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Portraits and Palimpsests

John Banville. *Mrs Osmond*. New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2017. 384 pp. \$27.95 (Hardback).

By Bethany Layne, *De Montfort University Leicester*

Madame Merle is a blonde. Given the number of times I have read James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (roughly biennially since my mid-teens), this should be no revelation, but on every one of those half-dozen readings, I am arrested by the mention of her "thick, fair hair" (PL 196). Jane Campion has, I suspect, more than a little to do with this: in her 1996 film adaptation, "the cleverest woman in the world" is played by Barbara Hershey, a brunette (PL 588). That a few late-night viewings of the film should overlay fifteen years of careful study is curious, particularly given that I invariably drift off somewhere around Pansy's first ball, to wake with a start when Ned Rosier bellows that he has "sold [his] bibelots." But when it comes to *Portrait's* legacy, Campion's film has rather a lot to answer for. John Malkovich's physicalizing of Osmond's psychological abuse informs Kirsten Tranter's *The Legacy*, in which Isabel, or "Ingrid," is a battered wife, as well as this most recent reimagining, whose prose is permeated by Malkovich's actions. Osmond is witnessed "leaning his face close to [Isabel's] and wagging his head . . . at once menacing and horribly comical" (Banville 290), while the experience of hearing Merle call Osmond by his first name is "like a sharp slap upon the cheek with a silk glove" (334)—both actions that viewers of the film will recall. This is by way of saying that Isabel's latest incarnation, John Banville's *Mrs Osmond*, carries a heavy burden of responsibility in its turn, for "palimpsests make for permanent change" (Hutcheon 29).

When Isabel Osmond closed the door of Henrietta Stackpole's Wimpole Street lodgings, causing first-time readers of either version to howl in anguish, she ushered in more than a century of speculation about what awaited her in Rome. Incarceration

at the Palazzo Roccanera, a flight with her stepdaughter, an adulterous reunion with Goodwood (yes, really: see R. H. Hutton), or a final escape from the “hard manhood” that had pursued her across two continents (*PL* 627)? When we join Banville’s Isabel in the railway carriage that will bear her away from Gardencourt and into her future, these manifold possibilities close down. The text is an affront to James’s refusal to spell out Isabel’s destiny. But what follows is, by my highly subjective reckoning, very good indeed and testament to Banville’s skill, for in general terms the prognosis for sequels is poor. Martin Middeke’s discussion of Austen continuations serves as a barometer for the critical debate: they are “aesthetically dubious,” symptomatic of “nostalgia and a retrogressive desire . . . on the part of the reader” (4). Colm Tóibín, who recommended this novel, was surprised to find a “serious artist doing a sequel,” and even more so that the sequel appeared to be “a genuine thing” (Tóibín). Even Sonny Mehta, the editor-in-chief at Banville’s publishing house, calls the impulse “outrageous,” though more in a tone of titillation than censure (Banville n.pag.). In excluding prequels and sequels from her study of adaptations, Linda Hutcheon helps explain this prevailing hostility: such texts are impelled, she believes, by the desire for continuation rather than change (9). Yet if the majority of sequels are born out of “never wanting the story to end” (Hutcheon 9), Banville instead takes issue with the story’s ending and its implied renunciation by whichever form. By inhabiting James’s novel, offering revised viewpoints, inferring characters’ motivations, and giving voice to the marginalized (Sanders 18), he provides the critical commentary that defines appropriation, rather than simply offering us more of the same.

Banville’s revised viewpoint enables an intriguing new perspective on Isabel as a mother, a facet of her identity that is elided in James’s text. Six months after the death of her son, James’s Isabel “had already laid aside the tokens of mourning” (*PL* 422), and this is the last we hear of the child for some time. When Mrs. Touchett, after the death of Ralph, tells her niece to “go and thank God you’ve no child” (616), this is more than just her characteristic tactlessness. It is as though the text has joined her in the act of forgetting. Banville, without allowing Isabel’s trauma to define his characterization, repeatedly returns us to the fact of her loss and her torment that “the child might have lived if she had loved him more” (118). Arguably, the baby only exists in James’s text as proof positive that the marriage has been consummated, a proof of which Banville demonstrates remarkably little need. Inspired, perhaps, by James’s suggestion that “if a certain light should dawn she could give herself completely” (*PL* 71), Banville’s Isabel acknowledges “the swooning completeness of her surrender, the moaning abjection with which she prostrated herself before [her husband]” (267). Osmond’s response is beautifully in character: “once he saw how it was with her, he saw too how to turn the thing to his advantage. *Her* passion was the question, and it would be *his* power. Now came the exquisite judgement, the meticulous calibration, in the matter of giving and withholding” (267). This has the all-but-statement of the major phase, reminiscent of Merton Densher’s masturbatory “hallucination of intimacy” with Kate Croy (*WD* 315), or of Amerigo and Charlotte’s orgasmic interplay of “pressure” and “response” as they “passionately seal . . . their pledge” (*GB* 221). It is such moments of not-quite-homage, not-quite-pastiche that lend Banville’s text that most coveted of qualities: authenticity. Mehta’s prediction that “you will wonder if he didn’t discover a long-lost manuscript by Henry James himself” may be taking

things a little too far (Banville n.pag.), but Banville's tone is entirely plausible as an extension to James's oeuvre.

Banville's revised viewpoint also enlivens characters whose perspectives, in the original, are overshadowed by Isabel's. These include the Countess Gemini, whose opinions of her sister-in-law ("so determinedly, so tediously virtuous" [Banville 197]) and niece ("damply vacant" [Banville 211]) provide some of the most humorous moments in the novel. Pansy herself is an obviously marginalized character crying out for a voice, and Banville is happy to oblige. One of his more provocative suggestions is that Pansy is a skilled dissimulator, "maintaining, with a convincingsness worthy of her father at his most dissembling, an appearance of demure blandness and childlike docility" (202). This is exemplary of the subversive power of appropriation. With Pansy's "mask of filial obedience" revealed for what it is (203), the reader is newly alert to her potential subterfuge in James's text, such as her "appearance of candour which imposed conviction" (PL 260).

Rather less satisfying, because insufficiently prepared-for, is Banville's revelation about the effects of Pansy's cloistering, which rivals the fate of the first Mrs. Osmond for the novel's most sensational element. A second bone of contention is Banville's several invented characters, of whom, as James said of Henrietta Stackpole, "we have indubitably too much" (PL 16), and who steal space from the figures we truly care about. Yet I say this as a devoted reader of *Portrait*, whereas Banville takes pains to include readers with varying degrees of foreknowledge. There are in-jokes aplenty for the Jamesian crowd: a visit from a "Miss Woolson" (50); Osmond paying a call to his "original," Francis Boott (263); Madame Merle's gaze fixing itself on a Beer-bohmian "mote in the middle distance" (326). But these co-exist with paraphrases of *Portrait*'s crucial scenes to orient the unfamiliar reader, such as the pivotal moment before Isabel leaves for Gardencourt, when Osmond reaffirms his allegiance to "*the honour of a thing*" (278). Such moments justify Mehta's claim that "you need not have read *The Portrait of a Lady* to succumb to Isabel's pluck and charm" (Banville n.pag.). And if you have? No "ahs," no "buts": I adored it.

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