Appeals to Incalculability: Sex, Costume Drama, and *The Golden Bowl*

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Sex is the last taboo in film.

—Catherine Breillat

Today's "meat movie" is tomorrow's blockbuster.

—Carol J. Clover

When it was released in May 2001, James Ivory's film of Henry James's final masterpiece, *The Golden Bowl*, received decidedly mixed reviews. Kevin Thomas calls it a "triumph"; Stephen Holden, "handsome, faithful, and intelligent" yet "emotionally distanced." Given the successful—if not blockbuster—run of 1990s James movies—Jane Campion's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), Agniezka Holland's *Washington Square* (1997), and Iain Softley's *The Wings of the Dove* (1997)—the reviewers, as well as the fans, must have anticipated praising *The Golden Bowl*. Yet the film opened in "selected cities," as the *New York Times* movie ads noted; after New York and Los Angeles, it showed in university towns and large urban areas but not "at a theater near you" or at "theaters everywhere." Never mind, however, for the Merchant Ivory film never intended to be popular with the masses. Seeking a middlebrow audience of upper-middle-class spectators and generally intelligent filmgoers, *The Golden Bowl* aimed to portray an English cultural heritage attractive to Anglo-bibliophiles. James's faux British novel, however, is paradoxically peopled with foreigners: American upwardly mobile usurpers, an impoverished Italian prince, and a social-climbing but shabby ex-New York yentl. Yet James's ironic portrait of this expatriate culture, whose characters seek only to imitate their Brit betters—if not in terms of wealth and luxury, at least in social charm and importance—failed to seem relevant to viewers

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in 2001. Despite its hip mix of sex with luxury, the Merchant Ivory *Golden Bowl* too closely resembled 1980s and 1990s quality costume drama to appeal to a mass audience used to the tarting up of James characteristic of, say, Softley's *Wings*. In quality costume drama—a mode of nostalgia film subsumed in Andrew Higson's "heritage film"—the costumes may get in the way of bodily pleasures, may picture sexual perversions too old-fashioned to be fun. The sexy post-national British heritage film, too, made Merchant Ivory's view of heritage Britain appear altogether too bland (see Powrie). Smoothing out the ironic edges of Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* made the film look outdated at millennium's end, even to the U.S. fan of British heritage culture.

As 1990s filmmakers seemed intuitively to know, Henry James's novels appear to be made for the big screen. Whereas James's novels insist upon the centrality of seeing, knowing, and spectatorship, however, the Merchant Ivory *Golden Bowl* goes them one better by visualizing voyeurism. In the novel, James displays a series of revelations—two of Maggie's; one, her father's—as knowledge verified by the trope of "seeing." Indeed, these revelations are preceded by two scenes of seeing. In the first, Adam Verver and Maggie exchange looks at Fawns when the daughter realizes her father is being pursued by the Miss Lutches and Mrs. Rance. Adam sees "the look in his daughter's eyes," a "look with which he *saw* her take in" the pursuit and his acquiescence: "he saw her see," and "she saw *him*" (*GB* 112–14). Likewise, when Fanny Assingham sees that Charlotte Stant's presence at Fawns has routed the Misses and Mrs., Fanny tells Adam that she "*saw* the[ir] consciousness": "one saw it come over them [. . .]. One saw them understand and exchange looks" regarding Charlotte's womanly charm; "I see, I see," Adam responds (143). This plastic play of consciousness on the face and through looks produces Adam's only revelation. "Light broke for him," our narrator says, outlining a "vast expanse of *discovery*," a "hallucination," a "vision" strangely delayed by his "blindness": that the "call of his future" as a father means that he must marry so Maggie appears not to have forsaken him (153–54). Seeing is therefore knowing—or seems to be—despite the reader's growing awareness that Adam's comprehension falters when he may no longer read his daughter's looks after her marriage. James's ironizing discourse here presents Adam's revelation precisely as a hallucination, a clumsy perception that seeks to redeem Maggie's poor marital choice by seeming to make good on his own.

