was not what is usually called womanly.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, this “first hand” “improvisation” of life means the performance of masculinity: “It is not simply that she could don a disguise that gaped at the seams, that she could figure as a man of the mere carnival or pantomime variety, but that she made so virile, so efficient and homogeneous a one.”<sup>30</sup> In grappling with Sand’s art of fiction, James wavers between hailing her impeccable disguise and detecting its occasional exposure. The success of her “homogeneous” performance of masculinity, thus, becomes the point of orientation for understanding her literary mastery. Furthermore, according to the standard set by this formula, mastery presents an ultimately unachievable ideal for a writer who cannot escape identification as “a woman and a Frenchwoman.”

As with James’s essays on Sand, *The Portrait of a Lady* abounds with overdetermined descriptions of its artist-heroine’s performativity. The most conspicuous instance occurs when Isabel contemplates Madame Merle in terms that accurately define her condition: “there was a corner of the curtain that never was lifted; it was as if she had remained after all something of a public performer, condemned to emerge only in character and in costume” (212, 274-5). James also carefully highlights her Sandian performance of “the art of life”: “It was as if she had learned the secret of it—as if the art of life were some clever trick she had guessed” (337). If Madame Merle does not explicitly perform masculinity, she performs the absence of maternity and its attendant self-negations. Both George Sand and Madame Merle embody the paradox of the “false” female subject as delineated in James’s texts. That is, performing an ideal constitutes the

source of both her success and her failure. James entraps his ladies' performance art, as it were, in a gendered schema according to which Madame Sand's womanhood and Madame Merle's motherhood render their productions inescapably fallible, even self-destructive, in the very act of their effectiveness.

Chief among the topics that interest James in his depictions of George Sand and Madame Merle is the question of marriage and its contribution to their respective tragedies. Both women suffer famously unsuccessful marriages and subsequent love affairs, which leave them independent in their final days. In a 1902 essay on Sand's controversial affair with Alfred de Musset, James defines the "real moral tragedy" of her life as her failure to find a male counterpart, for whom she had "ingenuously spent much of her early life in looking."<sup>31</sup> Significantly, James diagnoses the cause of this failure as her mastery of masculinity, which nullifies the possibility of heterosexual union: "the whole lesson of the picture is precisely in the disconcerting success of her system."<sup>32</sup> That is, her success in achieving masculinity—indeed, in "surpass[ing]" it—means she "was more masculine than any man she might have married" and "too imperious a force, too powerful a machine, to make the limits of her activity coincide with those of wifely submissiveness."<sup>33</sup> Borrowing Balzac's assessment, James insinuates that she "repel[led]" men, that she proved an unmatchable female "man," whose search for a husband was simply a "mistake."

Like Sand, Madame Merle "hoped she might marry a great man," Countess Gemini tells Isabel; "that has always been her idea. She has waited and watched and plotted and prayed; but she has never succeeded" (453). Does the novel's resolution—or lack thereof—follow the logic James employs in striving to explain the "moral tragedy"

of George Sand? He correlates the two figures, I would argue, as closely as possible without naming the problem of gender. If Madame Sand is “too imperious a force,” too masculine, too successful, to find a male equivalent, Madame Merle is “too good, too kind, too clever, too learned, too accomplished, too everything”—“she pushes the search for perfection too far”—to find her own match (216).<sup>34</sup> While Lydia Touchett and Isabel at first support her, she “repels” Ralph, Osmond, and Pansy, all of whom consistently condemn her.<sup>35</sup> James paints Madame Merle not as a woman, but as, in Ralph’s words, “the great round world itself!” (216). Such utter consummation, Ralph explains, “acts on my nerves” (216). The perfection of her fertile, aestheticized social performance, and the secrets contained by it, produce a narrative demise that evolves, in a deeply and diversely ironic turn, as her gradual alienation from the community of characters she helps create.

