EXPECTED FOR THE MARRIAGES delineated at length in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Golden Bowl*, such significant glimpses of married life as James offers in the novels are no more calculated to convey an affirmative vision of the institution than are those presented in the shorter works. Indeed, even most of the unseen marriages, those ended by the times in which the novels they figure in are set, are generally unappealing to contemplate. The terrors of being the husband of either Madame de Bellegarde or Mrs. Newsome are doubtless ineffable. Similarly, the shabbiness of the Condrip marriage, the deceits and quiet viciousness of the Merle union, and the tepid pleasures derived from being the wife of the young Lambert Strether are all readily perceivable though the marriages themselves are long since past. In marriages that to the dubious fortune of the husbands are still extant, Guy Brissenden, who, if the narrator’s theory in *The Sacred Fount* is to be believed, is being slowly drained of vitality by his vampire wife, and Jim Pocock, gurgling his joy in *The Ambassadors* at being allowed a chance to go to the Varieties and other Parisian hot spots and thus for a few evenings get out from under the pressures of being the husband of Sarah and the son-in-law of Mrs. Newsome, convey ample evidence of James’s continuing fears that marriage engenders domination, self-deception, and self-repression. However, the marriages seen at greatest length, other than those in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Golden Bowl*, are presented in *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *The Awkward Age* (1899); and these, though singularly unappealing, convey (implicitly and indirectly to be sure), as the shorter fiction does not, the benefits that can be derived from marriage, even in the midst of the predominant pain.
The marriage between Maisie’s parents and the subsequent one of her father and her quondam governess, Miss Overman, are seen as Maisie sees them and, hence, are all the more disturbing, even frightening, than they would be if seen from an adult perspective. The figures in them, like all adults in Maisie’s world, “approach and fade,” in Tony Tanner’s words, “like fish in a murky aquarium.” More, when they are near, again to quote Tanner, “they change their relationship with her most capriciously . . . and show her annoyance and affection, attention and indifference in an arbitrary manner which Maisie is at a loss to comprehend.” Literally and figuratively, then, “people in general” are for Maisie “never where you might expect them to be.” To put it another way, they appear to her much as figures do to a child caught in nightmare. They are imbued so luridly with preternatural, even supernatural, capacities for ill, for shape-changing, for sheer starkness of being as to make one pity the poor child trapped in intimate confrontation with them. Thus, all that Maisie sees is disturbingly “phantasmagoric—strange shadows dancing on a sheet,” cruelly intensified as if, James notes, “the whole performance had been given for her—a mite of a half-scared infant in a great dim theatre,” attempting to see just how she fits into the performance, which is the playing-out of perhaps the meanest marriage James ever depicts.

By her estranged parents, for whom marriage “had mainly suggested . . . the unbroken opportunity to quarrel,” Maisie was wanted “not for any good they could do her, but for the harm they could, with her unconscious aid, do each other” (p. 5). So might one with a bit of experience characterize the relation of the Faranges with their daughter; but, unable to perceive as a detached, sentient adult might that her mother and father are a promiscuous, hypocritical, lust-riden pair, deterred neither by common decency nor fear of notoriety from their vicious pursuit of pleasure and their childish hatred of each other, Maisie sees them merely in terms of the vivid images and stark experiences that she connects with them and that she tries feebly to shape into some sort of order understandable to herself. Thus, to Maisie her
father is most of all a man with "shining fangs" (p. 180) and a broad expanse of gleaming shirt-front who blows smoke in her face, pinches her thin calves in cruel sport, swears at her mother present and absent, belabors Maisie with being variously "a dirty little donkey" (p. 156) or "a little ass" (p. 183), and, finally, who deserts her and his second wife to run off with a rich American woman who seems to Maisie "a dreadful human monkey in a spangled petticoat" with a "nose that was far too big and eyes that were far too small and a moustache that was, well, not so happy a feature as Sir Claude's" (p. 193). Her mother, who speaks brutally in Maisie's presence of the girl's father, and finally deserts Maisie and Sir Claude to run off with a new lover, is a garish, billiard-playing virago, quick to belabor her little daughter with her "falsity" when Maisie fails to grasp either her attacks on her husband or her tawdry plans. Invariably, she is as bewildering and threatening to Maisie as is the girl's father. Pulled to her mother's breast when the woman makes a self-serving show of maternal affection, the child finds herself "amid a wilderness of trinkets,... as if she had suddenly been thrust, with a smash of glass, into a jeweller's shop-front" (p. 145). As one would expect, this pair and their subsequent mates and lovers confront Maisie with an unending succession of the strange: a trip to a seedy exhibition hall in which devotees of anthropology can observe the "Flowers of the Forest," the flowers being a "large presentment of bright brown ladies—they were brown all over—in a medium suggestive of tropical luxuriance" (p. 171); the sundry study rooms with the fantastic Mrs. Wix and her omnipresent "straighteners"; a sudden meeting in a verdant park with her mother and a mysterious "Captain"; a hurried, obscure journey across the channel to a quaint French town—all of these, along with the moustachioed American "Countess," the quarrels, the coach rides as she is shunted between parents, former parents, and soon-to-be parents, the smoke-filled rooms in which her father holds forth about her thin calves to his sporting friends, and the billiard rooms in which her mother dominates the table become the clutter of disorienting scenes, places, and people that is her childhood.
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The voracity, vulgarity, depravity, the sheer nastiness forming this Sargasso Sea of her youth are lost upon Maisie. Similarly lost upon her is the propensity of the adults around her to use her for their own sleazy purposes as, among others, bearer of ugly epithets that she fails to know the meanings of, go-between, pretext for illicit liaisons, and butt of coarse, lewd humor. Clearly, it is through the mistreatment of this child, all the more painful to observe, perhaps, because she is so unaware of it, that James shows the ugliness he finds so often attendant upon marriage. Nonetheless, Maisie's life is not blighted. Despite her youth and naiveté, she attains genuine moral stature, and attains it not merely in spite of the corruption that surrounds her but because of the experiences that it presents her. When Maisie, confronting Sir Claude in the presence of the second Mrs. Beale Farange in the French seaside town, demands of him nothing less than love, commitment, and courageous renunciation not only of Mrs. Beale but of his whole way of life, she has become, of course, the "abominable little horror" (p. 354) that Mrs. Beale calls her; but she is so only from the perspective of that irretrievably corrupt woman and the others like her who are used to Maisie solely as pliant and passive, an easy mark. From the perspective of James, Maisie has become, wondrously enough, the only character in the work capable of speaking with moral authority, the only one who, because she loves, cares, and demands honesty of others and herself, has really attained the freedom about which the others prate whenever they wish to justify their low courses of self-indulgence. When Sir Claude, rising to an appreciation of Maisie's moral grandeur but otherwise incapable of breaking from the chains of lust forged by the lure of Maisie's stepmother, fails to leave with Maisie, the girl's new will does not shatter. "By this time . . . afraid of nothing" (p. 352), loath to yield to her old governess and become again merely a means by which a sordid affair can be made to seem respectable, Maisie will now chart her own course. Encouraged by Sir Claude's appreciation of her integrity and bravery, ready now to live genuinely the moral life about which her nominal protectress, the ineffectual and all too corruptible Mrs. Wix,
merely cants and maunders, Maisie sails back to England in control of her future, gliding over waters in which, figuratively speaking, all the others are merely submerged and thrashing viciously about.

Prompting Maisie's growth has been not merely her real love for Sir Claude but the very pain into which the chaotic lives of her parents have immersed her. Somehow, through the welter of sharp, grotesque images and bizarre places and events that she has been unable to shape into ideas she can articulate, Maisie has discerned the outlines of right and wrong, love and hate. Perhaps in seeing and knowing intimately these opposites, she has, by virtue of her innate worth, gravitated ineluctably to the good. Had she not known the pain, she might not finally feel so repelled by it; had she not been subjected to its grips so intensely, her final hold on her moral vision might not be so tenacious. What this all amounts to, of course, is no striking affirmation of marriage on James's part but an awareness that one does not find in the shorter fiction that the pain associated with any given marriage can be educative, if not for the married persons themselves at least for one tied intimately to marriage (an ironic reversal, this, of Howells's fond wish that the good effects of a happy marriage will ripple outward into society and, for that matter, of Herrick's view, later, that the bad effects of unhappy marriages will ripple outward). For James to envision marriage as educative for the marrieds, he needs the fuller scope provided by a more extensively delineated marriage than one perceives here or in The Awkward Age.

Such education as is derived from the wrecked marriages dotting the London landscape of the Brookenham circle in The Awkward Age again is not to be found in the married folk themselves but in others—in this case, the bachelor Longdon, too old to marry, and the slightly shopworn ingenuous Nanda, regarded by Vanderbank, the man she could love, as too tainted for him to marry. The affection, understanding, and depth of communication achieved by Longdon and Nanda not only grow out of their painful contacts with the marital disasters about them but serve as examples, oddly enough, of what some of the dimensions of a good marriage
might be. Indeed, through all of James’s account of this circle and its disastrous marriages what one is left with, finally, is not so much a sense of revulsion from marriage on James’s part as a longing that it might be more often all that it should be. Though this, of course, is implicit in the melodramatic mode in which the shorter marriage fiction is written, it never makes itself felt as explicitly as it does here. Thus, in *The Awkward Age* one perceives less of a sense on James’s part of marriage as a relationship pricking human failings into action than of marriage as a potentially worthwhile relationship beset by human failings. Though James may well regard marriage in these terms in the shorter works, the emphasis there seems inevitably to be on marriage as breeding ground of problems rather than on marriage as vulnerable to problems inherent in those who wed.