Yet given the author's sense of the Princess—the "register of *her* consciousness" and her "exhibitional charm"—Maggie's revelations in Book Second bear the marks, unlike her father's, of felt knowledge and seeing as accompanied by being seen (*GB* xliii–iv). After she waits for Amerigo on his late return from the Matcham weekend, Maggie feels herself an "actress who had been studying a part and rehearsing it, but who suddenly, on the stage, [began] to improvise"; Amerigo, who then moves into the space opened by Maggie's renewed intimacy with Charlotte, seems, too, to be "acting [. . .] on cue" (322, 327). Suddenly, however, "light flashed for her" and "spread," as Maggie realizes that Amerigo's cue comes not from her but from Charlotte. "They had a view of her situation," she knows, the impression of which remains, like a "spying servant," a "witness": they "kept [her] in position so as not to *dis*arrange them" (328–31). Later, "before

her glass," "recognitions flash at her" as Maggie recognizes that Adam married for *her*, that to keep her husband, she must sacrifice her father without his knowing it (357–59). Here, seeing is both knowing and not knowing, as Maggie masquerades so as to expose Amerigo. Paradoxically, in exhibiting to him his mistakes and her own powerful knowledge of his two relations with Charlotte, Maggie sees herself (her framed reflection), her husband's betrayal not only of her but of Charlotte, and her rival's doom. At the end, Maggie knows she has seen more than she bargained for.

Seeing, moreover, can be sexy. As Hugh Stevens says of the novel, "*the* question is the sexual question": "are the Prince and Charlotte having an affair?" In response to *the* question, the narrator—and the reader—submit the couple to the "fervid curiosity of the voyeur" (46). In three chapters of Part Third—at the very center of Book First—Amerigo and Charlotte attend a party at which she as unaccompanied wife is "not perhaps absolutely advertised" but nevertheless "exposed a little to the public." Mounting the monumental staircase, Charlotte spies Colonel Bob Assingham, who, watching her, exchanges with her an "artlessly familiar signal"; when Amerigo joins her, looking like an actor who has refreshed his make-up, Charlotte enjoys this vigil's "testimony" to her own reflected "lustre." "I do want [Fanny] to see us together," Charlotte says, *sotto voce*; "hasn't she often seen us together?" Amerigo responds (184–94). In the ensuing conversations between Fanny and Charlotte and Fanny and Amerigo, Charlotte describes her husband's and his daughter's increased intimacy as an erotic betrayal and herself as Adam's unwilling and unhappy procuress. Amerigo describes his father-in-law as a link between Charlotte and himself; they have a "benefactor in common" (196). As each conversation about sex, triangulation, and (monetary) exchange concludes, Fanny denies her knowledge and responsibility for having "made" both marriages; Charlotte and the Prince separately accuse Fanny of giving them up; and Fanny goes home decently to bury her mistake (210). "We're beyond her," Charlotte tells Amerigo, as they "passionately seal their pledge" (226, 228). Stevens, who names the novel's central question, fails, however, to see the complexity of its seeming banality. It's not just a matter of whether our two lovers are having an affair but of who sees it, of who sees it and knows it. The entire project—Maggie's, the author's, his delegate's, and ours—hangs on who knows whether Charlotte and Amerigo are having an affair *and* on what constitutes the evidence (see Rivkin). The telegram Adam declines to read? Our couple's appearances in public and the "traces" they leave behind for reading? The golden bowl and its context of story, imagination, witness, and documentation?

Sexual affairs. Voyeurism. Marital manipulation. But for the novel's multiple registers and layers of consciousness, the imbroglios and entanglements, Henry James's story might seem ready for prime time—indeed, for soap opera. As Holden says, the film speaks the "commonplace language of an intelligent soap opera." James's novels were shot instead as feature-length films and BBC classic serials. Indeed, Martin Meisel maintains that the "activity of seeing," which I have been tracing in *The Golden Bowl*, is especially available for the genre of melodrama. The "mysteries of traditional melodrama," he argues, eventually produced revelations of "concealed identities" or "hidden crime" (65, 79, 66). In

James's modern melodrama—which exhibits and suppresses its relations with that popular nineteenth-century genre—revelations and the narrativized "pictural configurations" that contain them operate to gloss the novel's subtext as sexual and its aesthetic as voyeuristic (67). Indeed, if Adam Verver practices what Meisel calls the "habits of 'perceptual defence,'" Maggie learns to practice the habits of "perceptual vigilance": rather than seeing what is "familiar and probable," she watches for what is "anticipated, even dreaded" (65–66). Unlike what Sue Harper calls "costume melodrama"—the 1940s Gainsborough period history cycle—the Merchant Ivory *Golden Bowl* plays with the novel's fetishization of the melodramatic effects that figural imbroglios and entanglements suppress ("Historical" 182, see Cook, "Neither"). But to James's "mysteries"—are the Prince and Charlotte having an affair?—the Merchant Ivory *Golden Bowl* adds pictorially configured *mise-en-scènes* of sex.