In James’s portraits of Madame Sand and Madame Merle, life and art are indistinguishable. The songbirds possess qualities—loquacity, fluidity, falseness—that align them with James’s critical perception of Victorian women writers.<sup>36</sup> The performances of self through which they defy his standards of “feminine” form, however, fuel mysteries that envelope their personas, and in Madame Merle’s case, drive the plot of the novel. In embodying a woman writer comprehensible to James (and Balzac) only as an exquisitely approximated man, George Sand represents an unresolvable “riddle.” Our final textual impression of Madame Merle is of an equally unnamable enigma: “The only thing to regret was that Madame Merle had been so—well, so unimaginable. Just here [Isabel’s] intelligence dropped, from literal inability to say what it was that Madame Merle had been” (465). This indefinability of influence, I argue, derives from Madame

Merle's ambivalently gendered, present absence as a secret mother. To understand her densely metaphorical role, we must unpack the structural and symbolic implications of her secret literal and literary maternity by examining her relationships with Osmond, Isabel, and Pansy. In the following reading of *The Portrait of a Lady*, I seek to unveil the parameters of "what it was that Madame Merle had been," both as artificer to other characters and as partial projection of James's authorial self.

### **The Secret Mother and the Multiplicity of Mastery**

In one of the most critically undervalued passages in the novel, Madame Merle tells Isabel

that she would some day a tale unfold. Isabel assured her she should delight to listen to one, and reminded her more than once of this engagement. Madame Merle, however, begged repeatedly for a respite, and at last frankly told her young companion that they must wait till they knew each other better. (168)

James alludes to a turning point in *Hamlet* during which the ghost of Hamlet's father advises his son, "But that I am forbid / To tell the secrets of my prison house, / I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood, / Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres..."<sup>37</sup> The soul-harrowing, untold "secrets of [his] prison house" signify the details of his "foul, strange, and unnatural" murder.<sup>38</sup> It is in this moment when Hamlet's dead father begs his son to revenge his death, to act because he cannot act. Paralleling the ghost's plot with that of Madame Merle, James compares his tragedienne to a dead *father*, "forbid[den] / To tell [his] secrets," and intent upon enlisting his young progeny to serve in his stead. In James's narrative analogy, Madame Merle, loath to "unfold" the horrifying "secrets of [her] prison house"—that is, the secret of her "prison house" of maternal denial—impels Isabel

to act for her by replacing her as Pansy's mother. Madame Merle's death consists in her repudiation, her de facto murder, as a mother by Gilbert Osmond. Whereas the anxious influence of a dead father induces Hamlet to act (in his case, to kill), the anxious influence of a dead mother induces Isabel to act (in her case, to marry). This single citation, thus, highlights the principal elements of the "question" of Madame Merle: like Shakespeare's ghost, she exerts the greatest influence when dead, or secret, and her absent presence symbolizes an ambivalently gendered parental force that, as with James's vision of George Sand, experiments with a woman's assumption of masculine subjectivity. James's Shakespearean allusion joins his Sandian allusions, I argue, to implicate his fraught representation of the gendered politics of influence.

In *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud*, Carolyn Dever charts what she shrewdly interprets as the paradigmatic narrative of the dead mother in Victorian fiction and psychoanalytic theory. Paradoxically, Dever argues, the Victorian maternal ideal operates only insofar as the mother is dead, missing, or discarded. She functions for the child, whose subjectivity depends on maternal loss, as an ambivalent site of "the convergence of plenitude and the power to devastate," as a generative symbol that implies a representational practice wrought from the crisis of absence.<sup>39</sup> Adding Madame Merle to Dever's collection of nineteenth-century mothers, I suggest that *The Portrait of a Lady's* secret mother fits the fictional and psychoanalytic model of the "dead or lost" mother as Dever articulates it. As in the cases of those emblematic mothers who challenge their containment, Madame Merle exposes the paradoxes of her split subjectivity.