Certainly, at first glance, marriage in *The Awkward Age* seems nothing but an unpleasant opportunity to lapse into corruption or to be hurt by a partner who does. Edward Wag enknecht’s succinct account of the adulteries permeating the work gives a vivid sense of just how inescapable the marital pitfalls seem:

Cashmore is having an affair with Carrie Donner, whom he drops (or so he claims) when he is attracted to Nanda, shamelessly avowing his new interest to Mrs. Brook herself, who expresses no indignation; his wife, Lady Fanny, is involved with Captain Dent-Douglas; and Lady Fanny’s brother, Lord Petherton, is having an affair with the Duchess. Later Petherton switches to Little Aggie [Mitchy’s wife and the Duchess’s niece] and Lady Fanny to Harold Brookenham, who is mature only in his vices.4

Nor is there any reason to believe, apparently, that, given the views on matrimony of those depicted in this novel, adulterous relationships and a gradually widening network of corruption are anything but virtual inevitabilities to which marriage among them gives rise. J. A. Ward notes that for Longdon, “who represents the mores of a previous age,” marriage “is a matter of sacred trust and devotion.” For the others, though, who seem to epitomize the failings of the
present age for James, marriage, Ward points out, is something quite different: "To Mrs. Brook and the Duchess, marriage is a matter of political intrigue; ... to Cashmore, Petherton, Lady Fanny, and Mrs. Donner ... it is a matter of frivolity; to Vanderbank, it is a matter of self-effacement."

Marriage, then, regarded variously as means to power, subject for mirth, titillating opportunity for illicit pleasures, and possible threat to self-indulgence, does not offer these characters anything approximating "sacred trust and devotion." Sadly, the closest they come to attaining what Longdon sees as inherent in a good marriage is in their formation of Mrs. Brook's "circle," a group that, in achieving an ephemeral intimacy, arouses in Mitchy and, perhaps as well, in Mrs. Brook herself, a capacity for commitment that approaches what Longdon has in mind as the goals and rewards of matrimony. However, that the fulfillment Longdon envisions can be achieved in any marriages made on the modern scene James depicts here seems even more improbable than that such transient virtues as are shown in the "circle" can be made permanent, compelling forces in the lives of those who make up this group.

Nevertheless, what predominates here for all the adultery, dishonesty, and pain associated with marriage is, as I have noted, not an attack on the institution but a poignant sense of what is lost when marriages fail or when matrimony itself is not respected sufficiently. One senses this in what is perhaps the dominant force in the novel, the talk of the circle itself. Dorothea Krook notes that the conversation, "oblique, allusive, elliptical" as it is, bristling with "crucial implications of which not one must be lost on pain of losing the thread of a whole scene, if not of the whole story," is clearly "the speech of a homogeneous, closely-knit social group sharing common standards, attitudes, forms of behavior." Further, she points out, "precisely because so much is shared, no part of what is shared need ever be explicitly referred to." Such talk as this engenders certain expectations, of course, expectations of shared commitments, shared concerns, a sense of community. Nowhere, finally, are these expectations met by the group. As Mrs. Brook perceives at the close, their talk has
been “mere talk,” and it has been “mere, mere, mere,” as Vanderbank rejoins, because, Mrs. Brookenham states, the talkers “haven’t had the excuse of passion.” Unfulfilled by the circle, these expectations are met, surprisingly, for a moment anyway, in the Brookenham marriage, the only union at which James affords his readers an inside look in *The Awkward Age*. What is so surprising in this is that the Brookenhams’ talk usually shows them to be far less on the same wavelength than are the members of the group. The uncomprehending rejoinders, the unresponsive “ohs” tendered Mrs. Brook typically by her “dry and decent and even distinguished” but pedestrian and unimaginative husband prompt her at one point, in fact, to think “she would no more have appealed to him seriously on a general proposition than she would, for such a response, have rung the drawing-room bell” (p. 56). Briefly, though, this poorly mated pair do in their talk achieve the affection and the sense of community at which the talk of the circle merely points. This occurs when, in the course of discussing Nanda’s future, Mrs. Brook confesses that she feels herself the chief obstacle to her daughter’s making a good marriage. Hearing this, her husband asks with real affection, “And what’s the matter with ‘you’?” To which Mrs. Brook, touched, replies, “That’s the nicest thing you ever said to me. But ever, ever you know,” and goes on to declare poignantly, “Consider that fact well, and, even if you only said it by accident, don’t be funny—as you know you sometimes can be—and take it back. It’s all right. It’s charming isn’t it? When our troubles bring us more together?” (pp. 384–85). This moment in which their talk has been touched for once by some degree of deep affection is not enough, obviously, to redeem the continuum of lesser moments that is the Brookenham marriage, but it is enough to show that marriage is a relationship in which the unfulfilled promise of the circle’s talk can be fulfilled, even such a marriage as that of deeply flawed people like the Brookenhams.

The idea that marriage is a relationship of potential value subverted by human failings that is conveyed implicitly in the Brookenhams’ brief moment of genuine affection and indirectly in the vision of shared concerns and commitments en-
gendered by the circle’s talk is reinforced elsewhere in the novel. When Longdon’s declaration to Nanda that “you shall never be anything so sad” as one who does not marry prompts her query “Why not—if you’ve been,” his rejoinder “Exactly because I have” (p. 193) makes eminently clear that from the standpoint of one who, however old-fashioned his tastes may be, is in a position to know, marriage is a definite good. Similarly, Nanda’s own declaration that in marriage “the great thing is to be helpful” (p. 445) provides a compelling reminder of all that a marriage can be when those in it have it in them to seek to be of aid to each other. Finally, the sad retreat from the modern rout undertaken together by Longdon and Nanda, though the palest of matrimonial imitations to be sure (Longdon far in the past had sought to marry Nanda’s late grandmother, whom Nanda strongly resembles), does nonetheless provide a hint of what a real marriage might offer in the way of mutual comfort and support in a difficult world.

The wisdom that Maisie, Longdon, and Nanda attain is, as we have seen, a wisdom that comes outside marriage though closely linked to it. In *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Golden Bowl*, James’s most extensive delineations of marriage, it comes within wedlock itself. In the former, in fact, it is virtually the only reward that Isabel’s marriage offers her, for love in any usual sense, comfort, and joy are not to be hers with Gilbert Osmond. Nevertheless, what Isabel does derive at last from her marriage is enough to make it a successful, even a triumphant, one for her. Needless to say, it is so only in a very special sense. To understand fully the terms in which her triumph is operative, it is useful, I think, to turn to an account offered in the 1920s by Count Herman Keyserling of the highest benefits that can be derived from marriage. In his essay “The Correct Statement of the Marriage Problem,” Keyserling never refers to James and probably does not even have him in mind; but his unconventional theories are, in any case, of admirable aid in enabling one to appreciate the no less unconventional victory that James romantically envisions Isabel as attaining. Writing of those who are sufficiently sentient to be capable of achieving more
than commonplace gratifications in their marriages, Keyserling notes that “the fulfillment of marriage and its happiness entail the acceptance of the suffering pertaining to life. It gives the latter a new and deeper meaning.” His subsequent assertion that marriage without intimate knowledge of pain is incompatible with real personal growth seems so in tune with James’s thinking at the close of *The Portrait of a Lady* as almost to have been written by James himself in explanation and defense of Isabel’s behavior at the end of the work:

Marriage is essentially an ideal common to all humanity, for, if properly understood and carried out, it *precludes* the possibility of attaining satisfaction on a low plane, and consequently establishes a higher one. Its intention is not to slacken but intensify conditions. That is why unhappily married people more rarely do harm to their souls than those who are happily married. Not only does an unhappy marriage promote self-development more positively than does a state of ease due to lack of experience, but it leads more readily to that inward happiness which is the necessary consequence of achievement than any harmony can do which fails to make life more intense.  

This, then, is a characterization of matrimony as the inevitably painful but potentially triumphant, drawn-out confrontation with experience that is what James envisions marriage at its best as being and that, within the narrower scope of the short fiction and of the briefly delineated marriages in *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age*, is never developed.