When they succeeded at the box office, however, the 1990s James movies made our high-culture loving author middlebrow; when they flopped, art-house smart. As I've argued elsewhere, Holland's *Washington Square* and Campion's *Portrait* betrayed their artistic ambitions and so, unlike Softley's *Wings of the Dove*, failed to cross over into modest mass popularity and so to be screened at mainstream exhibition outlets. Lawrence Napper maintains that the term "middlebrow," which originated in the U.S. in the 1910s, emerged in Britain during the 1920s mass communications media expansions, when "middlebrow" was associated with a newly constituted British cultural institution, the BBC, that owed its existence to the government's and popular press's desire to "protect the nation from the excesses of American market forces" (111–12). As a "monopoly funded by licence fees," the BBC "address[ed] the whole nation," was "answerable to the state," and culturally improved the citizenry. This middlebrow cultural institution and the aesthetic it promulgated "divided the general educated audience from the high intelligentsia" (112–13). In the same decade, the Cinematograph Act (1927) sought to boost the volume of British film production by obliging distributors and exhibitors to market more British films (114; Street 6–11). Balancing the cultural demands of the government and critics and those of a mass audience, filmmakers chose to appeal to "the tastes of the new suburban middle classes" that had emerged as the service and knowledge sectors expanded (115). Eschewing European art film, British filmmakers, according to Napper, made films of "established cultural propert[ies]," generally by adapting literary or theatrical texts. As the new middle classes sought to justify their taste against that of Hollywood and continental Europe, these vehicles' Englishness guaranteed their quality and success. Seeking as his spectator what James Agate called the "average intelligent cinema-goer," Napper argues, Victor Saville shot *The Good Companions* (1933) to justify the "middlebrow project for a national culture." That film celebrated English heritage and its culture, portrayed regional characters as gathering to represent authentic and traditional cultural values that were common to all and so could be generalized as national (119–21). From Napper's perspective, then, the middlebrow aesthetic articulates quality drama, national values, and cultural heritage in a mix that emerged through the productive and public negotiations of government, industry, and audience (122).

This quality, national, and heritage mix helps me locate the middlebrow aesthetic that permeates the film and television remediations of that faux "British" novelist, Henry James. Indeed, Cairns Craig's and Paul Kerr's assessments of 1980s classic serials and Andrew Higson's of heritage film imply that a middlebrow aesthetic anchors and sustains these film-and-television genres. In writing about national cinema, Higson argues that historically, at the "prestige end of the market," British art cinema has been produced for export to international audiences through a separate and differentiated infrastructure; quality films, for "solid middle-class domestic audiences" (*Waving* 11). Craig cites Merchant Ivory as this cinematic genre's originators, a "genre [that] focuses on the English middle and upper classes at home and abroad" before the First World War at the "end of the Empire" (10). From Craig's perspective, *A Room with a View* (1986), *Maurice* (1987), and *Howards End* (1992)—all Merchant Ivory productions—cast the same actors and actresses, use the same period costumes, to portray the same repressed young Edwardian woman seeking through an encounter with the other to escape British class conformity (10). Like Higson and Robert Hewison, Craig assigns a specific aesthetic to this film genre: the *mise-en-scène* includes "country houses," "panelled interiors," and period clothing as indices of the protagonist's—and, by analogy, the spectator's—good taste; his or her desire for and training in the rigors of conspicuous consumption; a "perfection of style" that "denies the difference of culture"; and the "conflict of a nation" that displays the "last great age of the English *haute bourgeoisie*" (10–11). Kerr calls this genre "costume drama" without specifying its aesthetic as middlebrow. But he, too, views this genre as celebrating the "values of confidence and stability," as finding favor with corporate sponsors, as straddling "art television" and "costume drama" by offering "cultural prestige" and claiming "social credibility" (18, 6). Despite its status as televisual and serial, then, the quality costume drama is not soap opera; it occupies a "'middlebrow' middleground" on which to promulgate the values of British heritage and Englishness to an Anglo-American audience (7).