In the course of delineating her theoretical apparatus, Dever supplies an interpretation of the Freudian “phallic mother,” which she identifies as the “‘maternal ideal’ of psychoanalysis.”<sup>40</sup> The phallic mother represents a “phantastic figure of ‘completeness’ in the mind of the child,” an “all-powerful, all-giving source of life that embodies both mother and father, breast and phallus.”<sup>41</sup> Madame Merle, who leverages her performance of self in the act of sculpting Isabel’s subjectivity, functions for her as a variation of the “phallic mother.” Without claiming that James deliberately cites Freud’s language of “completeness,” I would argue that Madame Merle illustrates the impossibilities inherent in this rhetorical body by being, as Ralph puts it, “‘too complete’” (216). Her elaborately constructed self exceeds, as I have suggested, the embodiment of a woman or a mother: she represents “everything”; she, as Ralph puts it, is “‘the great round world itself!’” (216, 430). Indeed, James’s multi-layered metaphors make her a queer progenitor, the specter of both Pansy’s mother and Isabel’s father. James figures her character as all-knowing—“‘She knows absolutely everything on earth there is to know’”—and all-giving, an attribute epitomized in her self-sacrificial “gift” of Isabel (and her money) to Osmond (169). By embroiling her subjectivity in a Self-effacing, Other-inclusive performance (“she existed only in her relations” with others (167)), James furnishes her character with a gender-bending breadth of symbolic power.

Significantly, just as Freud’s phallic mother exists only in theoretical terms, Madame Merle exists as an idealizable, multiplicitous site of origin only when occupying her tragically “false position.” Madame Merle is not embodied in Isabel’s mind as a mother—that is, as the mother of Pansy and the “mother” of Isabel’s own (narrative) subjectivity—until novel’s end, at which point Madame Merle becomes irrelevant and

her relationship with Isabel shatters. The moment the curtain concealing Madame Merle's secret falls, Isabel discards her, solidifying what Dever calls the "ideal-in-absence" framework.<sup>42</sup> James deftly metaphorizes her shift from absence to presence, from passive ideal to transgressive agent, in the moment when Isabel sees Madame Merle "in the flesh," an experience "like suddenly, and rather awfully, seeing a painted picture move" (456). Madame Merle's "complete," "perfect," still life portrait as a mother/father abstraction exposes its untenability by coming to life.

Madame Merle's secret maternity also operates, I argue, on the meta level of literary mastery. This corollary reading accounts for her active containment by Osmond in the context of their joint service as metaphorical surrogates for the authorial master. If, for James, George Sand represents a paradoxical ideal ultimately unmatched against the "superior" Balzac, Madame Merle represents a paradoxical ideal ultimately unmatched against the force of Gilbert Osmond. As I have argued, the characteristics that make Madame Sand and Madame Merle feminine—Madame Sand's (French) womanhood and Madame Merle's maternity—must be contained, must remain secret, in order for each woman to succeed in her respective production of art. Whereas Madame Sand's masterful artistic achievement derives from her performance of masculinity, Madame Merle's derives from her performance of maternal death. I would like to examine the relationship between these female figures and the male figures, or abstract definitions of masculinity, against which James positions them in his representations of the Art of fiction.

Essentially, my analytical portrait of Madame Merle responds to the questions: How do James's critical perceptions of "masculine" and "feminine" literary styles manifest

themselves in *The Portrait of a Lady*? What does this say about James's notion of literary mastery?

“Balzac’s masculine authority,” argues Person, “clearly offered James an alternative to Sand and thus a way of killing the suspense into which she had cast his own gender identification.”<sup>43</sup> To articulate Balzac’s “masculine authority,” James privileges his formal techniques over those he considers feminine. James’s criticism of Balzac and Sand follows a schema consistent with his career-long judgment of the gender of fiction, a concern addressed by numerous recent studies of the gendered metaphors and declarations in James’s critical and prefatory writings.<sup>44</sup> These studies suggest that paramount among the formal characteristics James persistently genders are “all a woman’s loquacity,” or expansiveness, and “masculine firmness,” or linguistic economy.<sup>45</sup> Person observes, for example, that while “James repeatedly praises Sand’s writing for its fluidity, looseness, and improvisation, Balzac’s is ‘always extraordinarily firm and hard,’ possessing a ‘metallic rigidity.’”<sup>46</sup> James may praise Sand and other women novelists for the virtues of their literary “looseness,” but he repeatedly argues for the superior importance of “firm,” “masculine” structural economy. This very same formal competition emerges in the relationship between Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, whose aestheticized treatment of Isabel largely dictates the novel’s architecture. James stages the masculine dominance of feminine forms in Osmond’s restriction of Madame Merle, Isabel, and Pansy. Thus, the “dangerous...chemical combination,” to borrow Countess Gemini’s phrase, of Madame Merle’s art and Osmond’s aestheticism produces a gendered plot of the anxious control of maternal overabundance (230).