Keyserling’s statements do, obviously, take us a bit ahead of ourselves; for Isabel’s triumph, as James manifestly sees her decision to return to Osmond to be, is only comprehensible as the final stage of a completed action, the culmination of her seemingly idiosyncratic decision to marry Osmond in the first place. However, the key terms for understanding that earlier decision are again to be found in Keyserling’s account of the grim triumph attainable in marriage. When he speaks of the need to “intensify conditions in order to promote self-development,” he is dealing in assumptions that are central to James’s portrayal of Isabel’s needs and her underlying reasons for marrying Osmond. For James, inevita-
bly, living in "intensified conditions" implies living in intimate confrontation with experience, which, in turn, finally implies the opportunity to confront oneself and thereby undergo the "self-development" of which Keyserling speaks. For a young woman in the nineteenth century, even a young woman as independent and even willful as Isabel is, James realizes—as Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton later will—the major chance to achieve such a confrontation can only come with marriage and, perhaps, with a marriage none too happy at that. Now obviously Isabel does not marry Osmond with the idea in mind of having a bleak marriage and thereby growing. She marries him, as Tony Tanner notes, for entirely other reasons, reasons involving her own youthful egotism and devotion to what she considers to be her freedom. "Like many another character in American fiction," Tanner points out, "[Isabel's] energy goes into avoiding any commitment which might serve to define and arrest her." Thus, obscurely feeling the need for involvement with life and the chance to put her financial power to use, Isabel seeks marriage; but desiring, as well, to soar over the world that lies all before her and, in good American Emersonian fashion, loath, as she declares to Madame Merle, to let anything express her but herself, she seeks a marriage offering her the largest area in which to be her unencumbered self. And wedding Osmond, Tanner asserts, presents itself for Isabel as the most obvious means of achieving just such an ideal marriage in which involvement and unrestricted free play of self are happily combined because, as she unconsciously perceives, she and Osmond, despite all appearances to the contrary, are markedly alike.¹ Her marriage to one greatly like herself turns out far differently, of course, from what she had imagined—the aspects of herself reflected in Osmond had indeed been, to use the term she applies to her husband, "unimaginable"—but it is, finally, a means by which she comes to know herself and attain the growth of which Keyserling speaks.

Had Isabel wed Goodwood, Warburton, or such unexceptionable young men as her sisters do, she never would have found herself thinking of herself and her husband that "they
were strangely married at all events, and it was a horrible life"; but she also would not have undergone the confrontation with experience and, ultimately, with herself into which marriage with Osmond has led her. What one sees of Isabel in her married life until her decision to go to Ralph is a woman who, in many ways akin to her husband from the first, seems to become even more strikingly like him as the marriage wears on. Similar to Osmond initially in her weaker traits, including propensities for paying "excessive attention to appearances rather than realities," for preferring art to life, for having "more theories than feelings, more ideals than instincts," Isabel when first seen after several years of marriage seems like Osmond even in manner. The clipped answers and distant tone underlying the facade of merriment in her meeting with Rosier in chapter 38, a style of conversation generally that, as Ralph observes, reveals that she has lost her "discrimination" and "fallen into exaggerations," even the very "mass of drapery" drawn behind her "light step" and the "majesty of ornament" sustained by her "intelligent head," all manifest "that she appeared now to think that there was nothing worth people's either differing about or agreeing upon" (2:143). All of this, of course, bespeaks a rather uncomfortable likeness to Osmond that is all the more apparent the first time the pair are shown in conversation since their marriage. Their talk is of a tautness never here-tofore glimpsed in marital conversation in American literature, as husband and wife jockey intently for the psychological edge over each other, alert to each shifting nuance of menace in the other's words, and it shows unsparingly how completely akin to Osmond's Isabel's demeanor has become. As her husband unfolds his hopes that Warburton will propose to Pansy, who, he wishes, will reject Rosier's blandishments, Isabel's replies are no more calculated to give him pleasure than his obvious quiet relish in the fact that her former suitor now seems interested in his daughter is meant to give Isabel. Her quiet comment that "it matters little" to one in love, as Rosier is, whether she encourages him or not or whether Osmond "turns him out" or not because "a lover outside's always a lover" gives Osmond little joy. Nor do her
replies in response to his cool assurances that his daughter “wishes above all to please” and will “do what I like.” To the former she rejoins, “To please Mr. Rosier perhaps”; to the latter the quietly sinister line, “If you’re sure of that, it’s very well” (2:181, 183). Thus James shows that Isabel now, so like her husband, “was not accommodating, would not glide” (2:182). Were she “accommodating,” of course, she certainly would not ask of Osmond as she does, when he speaks of Pansy becoming Lady Warburton, “Should you like that?” (2:181); for the very essence of Osmond’s self-esteem is his maintenance of the appearance that he seeks little from the world, and her question is a frontal assault on this pose—as, doubtless, she well knows.

Hence, all evidence presented in the early chapters depicting the married life of the Osmonds shows that the general similarities between the pair before their marriage are reproduced now in the smallest, most intimate details of their demeanor together. Consequently, Isabel, in effect, by confronting in her marriage this sort of mocking mirror image of her own worst traits, responds, paradoxically enough, by exaggerating these traits as she combats them when they are manifested by her spouse. Though, to be sure, this does not make for a happy marriage, it makes for one in which the growth of which Keyserling speaks and that James clearly values is possible. It is possible, finally, because, despite all similarities between them, Isabel is not a female Osmond but someone far better than he. Were she not so, one suspects, neither James nor Ralph would concern himself so much about her development as he does, nor would characters as admirable in their different ways as Ralph, Warburton, Goodwood, and Henrietta be as devoted to her as, in their different ways, all of them are. And what makes her better than Osmond is the capacity for commitment, compassion, for sheer openness to life and its vicissitudes—the capacity, in short, as all these imply, for moral growth, which she never loses despite all her errors and which is never evinced in her husband.

Though the major difference between Isabel and Osmond can be perceived most clearly when one looks at their
thoughts on marriage itself, these seem at first, like so much else described thus far, to reflect more similarities between them than differences. Typically, Osmond’s remark to Goodwood that “being married’s in itself an occupation” (2:314) obviously echoes (although he has not heard it) Isabel’s comment to Ralph, shortly before, that “when one’s married one has so much occupation” (2:305). More significantly, Osmond’s assertion that the “disagreeable proximity” in which he and Isabel find themselves is of their “own deliberate making” and that therefore they “should accept the consequences” of their action because what he values “most in life is the honour of a thing” (2:356) is markedly similar to Isabel’s earlier statement to Henrietta (again unheard by Osmond), “One must accept one’s deeds. I married him before all the world; I was perfectly free, it was impossible to do anything more deliberate. One can’t change that way” (2:284). Also, the motivation underlying Isabel’s words here seems markedly similar to the egotism reflected in everything her husband says and does. Her remark to Henrietta “I can’t publish my mistake. . . . I’d much rather die” (2:284) seems like nothing so much, in this vein, as verbalization of an attitude that her husband has never quite put into words. But James’s purpose, here and elsewhere, in showing similarities between this husband and wife is not, finally, to show that they are lastingly of a piece. Rather, as we have seen, it is to show both the process by which Isabel must confront and even exhibit in aggravated form her worst traits before she can grow beyond them and the terrible intimacy in which she exists with Osmond as she undergoes this process.

More, for all the apparent similarity of their statements on marriage that I have just quoted, their motivations in making them are not identical at all; for though there may be some residual egotism inherent in Isabel’s desire to maintain the facade of a good marriage before the world, her marriage has taught her enough of herself and life to lead her to see that matrimony is in and of itself to be defended and maintained. It has taught her this because, unlike her husband, whose professed concern with the “honour of a thing” and with “the observance of a magnificent form” (2:356) starts and ends virtually with his concern for the image of himself that he
presents to the world and the world's response to that image, Isabel is, finally, capable of caring for things outside herself—for concepts, relationships, institutions, and people. Thus, when she speaks of the necessity of maintaining her marriage, it reflects her concern for personal integrity, her awareness of the worth of the institution, and even, strangely enough, her devotion to Osmond himself more than it reflects egotism.

Several other passages conveying reflections about marriage make this distinction between Isabel and her husband clear. In the course of his conversation with Goodwood in which he speaks of marriage as an "occupation," Osmond notes too that it is so because "my wife and I do so many things together." He goes on to relate with a deceptive air of amiability, "We read, we study, we make music, we walk, we drive—we talk even, as when we first knew each other. I delight, to this hour, in my wife's conversation"; and he concludes with an Iago-like show of offering friendly counsel: "If you're ever bored take my advice and get married. Your wife may indeed bore you . . . ; but you'll never bore yourself. You'll always have something to say to yourself—always have a subject of reflection" (2:314). Knowing what the Osmonds' marriage is like, aware that Osmond, finding Isabel resistant to his efforts at repression, has decided "there was nothing left but to hate her" (2:201), one perceives the menace and mockery permeating these words. Quietly taunting Goodwood, who still is devoted to Isabel, Osmond reveals at the same time the perverse pleasure he seems genuinely to take in being with her and thereby having the continual chance to hate and punish her for her independence. Marriage for him, then, a relationship in which, to use the sinister phrase he uses earlier in conversation with Goodwood, he and his wife are an "united" as "the candlestick and the snuffers" (2:420), is an opportunity for subtle refinements of sadism at the expense of his baffled wife and for self-dramatization before a world at large that, he hopes, is similarly baffled and suitably intrigued.