James's novel and the 1990s James films, however, ironize this heritage-cultural ideological project. Higson defines heritage film as quality cinema for members of the domestic middle-class British audience that values an "iconography" of the "national past, its people, its landscape, and its cultural heritage." Central to this cultural impulse, Higson states, is "the adaptation of heritage properties, whether novels and plays or buildings and values," in order, in the "national interest," to culturally "elevat[e] the general public" (*Waving* 17, see also Higson, "Re-Presenting"; Cook, *Fashioning*; and Sargeant). The Jane Austen films demonstrate the genre at its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s: the plight of gentry daughters whose fathers' estates are entailed to undeserving, twittish cousins; the daughters' drive to secure an estate of their own through marriage to handsome—though perhaps prideful—aristocrats or brothers of baronets; the endorsement of upward mobility and female aggressivity in securing these desired goods, country houses, and families; the novelistic exhibition of gentry daughters' marriages as the lever of all social projects. The James movies, on the contrary, portray the English country house as peopled primarily by upstarts, Americans, and expatriates. The female drive to secure an estate of her own means she must

marry a foreigner who may as readily rent as own a country house, who cannot afford the cost of maintaining a rural—indeed, a European—retreat, who may intentionally marry her for her money. Her marriage, then, has been modernized: rather than subsume her independence and marital drive to her husband's values and value, she marries in error a sadist, a pervert, a philanderer. The incipient tourism everywhere exhibited by the Austen movies' *mise-en-scènes*, costumes, location shoots in rural villages, and drawing-room settings in National Trust properties is ironized in the James movies as perverse pleasure in possession, as commodification of aristocratic properties, as fetishized costuming that displays transgressive sexual desire, and as urban slumming that is more pleasurable than rural retreat. Adam Verver is the modern expatriate art collector: here, Verver's—and the narrator's—"spirit of the connoisseur" endorses the value of Persian carpets and "new human acquisitions" alike: the attainment of a wife as though she resembled oriental tile and the possession of an aristocratic son-in-law as though a "morceau de musée" (*GB* 145, 104, 9). Wedded to the urges to power and dominance, Adam's desire to acquire and possess is institutionalized in his drive to create a museum in American City to hold his European, especially English, masterpieces. This trope exposes the twentieth-century fantasy that (re)presenting a nineteenth-century national heritage to middle-class, middle-brow tourists and high-cultural consumers celebrates even as it elevates their good taste, imagines the ownership of high-cultural artifacts, landscapes, and literature as modes of acculturation, as it knowingly perverts an "aesthetic principle" (*GB* 146, see also Buzard).

Merchant Ivory's *The Golden Bowl* prettifies this perverse ideological project even as it adheres to heritage-culture aesthetics. Shot in a palette of oranges, ochres, and golds, the film's *mise-en-scène* imitates that of upscale, contemporary classic serial. As in Softley's *Wings of the Dove*, the sets are crammed with luxury goods: at the Prince and Maggie's mansion, the settees are upholstered in gold silk, adorned with damask pillows, and festooned with wool and silken throws; the walls, covered in gold damask or red silk; the fireplaces, embellished with Italian tiles and the mantels with ornate gilt mirrors, the mantelpieces with vases, paintings, and golden bowls. In one highly decorated set, the Principino bathes in a silver claw-footed tub before a marble fireplace, in a room whose walls bear European masterpieces, with busts and vases on the floor. At Fawns, which an intertitle identifies as Adam Verver's "rented castle," the *mise-en-scène* is perhaps more lavish: marble floors and crystal lights meet wide wrought-iron and gilt staircases, with murals of cherubs embracing and lords clashing bedecking the walls; grand pianos furnish the intimate rooms, the walls filled with portraits that—hilariously—"came with the house" and whose painters shall remain "nameless." Fawns, after all, is *rented* rather than owned, and Adam, although (as the movie claims) "America's First Billionaire," is no aristocrat. But he's also a billionaire on the move.

The costumes are likewise lavish. Although Charlotte and Maggie occasionally wear day dresses, they are most often shot dressed for dinner: bustled, silkened, and satined, bedecked with fabulously exquisite and expensive jewelry, hair elegantly coifed, and make-up resplendent but tasteful. According to Stella