Madame Merle's occluded maternity, I argue, operates as a metaphor for her truncated artistry, and thus, for the "masculine" constraint of her "feminine" expansiveness.

Making a dramatic (re)entrance in Chapter 22 as a mysterious "lady" in the ante-chamber, Madame Merle visits Osmond to introduce to him the idea of Mrs. Isabel Osmond. Their disagreements during these early conversations reveal their clashing approaches to artistry. For example, when Osmond begs Madame Merle to admire his most recent sketch (drawn no less than the previous year), her disappointment surprises him, for he believes his drawing to be quite good. That may be, she explains, "[b]ut as the only thing you do—well, it's so little. I should have liked you to do so many other things" (208). It is not Osmond's lack of skill as an artist that disappoints her, but rather, his aesthetic parsimony. His minimalism infiltrates his attitude toward Isabel in dialogue that symbolizes the roles each plays in crafting her destiny:

"The girl's not disagreeable," Osmond quietly conceded.  
... "Is that all you can find to say about that fine creature?"  
"All? Isn't it enough? Of how many people have you heard me say more?"  
... "You're unfathomable," she murmured at last. "I'm frightened at the abyss into which I shall have cast her."  
He took it almost gaily. "You can't draw back—you've gone too far." (244)

Osmond's meager, negatively phrased estimation hardly speaks "enough" of the "fine creature" Madame Merle offers him. In contrast, she has "gone too far" by saying too much. As the recipient of Madame Merle's "gift," Osmond holds the power to frustrate her poetics of excess with the "abyss" of his circumscription.

The twosome's joint courtship of Isabel similarly illustrates their formal patterns of expansion and restriction. Osmond withholds words in ways that mesmerize Isabel: "Madame Merle had had that note of rarity, but what quite other power it immediately gained when sounded by a man! It was not so much what he said and did, but rather what

he withheld” (224).<sup>47</sup> Here, James explicitly associates the distinction between loquacity and reticence with the problem of gender. Osmond may sound the same “note of rarity” as Madame Merle, but his masculine mode of expression renders it better received by Isabel. Despite her own observations of Osmond’s fastidious, hypercritical, “probably irritable” disposition, Isabel is dazzled by a certain “peculiarity” James describes as the “*slenderness of structure* which made the movement of a single one of his fingers produce the effect of an expressive gesture” (224, emphasis mine). Like the chary precision of “masculine” fiction, his economically expressive gestures strike Isabel “as signs of quality,” “as promises of interest” (224). Indeed, Osmond’s character constitutes the *promise* of interest planted in Isabel’s imagination by Madame Merle, author of the young girl’s attraction to him. Madame Merle does everything—is “everything”—in the negotiation of Isabel’s desire. Osmond need only flick a finger for effect.

The desire that drives Isabel to marry Osmond originates, unsurprisingly, in the novel’s secret mother, Madame Merle. From the moment of their first meeting, Madame Merle entices Isabel, who, “feel[ing] herself, as the phrase is, under an influence,” instantly idolizes the mysterious woman (165). In his 1908 Preface, James highlights this scene, along with Isabel’s revelatory vigil, as one of “[t]wo very good instances...of this effect of conversion, two cases of the rare chemistry” (14). Isabel’s profound desire, argued convincingly by Melissa Solomon as homoerotic, persists only in the condition of Madame Merle’s maternal secrecy. Isabel rejects her intimate companion once she physically emerges as an embodied mother. In this way, Madame Merle’s and Isabel’s relationship reflects the psychoanalytic model according to which the mother functions as the source of all forms of sexual desire. Until Madame Merle’s “painted picture

move[s],” she serves as a substitute figure for Isabel’s lost mother onto whom Isabel can fix her cathexis of desire. James’s plot upholds the Victorian orthodoxy of maternal chastity that makes the erotic mother, as Dever puts it, a “source of anxiety and prohibition,” for when Isabel effectively exiles Madame Merle to America, she acts as the psychoanalytic child rejecting her erotic mother.<sup>48</sup>