For Isabel, on the other hand, marriage is less a matter of indulging one's own egotism than it is a matter of obligation. Curiously, she sees this most strongly during her odious con-
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frontation with Osmond over her desire to go to the dying Ralph. Osmond’s assertion to her in the midst of it, “You are nearer to me than any human creature, and I’m nearer to you” (2:356), driving home to her with utmost extremity the nasty situation into which marriage to him has thrust her, seems to drive home as well, as nothing has before, the dimensions of what she describes to herself as “the great undertaking of matrimony” (2:360–61). And she recalls in this moment of reflection, more powerfully than at any moment previously, that “marriage meant that a woman should cleave to the man with whom, uttering tremendous vows, she had stood at the altar” (2:361). She has seen, then, unlike Osmond, who despite his words sees none of it, that the institution of marriage itself, generating an intensity of intimacy unattainable in any other relationship, has an inherent value that cannot be blithely shunted aside, a value that, as the human need to solemnize the relationship with “tremendous vows” shows, may even touch upon the “sacred and precious” (2:356). The very fact that she can see this at all testifies to the validity of her perception. As a result of her marriage and the painful intimacy with Osmond and, eventually, the more painful intimacy with herself that it causes her, Isabel has grown to be the sort of person able to perceive that devotion to things beyond self—to, perhaps, an institution like marriage—can save even a life “thrown away” (2:203), as she has previously regarded her own to be.

Early in the novel, James declares that Isabel is to become “consistently wise” (1:145). Though at this stage of the story, James, to be sure, treats the brash young girl and her longings for the ineffable with a good deal of irony, subsequent events show that James here means exactly what he says. The trial that is her marriage to Osmond leaves her purged of illusions about life and herself and ready to face all with intelligence, compassion, and the quiet courage of which her brashness was merely a crude, transitory manifestation. Saddened by her discovery of Osmond and Merle’s liaison but above resorting to the self-demeaning comforts of vengeful tirades against husband or former friend, committed still to the welfare to her pathetically vulnerable stepdaughter,
brave, knowing, and loving enough to enter into a beautiful communion with her dying cousin and the spirit of Garden-court that he and his father have embodied, Isabel proves herself capable of charting the course James doubtless things the finest available to her, that of returning to her marriage. Though, clearly, as she looks at the years ahead, she wishes things had turned out differently, she is wise enough to know that consequences are to be faced and that acceptance of the life that she, others, and circumstances have all had a hand in shaping is what both moral integrity and the imperatives of her situation dictate.

As we all know, there are those who take issue with Isabel's choice. Finding behind her decision motives of which she is largely unconscious that are less admirable than those we have noted and perceiving, perhaps, alternatives for her that are in their eyes less life-denying than the path she chooses, these commentators believe that her behavior at the close of the novel either is abhorrent to James or ought to be. Holding in abeyance for a moment the question of whether James should be repelled by her choice, we can, I think, by looking closely once again at Isabel's course at the end of the novel, see the erroneousness of the notion that he is so and regards her as driven by self-delusions into the worst of the options available.

Simply put, the notion advanced by some that Isabel's decision to return to Osmond is a crudely self-serving one, growing out of egotism and fear of mature sexuality, is not borne out by the novel. Were Isabel committed merely to an egotistical sort of self-justification in which she seeks only to admire herself and impress others, it is doubtful that James would have presented her profoundly moving last scene with Ralph. To see Isabel in this scene as in the throes of a more subtle form of the egotism she manifested before her marriage is to charge James either with indulging in the most tasteless of ironies at the expense of Isabel, the reader, and even the dying Ralph or with an inadvertent inconsistency of tone, neither of which charges seems justified when one observes the uniformly somber, though not bleak, tone of the concluding chapters of the novel. Further, were Isabel's
choice to stay with Osmond motivated by sexual fear, one wonders why James speaks of the "admirably intimate" (2:140) first year of married life she shared with Osmond or why he mentions that the pair had a child who died. (James’s inclusion of this latter fact is indeed a skillful touch, for it cuts the ground out from under simplistic assumptions about sexual fears, supplies another source for Isabel’s education through marital pain, and does away with any potential a living child might offer for extraneous conflict between Osmond and Isabel or for reasons leading to Isabel’s returning to her husband other than the ones James presents.) Nevertheless, commentators point to Goodwood’s effect on Isabel, particularly in the final scene with him, as a sign of Isabel’s sexual terrors. Obviously, she does fear this man and her response to him. But why on earth should she not? Presented by James as, despite his many virtues, almost a walking phal­lus, Goodwood is constantly thrusting himself at her, conjur­ing up visions of a marriage in which she would be not much more than a physical object to him. Her fear as she responds to him physically is not fear of sexuality itself, but of sexuality so overpowering as to carry all that makes for her freedom chaotically before it, including principles, commitments to others, and most of all her identity as one who has lived, suffered, and loved and, in doing so, has found herself.\textsuperscript{15}

Moreover, to go off with Goodwood of necessity would involve divorce; and divorce, whether to gain Goodwood, someone else, or some ill-defined liberty, offers Isabel little. It is an enormity that would embarrass not only Isabel herself but Pansy (and thus Rosier) and Osmond. Her refusal to wish the latter pain, a clear manifestation of the wisdom and compassion to which the severe educative process of her marriage has brought her, derives explicitly from the insight that his initial misjudgment of her makeup was in part her fault, from her awareness of the possibility that he might turn on Pansy, who would already be hurt terribly by seeing her father suffering, and, finally, from her feeling that she and Osmond have been too close for too long for her to accept with any equanimity the prospect of damaging him. Further, to go the route of divorce not only implies that surpassing
happiness is to be found elsewhere either in or out of marriage, a possibility that Isabel has come to see as illusory, but that happiness is the great good toward which one's life should be directed, a belief of which Isabel has been disabused by the education brought her by marriage. Finally, entering "the great alkali desert of cheap Divorce," as James styles it in *The Golden Bowl*, would represent a repudiation on Isabel's part of an institution that she feels not only to be touched by the sacred but that, as she is fully aware, has taught her a great deal, an institution that she now perceives, in Laurence Holland's words, to be a "form of aspiration and commitment" making the highest demands on those in it and thus opening up possibilities of the greatest victories.

James reveals too, commentators to the contrary notwithstanding, a paucity of alternatives for Isabel should she desire to be right with herself and her circumstances. Divorce out of the question as both she and James see it, there remains nothing for Isabel to do but to return to her marriage and retain the commitment to the institution itself, to Pansy, and, insofar as he lets her, to Osmond. The alternative of staying married to her husband as a different sort of wife, one who finds her pleasures outside her marriage, as Mrs. Touchett does in traveling and residing comfortably alone with no demands on her or as the Countess Gemini does in attempting to avenge herself on her beastly husband by having a string of affairs, offers no chance for Isabel that anyone would seriously think her better off for taking. Mrs. Touchett's prickly, quirky selfishness and the countess's shrill, dotty misery serve, then, both as indicants to the reader of the sorts of folly Isabel avoids by returning, conventionally, to her unhappy marriage and as reminders that because happiness in marriage seems generally rather hard to come by, one might best look for other, perhaps more valuable, rewards in the relationship.

Returning to the question of whether Isabel's course *should* meet with James's approval, as it pretty clearly does, I suspect the answer is not within our purview here. Suffice it to say, as Peter Brooks does, "The theme of renunciation which sounds through James's novels . . . is incomprehen-
sible and unjustifiable except as a victory within the realm of a moral occult which may be so inward and personal that it appears restricted to the individual’s consciousness, predicated on the individual’s ‘sacrifice to the ideal.’” In other words, one either sees beauty in the highly individualistic renunciatory vision shared by Isabel and her creator or one does not; but an inability to perceive it in no way indicates that James does not mean for it to be seen. One for whom Isabel’s course would certainly be triumphant is, again, Keyserling, whose statement following might almost have been written as a defense of Isabel’s return to Osmond:

Human life inasmuch as it is superior to that of plants and animals, starts only with the perception of the inevitability of tragedy and its willing acceptance. From this it is evident in what sense a perfect marriage must represent for man the highest achievement of his purpose. In marriage . . . tragic tension is instinctively accepted as the basis of life . . . Thus suffering can mean happiness just as much as satisfaction can; and the most poignant pain can be joyously accepted if it is recognized as the fulfillment of man’s destiny.

Tension, indeed, there is aplenty in this marriage with Osmond; and as Isabel resolves it internally in terms of renunciation of self and acceptance of the marital form and its exigencies, the tension is raised to the tragic dimensions of which Keyserling speaks. In her free choice, then, to accept the consequences of an initial decision made in less than perfect freedom and to accept confinement as the price of maintaining character, Isabel, for James, attains genuine tragic grandeur; in a manner not unlike that of the novelist who tells her story or that of the marital institution to which, despite the pain it imposes, she maintains her loyalty, she thus imposes form on chaos.

Like The Portrait of a Lady, The Golden Bowl focuses on a marriage that is initially as disastrous as any of the irremediably luckless unions to be found in the short fiction; but again, as with the account of Isabel’s life with Osmond, James sees this marriage as the rare sort from which, ultimately, benefits of surpassing value are derived. Through her mar-
riage Maggie attains a profoundly tragic vision and the moral courage and compassion James saw as its concomitants. Further, she acquires the devotion to those forms, such as marriage, that seem to partake of the sacred as they impart this tragic vision. All of this, of course, is achieved as well, as we have seen, by Isabel. But for Maggie something else is gained too, something that Isabel and all other sentient protagonists in James's depictions of marriage are not fortunate enough to achieve, and that is happiness. What occurs in *The Golden Bowl*, in fact, is the gradual evolution of the union of a seemingly poorly mated pair into the sort of genuine marriage not only of man and woman but of America and Europe and of worldly and transcendent that Isabel had vague, incomplete intimation of when she decided to wed Osmond and that she continues to see as the informing ideal behind the vows she spoke. Indeed, it is Isabel's allegiance to this very ideal that leads her to stay in her marriage and thus maintain loyalty to the institution that makes the ideal, however rarely attained, a possibility.