Bruzzi, the excessive display of costume—often period dress that is not "authentic"—serves the costume drama's ideological project to prioritize eroticism rather than historical accuracy. Thus, the emphasis on sex and sexuality in the drama's costuming maps a "genderised territory that centres on the erotic" (primarily for female spectators, although males may desire the figural women this spectator envies and admires) and which "foregrounds the emotional and repressed" forces that constrain nineteenth-century women's lives (*Undressing* 36). What this "repressive hypothesis" proposes, however, is the explosive force of female eroticism, a sexual energy existing just under the surface of the popular costume drama's fetishized clothing. Bruzzi theorizes Freud's term "fetishized" as signifying sexuality that exists "on the cusp between display and denial"; the clothing of costume drama, which displays and disavows the availability of female flesh, may be described as fetishistic because it "simultaneously obstructs and substitutes [for] the 'normal' sexual act" (38–39). Indeed, the party that Charlotte and Amerigo attend, sans *sposi*, is portrayed by Merchant Ivory as a *costume* ball. Dressed as a Renaissance Prince, Amerigo attends as himself and not himself—as his generalized ancestors; as Cleopatra, Charlotte exhibits her lure and allure, her barely exposed sexual desire for Amerigo, and her bespangled body, complete with breast-identifying glittering cups, with feathers and jeweled asp as headdress. Ironically, Fanny dresses as the powerful and victimized "Mary Queen of Scots" and Bob, as hatchet-bearing Tudor; on screen, only the latter couple go home to couple, as Bob jumps Fanny, growling, while she giggles—a departure from James's portrayal of them as bound solely by "tired impatience" (*GB* 206). This embedded costume "drama" calls the spectator's attention to the fact that she (perhaps he) watches a costume drama, that costume obstructs and substitutes for the sexual act even as it exhibits and exposes it. The costume thus performs—perhaps masquerades—its fetishization, playing its role as dress that flaunts sexuality even as it flouts it.

The fetishized clothing of *The Golden Bowl* supports and sustains Merchant Ivory's concern to feature the constraints and fixedness of female destinies in their turn-of-the-century costume drama. The film's luxurious décor and fetishized dress signify Charlotte Stant's entrapment—her fixed place and her doom: her destiny as a figure for Cleopatra's power as well as her horrid subservience. Costume and décor also signal Charlotte's resistance to masculinity (figured by her resounding "No!" to Adam's urge to return to American City) and her paradoxically obsessive desire for sex, for erotic whisper, touch, kiss, and grab (figured in Amerigo). The excessive display in this film exhibits not conspicuous consumption and extravagant exchange, as in Softley's *Wings*, nor the solely constraining Victorian drawing rooms of Holland's *Washington Square*, nor the staged and Europeanized sadism of Campion's *Portrait*. Instead, Merchant's *mise-en-scène* appears natural and naturalized, as though it belongs in a film about aesthetics and collecting, about the museal instinct and the institutionalizing urge rather than about female sexuality and its entombment. *The Golden Bowl* is upscale classic serial rather than cultural critique, but Merchant Ivory know their primary audience is female, that costume drama is consumed primarily by women, and that heritage film sells to Anglophilic cultural wannabes who may

enjoy the costume as fetish but also seek the acculturation only portraits of the nation can provide (see Harper, *Picturing*).

Indeed, Verver's rented castle, Fawns, is not only a country house but a museum of British cultural objects, of European masterpieces and treasures. Lady Castledean tells her husband to make a "cause célèbre" of Adam's booty in the House: "don't these things belong in *British* museums?" she asks. Once "only thieves and murderers were transported overseas," her husband responds; "now it's your family portraits," she retorts archly. As the film nears its conclusion, Ivory exhibits Charlotte playing *cicerone* in the "presence of visitors," showing the Fawns's collections, providing commentary on its pieces' authenticity, originality, and value (*GB* 509). Ivory shoots Charlotte describing the reclining marble cupid that fills the frame, as she explains the value of "classical imitations," then, "Rebecca at the Well." Finally, she critiques Holbein's portrait of King Henry VIII, which displays "Royal authority" and the "masculine ego" in its "cold hardness"; Henry defied all who stood in his way, our *cicerone* claims, including the "numerous women, who one by one went to their doom." Charlotte, too, like those numerous historical women, goes to her doom at her husband's helpful hands. Existing to be seen, looked at, and exhibited, she appears in American City newspapers as headline, photograph, and story of conquering, triumphant, and powerful wife who may only move at the end of her husband's silken tether.

Such tropes of exhibition structure Merchant's story about a resistant, eroticised woman. To portray the submerged thematic of ancestry and (ironized) heritage, Ivory shoots under the credits and cuts in during the film the fictionalized story of Amerigo's ancestors, one of whom slept with his stepmother while still an adolescent; her doom is fixed, as she's dragged from her sex-drenched bed by soldiers, on order from her husband, who explicitly calls her "a whore." This story re-emerges as opening sequence to Maggie and Fanny's talk about the "awfulness" Maggie imagines between her husband and her father's wife. Here, slides of Italy—complete with multiple shots of the now-antique projector and its operator—accompany the spoken story of the Ugulino genealogy: duke's wife caught *in flagranté*, his heirs' luring of beautiful women, and the fifth duke's taking the name, Amerigo, in honor of his discoverer (raping and pillaging?) cousins. When Charlotte and Amerigo meet on the sly in London, they whisper at Madame Tussaud's, a lowbrow museum filled with waxed forms of historical lovers, criminals, and aristocrats enacting their atrocities. The scene ends with Charlotte's delighted posturing before a fun-house mirror: their forms distorted, she and her reluctant lover look at their stretched, headless, and disembodied reflections while anachronistic carnival music plays on the soundtrack.