The inclination to imitate Madame Merle guides Isabel’s interest in Osmond. She believes the “best way to profit by her—this indeed Isabel had always thought—was to imitate her” (338). To develop a relationship with Osmond is to step into Madame Merle’s place—to experience for herself the mystifying connection her mentor shares with a man who, sounding the same “note of rarity,” appears to prove her male counterpart. Madame Merle’s own magnificent, Sandian fecundity conduces Isabel to assume that Osmond’s “slenderness of structure” disguises the same great fund in reserve.<sup>49</sup> Madame Merle, thus, makes Isabel desire Osmond by making Isabel desire her. Whereas Madame Merle functions as a generative figure who produces the novel’s epicentral “interest,” Osmond functions as a restrictive figure who “snuffs” desire: he and Isabel, he later explains to Caspar Goodwood, are “as united as the candlestick and the snuffers” (309).

Once married, Isabel “surrenders” to Osmond, “her appointed and inscribed master”—a master inscribed in her story, that is, by Madame Merle (297, 386).<sup>50</sup> As the *objet d’art* passes from Madame Merle’s hands into Osmond’s, Osmond begins to assume authorial control. His style, as it were, is to inscribe himself upon Isabel, to make her, as Ralph puts it, “represent Gilbert Osmond”—to make her a copy of himself (331). Osmond openly intends to limit his wife’s excess ideas and to render her character a mere

function of his ego. “[B]eside [Isabel] enjoying it,” he contemplates, “she should publish it to the world without [me] having any of the trouble” (260). Osmond, thus, attempts to produce a publicizing self-reflection in Isabel by means of an economical copy act. We gain an outsider’s perspective of the Isabel that results from marriage to Osmond when James writes, “Ralph, in all this, recognised the hand of the master; for he knew that Isabel had no faculty for producing studied impressions” (330). Ralph’s thoughts beg the question: who is the master recognizable in Isabel’s “studied impressions”? Both Madame Merle and Osmond succeed in impressing themselves upon Isabel—Madame Merle through the desire she inspires in Isabel to emulate her and Osmond through restrictive self-projection. Importantly, by deliberately leaving the question of the master’s identity unanswered, James implies the necessity of both influences in sculpting Isabel’s subjectivity. As with Pansy, whose body is literally produced by the combination of Madame Merle and Osmond, the portrait of Isabel Archer is produced through the combination, or clash, of these two forces—the forces of expansion and constriction, of the production and the absence of desire, as exemplified in such extremes as Isabel’s adventures around Italy with Madame Merle and her virtual imprisonment within Osmond’s house.

If Osmond successfully imprisons both Isabel and Pansy, he helps banish Madame Merle. At first, his restriction upon her mothering of Pansy fails to extinguish her fertility, for it is that very restriction that catalyzes her cultivation of Isabel as her daughter’s stepmother. Ultimately, however, Osmond’s repudiations and the self-effacing terms of Madame Merle’s scheme force her expulsion from the drama. She figures as the most rigorously reproductive and the most rigorously contained character in the novel. In