When last seen, in loving embrace, Maggie and Amerigo have achieved a marriage unlike any other depicted by James and one by its very nature rarely seen anywhere. It is a marriage in which husband and wife, though devoid through hard experience of pleasant illusions about themselves, each other, or life, can still find happiness together. They find this not through leaving the tragic vision behind but through a constant acknowledgment of it that makes their union, as both they and James perceive it to be, a fragile, beautiful stay against confusion, a commitment to their own and mankind's future despite all they know of pain, and, above all, perhaps, a tribute to love itself, which maintains its redemptive power even amid human imperfection and the awesome mysteries and ambiguities of existence. This sort of solemn yet joyous affirmation of life, one transcending tragedy yet deriving its special beauty from being at the same time grounded in it, is what James hopes the intimate, intense confrontation with experience that marriage affords can lead to. That he sees it doing so only rarely is obvious. The tragic vision itself, without which courageous affirmation cannot be reached, is at-
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tained in his marriage works only by Isabel; and though she
herself understands what marriage offers, she fails because
of Osmond's shortcomings to attain the happiness reached,
finally, by Maggie and Amerigo. That they alone in James's
marital fiction attain this level in their marriage testifies both
to the rarefied character of the ideal marriage as James envi­sions it and his awareness of how effectually the limitations
of human nature keep most from realizing this ideal.

Perhaps James's greatest technical triumph among many in
*The Golden Bowl* is the manner in which he makes Maggie
and Amerigo's gradual realization in their marriage of this
glorious matrimonial ideal convincing by painstakingly delineating its evolution through clearly demarcated stages cor­responding to the types of marriages attained by the other
husbands and wives depicted in the book. The originally pro­jected title for this novel, *The Marriages*, though not finally
as evocative as *The Golden Bowl*, is apt nonetheless as an in­dicant of the thematic and structural significance of the other
marriages. The briefly glimpsed Gutermann-Seuss marriage,
the marriages of Adam and Charlotte and of Fanny and Colo­nel Bob are not merely a means of providing one with scattered insights about the central marriage of the work but are the embodiments, as well, of marital states paralleling those
of the prince and Maggie at given stages until this pair moves
beyond all of them to a rare conjugal triumph. More specifi­cally, the commercial arrangement of which the Gutermann­Seuss and, at first, the Verver marriages are redolent, the
Howellsian "affectionate comradeship" of the Assinghams,
and the tragic tension apparent later in Charlotte and Adam's
marriage, all correspond to stages of Maggie's marriage with
Amerigo, enabling one to understand better where this pair
are at any given time, and finally prompting one to grasp that
they are moving through these stages to what is essentially
another, genuinely transcendent, level of marriage.

Tainting Maggie's marriage from the first is the spirit of
acquisition. Underlying both Amerigo's jocular assurance be­fore their wedding that the six months he has spent pursuing
Maggie have been "justified" because "capture had crowned
the pursuit—or success, as he would otherwise have put it,
had rewarded virtue” (1:4) and Maggie’s no less jocular assertion that the prince is “a rarity,” an “object of beauty, an object of price,” a significant “part” of her father’s “collection” (1:12), is something obviously not humorous at all, an inability on the part of either to conceive of marriage as anything other than a convenient means of getting something one wants, be it a pretty, ingenuous little bride of monumental wealth or an imperially slim husband with impeccable Old World lineage and charming panache. Before focusing, however, on the intimate confrontation with each other and themselves that their initial conception of matrimony causes this pair, James turns to two other marriages, Adam’s and Charlotte’s and the Gutermann-Seusses’, in order to emphasize more fully the sinister qualities underlying the view of marriage humorously implied by Maggie and Amerigo. There are several reasons for this strategy. Were James immediately to focus directly on Maggie and Amerigo’s married life, thereby accustoming the reader to seeing them dealing with each other, much of the intensity of their intimate confrontation in the second half of the novel might be vitiated. More, by presenting these other unions James not only achieves indirectly all the reinforcement necessary to the characterization he has shaped of the spirit behind the early stages of Maggie’s marriage, but he also establishes something crucial to an understanding of this novel, a sense both of the timelessness of this spirit and the human susceptibility to it. Finally, these two other marriages, presenting as they do an externalization of the false conceptions initially shaping Maggie and Amerigo’s married life, implicitly establish a standard, one of error, against which the development undergone gradually in the central marriage of the novel can be measured.

The motivations prompting Charlotte and Adam to marry are ultimately rather sinister ones, but they are no more sinister than those tainting whatever affection Maggie and Amerigo feel for each other at the outset of their own marriage. With Adam and Charlotte, they are simply not masked by the humorous tone and charm with which the prince and his bride invest the crasser reasons for the pleased antici-
tion with which they view their upcoming nuptials. As Charlotte herself is frank to admit, her reasons for wanting to give up her peripatetic single existence and marry have little to do with anything but herself and what she might gain through matrimony. She declares, "I won’t pretend I don’t think it would be good for me to marry. Good for me I mean . . . because I’m so awfully unattached. I should like to be a little less adrift. I should like to have a home. I should like to have an existence" (1:219). She goes on to confess that she finds “Miss” a term “too dreadful—except for a shop girl” and that she does not want to be “a horrible English old-maid” (1:219). But she notes quite candidly as well that she does not see why “for a mere escape from my state—I need do quite so much” (1:219), so much, that is, as get married. Finally, of course, she accepts Adam’s offer of marriage, but the spirit in which she accedes to his proposal and that characterizes her sense of what marriage entails never changes, right through her illicit involvement with Amerigo and her transportation, at last, to America, from that which she manifests here. Nor, clearly, does Adam marry Charlotte in any significantly different spirit. If he offers her comfort, stability, and escape from the indignities of poverty and spinsterhood, she offers him, above all, a means of pacifying his daughter’s fears that he is lonely.

For all that is wrong here, though, even Charlotte and Adam’s reasons for marrying do not see quite so unsavory and dangerous as they actually are, since Adam’s apparent guilelessness, Charlotte’s beauty, and the relative frankness with which the couple deal with each other impart to their relationship a deceptive aura of innocence. Thus, as Laurence Holland notes, James, seeking to show the ugliness lurking behind the pleasant facade in the impending union of this pair and through it the similar ugliness marring the early stage of Maggie’s marriage, provides a brief sketch of the Guttermann-Seuss marriage. This, presented mainly in terms of James’s account of the marriage’s progeny and the bevy of surrounding Guttermann-Seuss relations—all of whom are in mercilessly full view when Adam and Charlotte call—is, despite being distressingly anti-Semitic, deeply effective in por-
traying the vulgar essence of acquisitiveness. As Adam deals with Gutermann-Seuss for some precious Damascene tiles, the marital bargain he and Charlotte are on the verge of sealing becomes inextricably associated for the reader with the merchant, his closely ranged offspring of “eleven little brown clear faces, with such impersonal old eyes astride of such impersonal old noses” and his “fat earringed aunts and . . . glossy cockneyfied familiar uncles, inimitable of accent and assumption and of an attitude cruder than that of the head of the firm” (1:213). Hence, the completed transaction with Gutermann-Seuss, marked as it is by the dispensing all round of “heavy cake and port wine” that add to the deal “the touch of some mystic rite of old Jewry” (1:216), ties the upcoming marriage of Adam and Charlotte, no less a product of shrewd negotiation, to what James sees as an avarice timeless in its origins and virtually inexpungible from the human scene.

The unfortunate results of entering marriage with gain for oneself as one’s major goal are not long in manifesting themselves. Imperfectly committed to their mates, Maggie and Adam, as all know, spend more time closeted with each other than is good for their marriages. Left too much to their own devices, the prince and Charlotte, themselves devoted more fully to self-indulgence than to their mates or matrimony, are not long in finding illicit mutual solace with each other. What is particularly insidious about all this is, as James shows, its aura of plausibility, even of charm. Certainly, there seems nothing unappealing on the face of it in a daughter and father spending time together, especially time shared with the daughter’s child, the handsome little principino. And the “noble fairness” of Matcham, where the weekending prince and Charlotte decide to embark on their course of adultery, seems to sound amid the “generous mood of the sunny gusty lusty English April” (1:332) an almost irresistibly enticing “call to the ingenuities and impunities of pleasure,” demanding only such “courage and good humor” (1:332) as are readily compatible with its pervasive “wonderful spirit of compromise” (1:354). In such a scene, even the shabby amour of Lady Castledean and Mr. Blint seems
touched by an aura of graceful ease that makes all and anything seem right and acceptable to those for whom the good is self-indulgence; but as James shows with the Gutermann-Seusses and the perhaps divorced, perhaps vaguely married Mrs. Rance, who is seen pursuing Adam before he weds Charlotte, at the root of the deceptively appealing devotion to self are blatant rapacity and moral disorder. The failure of Maggie and Adam, Charlotte and the prince to perceive this through the first half of the novel manifests James's view that the pursuit of personal gain at the expense of commitment to principle or to those around one is so intrinsically a part of the human scene as to seem to many if not right and natural at least insufficiently appalling to make one fight resolutely against it.