Sex itself is on display at the costume ball when Charlotte, Amerigo, and Fanny and Bob have their pictures taken. Here, Merchant embeds a technology of exhibition within the costume ball's "drama," as the photographer watches them "compose" themselves before he "exposes" the photographic plate, accompanied by a burst of light. Arms outstretched to display her bespangled body and breasts, Charlotte's image is "fixed" on the photographic plate; Amerigo poses alone as conqueror; the two pose together, much like man and wife, she sitting, he behind her, proprietary arm outstretched to her chair. These photographs later

mark Charlotte and Amerigo as the near-buyers of the golden bowl, when the shopkeeper identifies their portraits. Finally, at a massive dinner at which Adam cannot eat the delicacies, exotic dancers perform as a fastidious Maggie withdraws and an eager Charlotte watches. This scene of exposed and often fleshy female bodies, bare-chested and beautiful young man, and bearded elder replays as performance an embodied and orientalized version of the Ugulino legend. For cuckolded elder interrupts the staged dance of sexual touching and recumbent orgies, performing the violent murder of "son" and watching the suicide of "stepmother." Merchant Ivory's tropes for exhibition, then, stage sex, eroticism, and the fetishized image. All exist on the cusp of desire and denial, especially when performativity makes sinuous the dance of sexual exposure and obstruction of or substitution for pleasure.

Despite its costuming, masquerades, and performativity, Merchant Ivory's *Golden Bowl* makes explicit the sex acts that James leaves unreadable. In his novel, the sexual question achieves such prominence because it is undecidable, incalculable. When Bob Assingham asks Fanny, "what in the world, between them, ever took place?" his wife responds, "nothing" because "nothing *could*"; "that was their little romance": they "fell in love with each other" but "gave each other up"; "she might have been—," well, "anything she liked—except his wife" (53–54). Later, Fanny assures her bored husband that Charlotte and Amerigo have done "nothing" and claims, too, that she never makes mistakes, that she has "worked for them all" (*GB* 269, 277). The reader well knows that Fanny has worked to bury her big mistake about the lovers—"if they *are* lovers" (*GB* 396); still, Fanny has visited at Eaton Square, a scene to which the reader has not been privy, and she (or he) is once again stymied: "what in the world, between them, ever took place?" Consigned to undecidability, the sexual question cannot with certainty be answered. When Maggie asks—although she *has* decided—"what awfulness" is "there between my husband and my father's wife?" Fanny claims to see no "awfulness," has never "entertained" Maggie's idea of "criminal intrigue" between her husband and stepmother, "never for an instant" believed the couple "in act [or] fact lovers of each other" (*GB* 382–87). The reader knows, however, that Fanny has imagined, entertained, believed, as demonstrated in her gossipy, domestic spousal dialogues. As delegate for us, Fanny seeks to see and know whether our illicit couple has had sex, but her perfidy prevents us from fully trusting her judgments. Ruth Bernard Yeazell rightly calls Fanny a "double agent" because she simultaneously "acts as our guide and intensifies our bewilderment" (98). When Bob later accuses his wife of having procured for the Prince the pleasures, "the enjoyment," of "*two* beautiful women," Fanny, unblushing, admits she has kept Charlotte "within his reach," as Bob avers, "on that construction, to be his mistress?" Fanny repeats his exact words, without question, and the reader assumes, without certainty, that Fanny has set it all up (*GB* 393–94). Fanny later destroys the only proof: the cracked golden bowl, which Maggie regards as "evidence," as bearing "witness," despite, as Fanny says, her desire for "*dis*-proof" (421, 419, 395). The evidentiary status of Maggie's documentary proof, however, is hardly free from flaw, for it bears witness only by spawning shopkeeperly hearsay, itself bearing the status only of hypothesis, possible

misreading, supposition. Wife, procuress, and reader all speculate about whether our couple were in act and fact lovers, and James everywhere in the novel refuses to satisfy our appetite for certainty, refuses to allow us to witness through figural spectatorship and metaphorical presence the scene of amour, of sex, of evidence.