the same way that Osmond binds Isabel by sacrificing the “too many ideas” for which she is known, he attempts to limit Madame Merle’s expression: ““I wish you’d express yourself less!” he complains (433). In orchestrating the conflict between them, James often uses metaphorical language to shape a subtext that thematizes literary mastery. In a representative example, Osmond criticizes Madame Merle thusly: ““Oh, the imagination of women! It’s always vulgar, at bottom. You talk of revenge like a third-rate novelist”” (435). As if to do away with “third-rate novelist[s]” and their feminine encumbrances, Osmond omits Madame Merle from his social sphere and, therefore, from the sphere of Isabel’s story. A crucial element of his repudiation is his failure to acknowledge, much less thank her for, her “gift” to him—that is, her authorship of Isabel Osmond. Not only must Madame Merle remain unacknowledged as Pansy’s mother, but she must similarly suffer anonymity as Osmond’s benefactor. Defending her efforts against his disregard, she pleads, ““I want it to be *my* work”” (436). Just as she seeks recognition as creator of his and Pansy’s prosperity, so she wants the role of heroine for herself: ““The tragedy’s for me!”” she exclaims, reminding both Osmond and the reader of her unhailed contribution (436).

Madame Merle’s restricted maternal presence narrates James’s career-long anxiety about the “feminine” reproductive power he simultaneously exploits and counteracts for the sake of masterful literature. Her containment symbolizes James’s critical approach to the figure of the great woman writer, whose abundant influence must ultimately be suppressed within a “masculine” structure. I do not suggest that Osmond outmasters Madame Merle, or that Balzac outmasters Sand, in James’s fictional and critical texts. Rather, both *The Portrait of a Lady* and James’s critical writings on Sand

betray his belief that to achieve literary mastery is to negotiate between and incorporate doubly gendered forms. Superior literature requires both George Sands and Honoré de Balzacs, both Madame Merles and Gilbert Osmonds. Just as the master himself “possess[es]...both” Balzac and Sand, so he possesses both Merle and Osmond, and the complexly gendered forces they represent.

### **Conclusion**

Whereas Osmond attempts to contain, to prevent, and to economize, Madame Merle wants above all else to create—to make art, to furnish “relations,” to mother Pansy, to please Osmond, and in her most perilous experiment, to help build James’s house of fiction by crafting the marriage of Isabel and Osmond. James creates a regulatory scheme in the competition between feminine reproductivity and masculine restriction, a contest whose consequences are (paternal) life and (maternal) death. On its simplest level, this means Madame Merle versus Osmond. On its richest level, this means expansion versus constriction, desire versus discipline, creating versus copying, existing in relations versus retreating into isolation, and the “great round world itself” versus “nothing, nothing, nothing” (216, 233). James weaves into this fictional conflict his analogous, metadiscursive struggle to represent his own queer subjectivity as a literary master. Just as George Sand achieves mastery to the extent that she performs “homogenous” masculinity, and just as Madame Merle achieves mastery to the extent that she performs her own maternal displacement, so James creates a masterful novel to the extent that its “masculine” structure controls its “feminine” contents. For James,