The only pair who seem out of place at Matcham are the Assinghams, a pair about whom critics have long been at odds. Perhaps the best means of ascertaining their role in the novel is to begin with Holland's apt assertion that the Assinghams confront the crises in the marriages of their friends with "terror and compassion, from within the communion of their own intimate embrace." Indeed, through the first half of the novel, they are the only married couple in communion with each other, the only example James offers of a marriage undamaged by selfishness. Further, their communion, based less on romantic passion than on an enduring capacity for the sort of marital partnership so prized by Howells, serves through the first half of the work, like the Gutermann-Seuss marriage, as a standard against which other unions may be measured. Here, of course, the standard is a higher one than that evidenced by the importer and his family, one, in fact, to which no other marriage in the first half measures up. Nevertheless, for all the mutual devotion inherent in the intimate embrace of each other's lives, their marriage is not for James the embodiment of all that can be hoped for in matrimony. Their happiness, though assuredly not that of shallow, thoughtless folk, still falls short of the state of creative tension that James believes is the highest form marriage can attain. Devoid of such agreeable compromise, such good-humored mutual accommodation as lies at the root of the As-
singham's union, this higher state of marriage is character-
ized by a tension not based on conflict finally—though ini-
tially engendered by it—but on shared acknowledgement
that oneself and one's mate are deeply loving yet irremedi-
ably separate partners, understanding each other, as most
mates do, only imperfectly. The tension in such a marriage as
this is creative because in the unending struggle to be true to
oneself yet devoted to one's mate one finds not ease but con-
tinual confrontation with the tragic fact of human frailty in
a difficult world. And this, in turn, can be a constant prod to
struggle to a hard-won, loving communion—beyond tragedy
but grounded in it—with one's spouse. This sort of marriage,
one bringing husband and wife into profound knowledge of
what James here conceives to be love's sacred office as re-
deemer of the human plight, is achieved, as I have noted, by
Maggie and the prince. Thus, if the Assinghams in the first
half of the novel present a standard below which the other
marriages fall, in the second half, this same standard is one
against which the rise of Maggie and the prince can be mea-
sured.

However, before Maggie and Amerigo do transcend the
sort of marriage achieved by Fanny and Colonel Bob, the As-
singham marriage embodies a state through which they must
pass. Oscar Cargill notes that the Assinghams "preserve the
dignity of the principals by accepting the burden of the mun-
dane in what is, for all of the exquisiteness of Charlotte Stant
and the prince, an exceptionally sordid relationship." But
more, I think, is involved than this. Fanny and her husband
do not merely show through their presence that ugly events,
described here though they be in rarefied terms, are taking
place in a world recognizable as our own. Crucial as this func-
tion is, they have others as well. One is to serve as index to
what is taking place between Maggie and Amerigo as they
move from a stage of marriage dominated by personal ac-
ququisitiveness through the one marked by partnership that
precedes their further development. The condition of com-
radeship between Maggie and the prince, only adumbrated
by James as he reserves his most intense and extensive treat-
ment of them for the final stages they attain in their union,
is made more understandable for the reader through his earlier, full delineation of the Assingham marriage. The other pivotal function of the Assinghams is to ground the triumphant final stage of Maggie and Amerigo's marriage in reality. In other words, just as the Assinghams' presence shows that the infidelities in this novel are something to which all too many on less rarefied planes of existence than their four friends are prone, so too their presence shows that the victory achieved by Maggie and the prince, transcendent as it may be, is rooted in the real world and, hence, attainable by at least some.

This "affectionate comradery" of the Assinghams, as Howells might call it, which is closely approximated then by Maggie and the prince during a crucial stage in the development of their marriage, manifests itself in several ways. Despite the fact that Fanny's imagination and capacity for intuiting, and at times overintuitoring, the subtlest motivations are unmatched by like faculties in Bob, who, blunt and unimaginative (though not so unimaginative as he lets on) is frequently caught bewilderedly in the rapidly shifting currents of his wife's conjectures, the pair never fall out. The reason for this, apart from the fact that they obviously love each other a great deal, is the ability of each to laugh at his or her own foibles or crotchets and to tolerate with humorous good will those of the other. This and their tongue-in-cheek beratings of each other for either overactive or recalcitrant powers of perception are reminiscent, consequently, of the banter of Howell's Basil and Isabel and tie Fanny and Colonel Bob, then, just as firmly as are the Marches to the quotidian and to what is essentially a pragmatic orientation toward its exigencies. Further, of course, it reveals implicitly that whatever the exigencies, they will face them together. Thus, when Fanny, frightened and shaken by the almost brazen demeanor of Charlotte and Amerigo together at a large party, fears that her efforts at matchmaking will lead her friends into disaster and herself into disgrace, she finds, if not reassurance in Bob's bland pronouncement "They'll manage in their own way" (1:286), at least the comfort of knowing that there is someone who values her enough to seek to reassure
her. Similarly, on their arrival home that same evening, Bob’s giving Fanny his arm and “their crawling up the stairs together, like some old Darby and Joan who have had a disappointment” (1:287) reveals again the unwillingness of Bob to let his wife suffer alone. Bob, in fact, senses with perfect clarity, for all his supposed obtuseness, that in the matter of their four friends, Fanny finds herself in “deep waters” on a “mystic lake.” Though he cannot quite fathom the waters himself, “he hadn’t quitted for an hour during her adventure, the shore,” and stands ready on the instant to aid her should “the planks of her bark” begin to part. He holds himself, James notes, “so ready that it was quite as if the inward man had pulled off coat and waistcoat” (1:366). Later, when the planks do indeed begin to part, Bob’s aid is sure; if it means helping her “save” Charlotte and the prince “so far as consistently speaking of them as still safe might save them” (1:378), he is ready to do so. If it means, even, that he and Fanny must help Maggie rescue the whole situation—including Fanny’s peace of mind—by going about “looking like fools” (1:401), professing, that is, not to see anything wrong with their friends’ marriages, again this supremely unimaginative man is willing to sacrifice pride in appearance and with his wife take the commonsensical, pragmatic course of doing so. Through all this, doubtless, the support offered in this marriage seems one-sided. One sees Bob repeatedly comforting Fanny, tolerating her flights of fancy and her mild, vicarious involvement with the romantic prince, and finally asking the right, seemingly pedestrian questions that help her steer herself to the correct, pragmatic stance that helps Maggie. However, it is clear from Fanny’s own toleration of her mate’s sardonic humor at her expense and, indeed, from the whole tenor of this marriage—the only one in the first half of the book in which there is real communication, accommodation, and sacrifice for one’s mate—that Fanny would offer similar aid to Bob in this union, which for James shows the best type of marriage attainable on the plane of the commonplace.

The corresponding stage in Maggie and Amerigo’s marriage to this sort of union begins when Fanny smashes the
golden bowl and Maggie, rather than force immediate confrontation with the prince when he enters and finds the wreckage, allows her "wish for time" to interpose—time for Amerigo's use, not for hers. . . . " She wants to say to him, "Take it, take it, take all you need of it; arrange yourself so as to suffer least, or be at any rate least distorted and disfigured. Only see, see that I see, and make up your mind on this new basis at your convenience" (2:184). More, for her own sake and his, she wishes to give him time so that "the dreadful blur, the ravage of suspense and embarrassment" produced in him by his coming on the broken bowl in her presence can be put under the control of his "personal serenity" and "incomparable superiority" (2:184). This decision to give the prince time to compose himself and to consider the implications of Maggie's undeclared but certain knowledge of his infidelity initiates a stage of mutual aid, accommodation, and tacit understanding in Maggie's marriage unlike anything she and Amerigo have achieved previously and the basis for the higher stage of union that they will eventually forge for themselves. In this phase of their marriage, therefore, they enter into a partnership that is, though lacking for obvious reasons in good-natured banter, at least as deep and intense as any of which the Assinghams are capable and certainly deeper and more intense than any relationship they themselves have known, either before or in the course of Amerigo's involvement with Charlotte.

The time Maggie allows the prince enables him quickly to perceive that although "he had used her, . . . had even exceedingly enjoyed her before this," he would now "be really needing her for the first time in their whole connexion" (2:186). A "proved necessity" (2:186) to him now, Maggie, he sees, offers him "assuredly a kind of support that wasn't to have been imagined in advance" (2:187). This perception, in turn, leads to an openness between them uncharacteristic of their marriage up to this point. Maggie's explicit confrontation of him with the fact of his "two relations with Charlotte" (2:190) prompts not bitter argument and mutual accusation but a long-needed clearing of the air, leading Amerigo to see his newly resolute but still loving wife as more "sacred"
(2:199) to him than he has ever felt her to be. The support that she continues to offer him after the fact of the affair is in the open and that he for his part, as we have noted, sees he needs so desperately is again couched in terms of time—time, in this case, not merely to compose himself and avoid any awkwardness or bêtise that would embarrass them both, but time to free himself of the liaison with Charlotte. Nor does he offer nothing in return. Through his quiet efforts, he too provides time and an atmosphere of unruffled calm that establish the opportunity for Maggie to carry out what she must, her own lonely maintenance of the facade of normalcy, of the appearance, that is, even in the face of Charlotte’s arrogant hectoring, that the two marriages are undisturbedly pleasant ones. Maggie’s work, therefore, not only gives the prince the chance to do his but her courage and love manifested in it inspire him to do so. Also, of course, her work enables Adam to keep his pride and to assert quietly his domination over Charlotte, so necessary to the success of Maggie and Amerigo’s plans. Thus, working separately yet intimately together, the pair labor with reciprocal benefits for each other to put their newfound closeness on firmer footing—work, in short, to save their marriage. Like the Assinghams before them, then, Maggie and Amerigo have formulated a pragmatic pact. If Fanny and Bob working together must appear a remarkably imperceptive couple to achieve their ends, Maggie and the prince must, though united in aim, work separately and appear to be neither working at all nor anything but a conventionally comfortable man and wife to achieve theirs.