In the novel, tropes and hypotheticals substitute for the absent sex scene. When Charlotte turns up at Amerigo's mansion, James refuses to represent sex, but his hypotheticals hint at it everywhere (see Yeazell 41–49). The sense of the past with Charlotte revives in Amerigo, who meets with her the future "as in a long embrace of arms and lips"; Charlotte and Amerigo "drain" meaning from their association, "even as thirsty lips [. . .] might drink" (*GB* 218, 254). Fanny Assingham's ludicrous name could be nothing but a sodomitic joke; Amerigo's "finger[ing]" of a "shining star, a decoration" that might, hypothetically, have been worn by a man like himself, may trope sodomy or the heterosexual act (240–41). When Maggie undertakes her project to rearrange the foursome's relations, she talks to her husband, "as a manner of making love to him." She senses, suddenly, that Amerigo needs time to become accustomed to the new arrangement, and, she imagines, hopes that he and Charlotte "must enjoy a snatch, longer or shorter, of recovered independence" (343). Deferring the reader's grammatical comprehension of noun or verb, James plays with the "as ifs," the readings and imaginings by one character of another. As the reader seeks to literalize these hypotheticals she senses that sex is somehow present in the scene even if no sexual acts are represented as having been enacted. Indeed, when Charlotte and Amerigo talk about the unspoken act or fact of sex, they adopt the same terms that Fanny and Bob do. "What will you say," the Prince asks, "that you've been doing? [. . .] I can scarce pretend to have had what I haven't." "Ah, *what* haven't you had—what aren't you having?" (225–26). As our couple discusses the inn they will visit in Gloucester, she says, "These days, yesterday, last night, this morning, I've wanted everything"; "You shall have everything," the Prince responds (266). Again, James's narrator effaces the part of speech, the bodily acts, to which "everything" refers, yet the reader eagerly substitutes for the elided signification the meaning of multiple sexual acts—voraciously and continuously desired. James encourages the reader's prurience; indeed, he likes the smutty jokes and readerly giggles he writes and stimulates by veiling the sexed and sexual body. Part of his, the narrator's, and our pleasure in writing or reading *The Golden Bowl* is just this act or fact of substitution. Julie Rivkin might well identify this move as James's creation of a "false position," the "logic of supplementarity" that is produced by an "impasse of delegation" (5). Willingly encountering this impasse, we admire the ways James's language—itself a kind of "costume drama"—obstructs even as it enables our attribution of sex to absence or narrative gap. James's language whispers its intent and represents sex, as Bruzzi says of period costume, as existing on the cusp of denial and desire.

Merchant and Ivory eschew this version of sexual delicacy. In the film's first scene of *The Golden Bowl*, Charlotte and Amerigo tour his Italian estate; Ivory and his cinematographer, Tony Pierce-Roberts, shoot the white wall and azure sky from low angle, making it majestic. As Amerigo explains to the spectator (and his lover) that they cannot marry, she embraces him, seeking a kiss that he avoids

as he turns his face from her. The film announces at its opening, then, that the two are lovers; that Charlotte is eager and, indeed, insatiable. Moreover, Merchant Ivory no longer leave a narrative gap as our couple couples in the Gloucester inn. Rather than practicing tourism, however, as they do in James Cellan Jones's 1972 BBC classic serial, the Merchant Ivory lovers engage in sexual foreplay—if not in intercourse—on screen. The scene opens as Amerigo looks out a window, clad only in tweed jacket (and, as we will later see, underwear), smoking. Bare breast and exhalation signify post-orgasmic satiety. Cut to Charlotte, raising her torso from the slept-in bed, her nightdress unbuttoned; never shot frontally nor fully seen, Charlotte's camisole—the spectator nevertheless knows—is open, as the post-orgasmic woman displays her never-satisfied desire. Track Charlotte walking to Amerigo; she sits on his lap, and they kiss passionately. "We might not make it home for dinner," she whispers, as she looks down at her (suggested) bare breasts, drawing Amerigo's look to her breasts; he looks, and the spectator desperately wants, too, to look, to see. Cut to Charlotte's back to the camera, as Amerigo grabs her nightgowned buttocks and pushes her to the floor, her leg raised and lingerie pushed up to her crotch; he clasps her hands over her head, on the floor, suggesting his dominance and her submission; she giggles. He touches her breast. In two shot, she rolls on top and, as camisole separates from skirt, he puts his hand under the waistband, on her skin. Cut to Maggie, seated by the fire, her body fully and elegantly dressed, recumbent against an upholstered chair, waiting for her philandering husband.