mastery means destroying the very “feminine” bodies upon which high art depends, and thus, ironically, unveiling their not-so-secret superiority.<sup>51</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Henry James, *Notes on Novelists with Some Other Notes* (London: Dent, 1914), 237.
- <sup>2</sup> I take this cue from Richard Brodhead, who makes the keen observation that James's "intercourse is first and foremost with other masters of his form; nonliterary influences act on him more remotely, through the mediation of literary relations" (Richard H. Brodhead, *The School of Hawthorne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 116-7).
- <sup>3</sup> James, "Honoré de Balzac, 1902," 90; *George Sand: Sa Vie et ses Œuvres, vol. iii. (1838-1848)*, 775.
- <sup>4</sup> James, "George Sand: The New Life" (1902), 772; Leland Person, *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (2003)), 18.
- <sup>5</sup> James, "Letter from Paris: The Late George Sand" (1876), 701. Similarly, in his 1902 essay on Balzac, James speaks of the "agents" of artistic influence who "have become a part of our personal history, a part of ourselves, very often, so far as we may have succeeded in best expressing ourselves" (James, "Honoré de Balzac, 1902," 90).
- <sup>6</sup> James, "George Sand: The New Life" (1902), 774.
- <sup>7</sup> James, "Letter from Paris: George Sand" (1876), 704.
- <sup>8</sup> James, "George Sand" (1877), 721. James writes of Sand as a "recruit" in the category of "the dressing-gown and slippers order" of gentlemen: "As a man Madame Sand was admirable—especially as a man of the dressing-gown and slippers order, easy of approach and of *tutoiement*, rubbing shoulders with queer company and not superstitiously haunted by the conception of the gentleman. There have been many men of genius, delightful, prodigal and even immortal, who squared but scantily with that conception, and it is a company to which our heroine is simply one of the most interesting of recruits. She has in it all her value and loses none of her charm. Above all she becomes in a manner comprehensible" (773).
- <sup>9</sup> James, "Letter from Paris: George Sand" (1876), 705; "George Sand" (1877), 712, 717 (See also 726).
- <sup>10</sup> James, "Letter from Paris: George Sand" (1876), 707.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 708.
- <sup>12</sup> James, "The Lesson of Balzac" (1905), 117.
- <sup>13</sup> James, "Letter from Paris: The Late George Sand" (1876), 702; "George Sand" (1868), 697.
- <sup>14</sup> James, "Letter from Paris: George Sand" (1876), 706.
- <sup>15</sup> James, "George Sand" (1868), 699.
- <sup>16</sup> James, "George Sand" (1877), 734.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 721.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 732.
- <sup>19</sup> For example, "Madame Merle perceptibly flushed, but we know it was not her habit to retract..." (213).
- <sup>20</sup> James, "She and He: Recent Documents" (1897), 752.
- <sup>21</sup> James, "George Sand" (1877), 721.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 716.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 712, 728.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 712.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 712.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 729. Osmond observes this quality in Madame Merle: "'You always see too much in everything; you overdo it; you lose sight of the real'" (436).
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 712, 717
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 716
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 717
- <sup>30</sup> James, *George Sand: Sa Vie et ses Œuvres, vol. iii. (1838-1848)*, 781.
- <sup>31</sup> James, "George Sand: The New Life" (1902), 774.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 774.
- <sup>33</sup> James, "George Sand" (1877), 716. The "most brilliant matrimonial associate," James writes, "would have been utterly overmatched" (716).
- <sup>34</sup> For these reasons, Ralph confesses to Isabel, "'she acts on my nerves and...I feel about her a good deal as the intensely human Athenian felt about Aristides the Just'" (216).
- <sup>35</sup> "'I don't like Madame Merle!'" yelps Pansy to Isabel (463).
- <sup>36</sup> See: Cecile Mazzucco-Tham, *"A Form Foredoomed to Looseness": Henry James's Preoccupation with the Gender of Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2002); Kelly Cannon, *Henry James and*

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*Masculinity: The Man at the Margins* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); Peggy McCormack, ed. *Questioning the Master: Gender and Sexuality in Henry James's Writings* (London: Associated University Presses, 2000); Mary P. Edwards Kitterman, "Henry James and the Artist-Heroine in the Tales of Constance Fenimore Woolson" in *Nineteenth-Century Women Writers of the English-Speaking World*, ed. Rhoda B. Nathan (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986); Leland Person, *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Elaine Pigeon, *Queer Impressions: Henry James's Art of Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (David Bevington, ed. New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 29.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Carolyn Dever, *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1998)), 43.

<sup>40</sup> Dever, 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Dever, 45.

<sup>43</sup> Person, 23.

<sup>44</sup> See footnote 36.

<sup>45</sup> James, "George Sand" (1877), 721; When a text can boast of "masculine firmness," as James put in his 1888 essay on Maupassant, "every phrase is a close sequence, every epithet a paying piece" (Mazzucco-Tham, 59).

<sup>46</sup> Person, 22.

<sup>47</sup> See pp. 181, 213.

<sup>48</sup> Dever, 45.

<sup>49</sup> "Her imagination supplied the human element [of Osmond] which she was sure had not been wanting," Isabel contemplates, "naturally she couldn't expect him to enter into this" (228).

<sup>50</sup> Isabel contemplates: "There was explanation enough in the fact that he was her lover, her own, and that she should be able to be of use to him. She could surrender to him with a kind of humility, she could marry him with a kind of pride; she was not only taking, she was giving" (297).

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