Gradually, in fact, as the Assinghams appear together with decreasing frequency through the second half of the novel, Maggie and Amerigo’s marriage becomes James’s chief example of matrimony as pragmatic partnership. However, inherent in their pact is an unresolved tension between the pair unlike any that is glimpsed between the Assinghams, a tension that, ultimately, both prompts and remains central to the final stage of the younger pair’s marriage. Again, it is another marriage that helps one perceive fully what is taking place between Maggie and the prince, in this case, once more,
Charlotte and Adam's. The invisible, yet clearly discernible, "long silken halter" that Adam has coolly "looped round [Charlotte's] beautiful neck" (2:286), Charlotte's all too distinct silent shriek, her continuing arrogance and shrill efforts at self-justification, and Adam's quiet, abysmal comment that his terrified wife will know of what life "over there" in the "awful place" holds for her only "when she does know" (2:288), all reveal that although the major problem in terms of plot—that of whether the two marriages will stand and the liaison end—has been resolved, the tension generated within Charlotte and Adam's marriage by the ramifications of the acquisitive terms on which their marriage was established remains thoroughly unresolved. Thus, Adam and Charlotte's union, unlike that of the Assinghams, entails no partnership, no comradeship, only a conflict that cannot be voiced between two personalities that cannot bend and that refuse to accommodate themselves to each other except insofar as it is necessary to keep up appearances. A similar tension, Adam and Charlotte's marriage prepares one to see, is evident in Maggie and Amerigo's marriage, despite all the partnership involved in their effort together to preserve two marriages and the maintenance of correct social forms.

This tension between Maggie and her husband manifests itself increasingly to her as their partnership draws nearer to achieving its desired ends. Her perception that "she was seeing [Amerigo] through—he had engaged to come out at the right end if she would see him" (2:322), with which book six, the final section of the novel, begins, drives home to her the fact that she and the prince though helping each other to their goals are also terribly isolated from one another. In part, of course, this isolation derives from a residual uncertainty about each other and from the peculiar demands of their task—unwonted amounts of time with each other would disturb the appearance of unchanged relations that they seek to maintain—but in great measure, too, this isolation arises because they are each markedly different sorts of people. Amerigo's work in their partnership involves, as Maggie comes to see, little more than that he stand, comfortably and calmly, "as fixed in his place as some statue of one
of his forefathers” (2:323), a calling for which she realizes he is admirably suited because his “place,” his position of ease, “was like something made for him beforehand by innumerable facts, facts largely of the sort known as historical, made by ancestors, examples, traditions, habits” (2:323). Maggie, on the other hand, sees her own work of having to “move indefatigably” toward Amerigo to rescue the situation, while his repose enables her to do so, as involving nothing less than a virtual trek across “new country,” on which, like a “settler,” a “trader,” or even “some Indian squaw with a papoose on her back” (2:323), she lacks even “the most rudimentary map of the social relations as such” (2:324). And, for all its difficulty, she sees herself as eminently suited for this endeavor in a way that the prince could never be; for if, as a quintessential American, a pioneer-aborigine, she lacks the security, the guideposts, the “map” of “examples, traditions, habits,” she is free too of the confinement and the reticence to chart new courses to their mutual goal that these would impose on her.

Irremediably, then, for all their increased sensitivity to each other’s needs as they work apart yet together, the differences between Amerigo, the knowing, reposeful, Old World nobleman, and Maggie, the aroused New World lamb who seeks to save all “for love” (2:116), are as pronounced, doubtless, as those between Adam and Charlotte. As such, they will never understand each other, much less change each other markedly. Maggie, inevitably, will remain an absolutist, wont to see her life as bound up in choices between good and evil, love and hate, all of which she conceives of as almost tangible realities; and Amerigo will, one suspects, still see most choices as involving little more than the discrimination between pleasant and unpleasant, agreeable or tiresome, and will never quite know what to make of those who do not.

Nevertheless, the loneliness in which their partnership forces each to labor brings home to both, finally, an awareness that existence by its very nature involves terrible isolation and tensions, isolation and tensions felt with particular keenness by such sentient ones as they have come to be. And this awareness, in turn, awakens in Maggie and Amerigo a
responsiveness to suffering, a compassion for human frailty, and, through these, a cognizance of their own participation in the human welter of suffering, frailty, and conflict. Hence, Maggie, though unremitting in her pursuit of justice, perceives sadly the silken rope and the silent shriek marking Charlotte's destruction. Having discerned too within herself, not long before this, a capacity for joyous but dangerously chaotic release through open rage, which she envisions vividly as a "wild caravan looming into view with crude colours in the sun, fierce pipes in the air, high spears against the sky" (2:237), Maggie is clearly no longer the young woman whom Fanny once regarded as one who "wasn't born to know evil" (1:78). She obviously knows now with full painful intimacy the capacity for evil lurking in all, even herself. Moreover, when she tells Fanny later that she and her father are "lost to each other really much more than Amerigo and Charlotte" (2:333), she speaks out of a new, no less intimate knowledge of the human capacity for suffering, a suffering in her case made all the more exquisite because she is aware that the loss of her father results from a choice she herself makes, one that is no less painful for being, as she knows, the only right one, the only one that, all sorrowfully, compassionately, knowingly, is "for love." Similarly, the prince through his isolation comes not only to be increasingly attuned to what Maggie requires of him but capable, at last, of seeing that Charlotte is "stupid" (2:348), unaware, that is, of the needs, virtues, and pains of others. Thus, however much he still may see taste as the major touchstone to existence, the prince realizes now that it is not the only one, that a moral vision and commitment to others are not irrelevant to the leading of a tasteful, pleasant life. This heightened sensitivity is evidenced as well in his quiet assertion to Maggie, based on what he has seen of all the major figures of the novel, including himself, that "everything's terrible, cara—in the heart of man" (2:349). Consequently, though this crucial development undergone by Maggie and the prince as a result of their lonely yet united efforts is not enough to break down the major differences between them and resolve the resultant tension, it effects sufficient change to enable them to sustain a marriage.
Even more important, of course, in helping sustain their marriage than the changes they undergo is the fact that their partnership confirms powerfully for them both that they do indeed love each other. And, clearly, it is this love that enables them to turn their perceptions of the grimmer facts of the human condition and, closer to home, of the tensions in their marriage that manifest these facts into features that, surprisingly enough, strengthen their union. Too sentient to ignore the tension, too different from one another to resolve it, Maggie and Amerigo are prompted to a deeper love and a new stage in their marital development by it. Unlike Adam and Charlotte, therefore, whose state of tension mirrors their own, they are able to make their differences productive of growth. A constant reminder to them of the pain and chaos inextricably bound up in human existence and, consequently, of the fragility of love, the tension, because they do love each other, makes them cling to each other more fervently. Paradoxically, then, without their differences their love would be less urgent, less strong, something taken for granted and, hence, palling rather than an earnestly chosen stay against confusion and the "terrible" that resides in the human heart. The presence of the principino makes clear that their love, again unlike that of Adam and Charlotte, who have a childless marriage, is a vital, procreative one, generating joy and beauty in the midst of the omnipresent darkness.

Maggie and Amerigo’s final scenes together in the novel reveal poignantly both the continuing tension in their relationship and the love that asserts itself in response to it. The prince’s sexual overture as he draws close to Maggie before their last meeting with Adam and Charlotte engenders a particularly telling example of this. Though clearly drawn physically to the prince, Maggie is disturbed by "the thick breath of the definite—which was the intimate, the immediate, the familiar as she hadn’t had them for so long" (2:351), and she refuses, much to her husband’s surprise and incomprehension, one suspects, to commit herself fully to physical intimacy with him until the others have been faced one last time and seen off for good. Though her motives are not made entirely clear, one can discern several that may well be at work
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here: a refusal to surrender to her physical desires the sen-
tience that she will need to see all through this last meeting,
a moral punctiliousness that prompts her to refuse all reward
till she has earned it through carrying out this last task be-
fore her in her overriding effort to sort out the tangled rela-
tions among the four, and, lastly, an inability to partake of
joy until her pain over her father's imminent departure is as-
suaged by his actual leaving. These, perhaps linked with a re-
sidual distrust of the prince's motives that only makes her
want to cling to him more strongly, are reflective of a nature
that is, as both realize, more complex, intense, and higher-
strung that the prince's; and, patently, this difference be-
tween them will remain a constant source of tension for
them both in their union. Similarly, Maggie and Amerigo's
final scene together, which closes the novel, manifests both
this tension of disparate identities and the love that it rein-
forces. When Maggie, in the last words of the novel, buries
her head in Amerigo's breast for "pity and dread" of the light
in his eyes as he tells her, "I see nothing but you" (2:369), her
response is one of love that has been reaffirmed by the con-
tinuing tension in their union that his look and words make
her perceive. Her awareness of the total devotion that this
relatively uncomplicated man she married will now lavish on
her makes her at once pity him for being so fervently com-
mitted to an imperfect, limited being in a frightening, pain-
ridden world and regard him with some dread because of the
very intensity of the devotion he will direct toward her. Con-
fronted one more time, then, with the differences between
herself and her husband and with all that this tells her of the
strange chaos of life, she realizes once again that there is
nothing for her to do but cling to him, find what comfort and
order she can with him, and love him fervently in the face of
all that seems so capable of driving them apart.

Naomi Lebowitz comments aptly that Maggie's marriage
has been "earned in pain." As such, it is, in its final stage,
what James believed marriage in its highest form ought to be,
a union that in exposing two people to intense experience ex-
poses them, as well, both to the complexity, suffering, limi-
tation, and evil that are the givens of life as James sees it and
to a means of triumph over them. Herman Keyserling notes, in this vein, that the “fulfillment of marriage and its happiness entail the acceptance of the suffering pertaining to life. It gives the latter a new and deeper meaning.”

Doubtless, James would concur with this notion, and throughout the development that Maggie, Amerigo, and their marriage undergo, it is clear that James believes the “new and deeper meaning” marriage imparts to suffering is that the marrieds sentient enough to do so can be brought by marriage to regard suffering as a prompter of love. No one in James’s marriage fiction except for Maggie and Amerigo comes to this insight that extends beyond tragic awareness—Isabel might have, had Osmond been a different sort—but this fact makes the insight no less valid and marriage no less sacred for James as a potential means of stimulating people to the moral, spiritual, and emotional growth that renders them capable of attaining it.

Writing of Maggie, Judith Armstrong notes that her “final accomplishment is to restore the moral order of things as they should be,” a comment that calls to mind Laurence Holland’s assertion that the marriages in The Golden Bowl “are made symbolic not only of marriages in actual life but of other social institutions and processes which are fused with them.” Implicit in both remarks, obviously, is an awareness of the crucial social role James envisions marriage at its best as playing, a realization that such development as Maggie and the prince undergo can never, of course, be without valuable social ramifications. Behind the muted melodrama of their story (and, clearly, of Isabel’s too) is a social vision, the memory in a mature author of his father’s oft-repeated assertion to him that “we need never fear not to be good enough if only we were social enough.” In other words, James hopes that marriage might, in teaching husbands and wives to be more alert to each other’s needs, teach them as well to be more alert to human needs generally, more “social” in the largest sense of the term.

As a social institution, one, like the church, calculated to impose spiritual order on the mélange of human life, marriage, James believes, also ought to compel allegiance. What
he hopes husbands and wives will maintain in their marriages is an allegiance to the sacred ideal that marriage embodies; and just as the weak priest glimpsed briefly in *The Golden Bowl* seems less than admirable because of his failure to maintain his fervent allegiance to what should be a compelling ideal for him, so too, as we have seen, do the husbands and wives in his marital fiction seem lacking in moral intelligence and sensitivity when they fail to commit themselves fully to marriage, capable as it is of promoting both individual growth and more humane social relations. What he demands then, clearly, in each marriage, and nothing less, is "the golden bowl—as it was to have been" (2:216). Particularly apposite here, I think, is F. R. Leavis's comment about the moral demands that James makes on society and its institutions generally. "It is doubtful," Leavis notes, "whether at any time in any place he could have found what would have satisfied his implicit demand: the actual fine art of civilized social intercourse that would have justified the flattering intensity of expectation he brought to it in the form of his curiously transposed and subtilized ethical sensibility."32 Certainly, James was unable to find this "fine art" in the marriages he saw about him, and he was too honest to purport that he did; but that he continued to hope he might and in one visionary novel created a marriage that attains a surpassing though somber grandeur attests to his highly personal and romantic faith that at least a rare few highly sentient men and women might have the capacity to bring the glorious potential of their best institutions to fruition and make them express and perpetuate—in the very midst of the prevailing darkness—the best in human nature.

Some whose view of Maisie's development is closer to mine include James L. Gargano, "What Maisie Knew: The Education of a 'Moral Sense,'" Nineteenth-Century Fiction 16 (June 1961): 33-46; Wagenknecht, Eve and Henry James; Sister M. Corona Sharp, The Confidante in Henry James (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963); Samuels; and Weinstein.

4. Wagenknecht, Eve and Henry James, p. 139.


11. Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1908), 2:202. All subsequent page references to this novel are to this edition, volumes 3 and 4 in the New York Edition, and will appear in the text, with the volume numbers cited as 1 and 2. Where variations from the 1881 text occur, I shall cite the original reading in a footnote.

12. Tanner, "The Fearful Self," p. 210. Another significant similarity between the two, David Gervais notes, is that Isabel and Osmond dupe themselves "by loving in each other more the impressions they give of themselves than what they really, secretly, are" (Flaubert and Henry James [London: Macmillan, 1978], p. 154).

13. In 1881 this read simply, "Marriage meant that a woman should abide with her husband," the change a clear indication of the increasing significance of the marital commitment for James.

14. Among those who find Isabel's decision to return to Osmond one that James regards with disfavor is Richard Poirier. In his chapter on The Portrait of a Lady in The Comic Sense of Henry James (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), he argues that James regards Isabel ironically at the end of the novel. Philip Weinstein argues at the close of his chapter on Portrait that James's admiration of Isabel for her return to her husband reflects the severe limitations of his own responsiveness to life. More severely still, Gervais suggests that "Isabel's marriage does not force her into real spiritual growth," only into a self-pity that James "can enjoy... unperturbed" (p. 160). Further, Gervais argues, the "sanctity of marriage" theme is James's shabby contrivance for "draping Isabel in a ready-to-wear convention that allows him to explore her fear and her pride while giving them a noble appearance" (p. 194). Gervais asserts, in fact, that this novel is nothing less than "a subtle evasion of the tragic" (p. 149). Annette Niemtzow, in "Marriage and the New Woman in The Portrait of a Lady," American Literature 47 (November 1975): 377-95, suggests that James, ambivalent about the "New Woman," "on one hand... tames the experimental woman and restricts her physical options for her psychic salvation" and "on the other... proves bolder than he permits his heroine to be" (p. 395) and undercuts, ironically, the notion that marriage invariably provides a happy ending for any tale.

15. Mary S. Schriber suggests, in "Isabel Archer and Victorian Manners," Studies in the Novel 9 (Winter 1976): 441-57, that Isabel also comes to gain as much power for shaping her own destiny as was available to any young woman of her time.

16. Henry James, The Golden Bowl (New York: Scribner's, 1909), 1:133. All subsequent page references to this novel are to this edition (volumes 23 and 24 in the
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New York Edition) and will appear in the text, with the two volumes cited as 1 and 2. Niemtzow points out that James's distaste for divorce reveals the marked influence of his father's views on the topic. Of course, going off with Goodwood might also involve adultery, and, as Tony Tanner notes, adultery would imply for Isabel "the absolute annihilation of forms," the annihilation, that is, of all that establishes a context in which moral and spiritual growth might occur (Adultery in the Novel [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979], p. 18).


18. Though Isabel's somewhat disdainful response to Henrietta's marrying Mr. Bantling may show some remnants of her earlier foolish romantic illusions, it more than likely is primarily a reflection of her belief in the grand potential for growth inherent in matrimony and of her disappointment that Henrietta, with the pedestrian, if affable, Bantling, will have no chance to tap this potential.


21. See Holland on this point throughout his discussion of Portrait.

22. Holland suggests that Maggie and Amerigo achieve "the full redeeming intimacy of an intense passion" and an "authentic commitment" to the "communion" of their marriage and to "the larger community of purpose it makes possible" (p. 350). Quentin Anderson throughout his chapter on The Golden Bowl characterizes their marriage as a wedding of wisdom and love to the world. Keyserling, speaking generally of the sort of marriage that Holland, Anderson, and I think Maggie and Amerigo achieve, characterizes it as a state of "conjugal happiness" in which "partnership is based on the realization of its tragic significance"—that is, on a realization of its vulnerability in a troubled world. This leads the couple to perceive, he asserts, that "life is not a tragedy in the last resort" but "beautiful" because hard-won love can be attained in it (pp. 19, 48).


24. Edith Wharton described the Assinghams as an "insufferable," "dull-witted," and "frivolous" pair of "eaves-droppers" (quoted in Segal, p. 208). Among the most vehement recent commentators attacking the Assinghams are Fryer, who asserts of Fanny, "If there is a villain in the piece it is probably she, who with her machinations has engineered the whole quartette" (p.119); Anderson, who sees Fanny as an incarnation of the Whore of Babylon (p. 288) and Colonel Bob as an unregenerate servant of Mammon (pp. 295-96); and Sallie Sears, who claims in The Negative Imagination (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968) that Fanny is a "puppet master" (p. 165). In addition to Holland and Cargill, cited in my discussion, Segal and Sharp assert the Assinghams' goodness, with Sharp characterizing Bob as a type reminiscent of Conrad's Marlow (p. 246).