This sex scene is hardly explicit, by early twenty-first century standards. Although this scene might on first glance appear to be a bodice ripper, there's nothing nasty about its dominance and submission, its masculine aggressivity, its implicit but never explicit violence. In the *New York Times*, Kristin Hohenadel argues that whereas penetrative, sadomasochistic, and non-body-doubled sex scenes are increasingly on view in international art cinema, audiences remain ambivalent about the graphic depiction of sex on screen. Despite the entrance of sex into mainstream movies such as *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (2000), Hohenadel maintains, Hollywood's "glossy" and "saccharine" version of sex—"gauzy and backlit," choreographed and performed—may break more records at the box office than hard-core shoots of sadomasochistic or penetrative pleasures. Independent filmmakers who want to shoot "real" sex must cope with actors' reticence, spectators' resistance, and the industry's self-censorship. Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi hired hard-core actresses to star in their road-movie of a pornographic actress and prostitute on a murder spree; Chen Kaige shot British heritage star Ralph Fiennes and innocent-but-sexy chick Heather Graham completely naked—and without body doubles—during sex scenes that suggested sadomasochism. Nevertheless, Kaige refused to "show the things that nobody wants to see," he said, including full-frontal male nudity; "I want the sex to have a very beautiful look" (Hohenadel 20). To enter the mainstream, to appeal to middlebrow spectators as well as high-culture consumers, a film's sex scenes must, Hohenadel maintains, shoot glossy, gauzy, and simply suggestive sex acts as facts.

Art films that show the "messy truths about sex," Hohenadel claims, are generally produced outside the Hollywood system. When they are directed by

women—Catherine Breillat, for example, or Despentes and Trinh Thi—they may turn off their feminist, intellectual cinema fans. Breillat's *Romance*, which played briefly in "selected cities" and university towns, shoots sadomasochistic sexual acts from a woman's perspective. Appealing to a female audience, this film about a woman who pursues perverse sex as a potentially liberating act was hardly acceptable to contemporary feminist spectators. Despentes believes that her film's sex scenes made male critics more critical of her work; Breillat, that women believed that her film identified her as a woman who hates women (Hohenadel 20). Indeed, it is easy to imagine that the long lines on *Eyes Wide Shut*'s opening night were less about the sex itself than about what was censored and how, about sex talk and scenes between its then-married star celebrities, Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman; for the unusual casting of sexual partners in "real life" made the sex in *Eyes Wide Shut* unusual in its supposed intimacy, its immediacy, its voyeuristic kick. Indeed, Stanley Kubrick, who specialized in genre pics that spectacularized a genre's codes and conventions, shot his "porn" flick to transgress the boundary in mainstream cinema between simulated sex and voyeuristic, nonchalant, but also frighteningly banal "real" sex. According to Linda Williams, video and blockbuster erotic thrillers differ only in the straight-to-video films' "routine nonchalance" about "scenes of three-way sex, voyeurism and domination," in the mainstream movie's "high production values, massive budget and stars who can open a movie." These thrillers, whose "stories of sexual intrigue" use "criminality or duplicity to support on-screen sex," stimulate male heterosexual desire even as they portray female sexual pleasure, seeking a gender-mixed, heterosexually coupled, audience (111, 107, 105).

Such depiction of on-screen sex—whether in mainstream blockbuster or straight-to-video sleaze—habituates audiences to seeing sexual scenes that exhibit yet choreograph the sex act. Merchant Ivory's *The Golden Bowl* seeks to reach such an audience, yet, unlike "real" sex filmmakers, Merchant and Ivory shoot their big sex scene with a "very beautiful look" (Hohenadel 20). So beautiful, in fact, that the gauzy, sentimental scene may offend some viewers who want to see more of sex's messiness. For Charlotte and Amerigo's novelistic sex—whether a fact, an act, or an "act"—is nothing if not messy. Existing in a smutty melodramatic story about figurative incest and wife-swapping, our couple's sex could hardly have looked so romantic in 1904. Using the conventions of heritage cinema, Ivory shoots this sex scene as costume drama. In her nightdress, Charlotte looks like a "Victoria's Secret" catalogue ad, a figure in a romantic interior shot for *Victoria*, *Victorian*, *Vogue*, or *Interior Design*; a traveling woman in *Travel & Leisure* or *Town & Country* (see Yaeger, Cohen, Van Meter). As costume drama, however, Merchant Ivory's film makes its spectator achingly aware that the nightdress and the shirtless tweed jacket signify inexhaustible sex; the maid who overhears Charlotte's giggle in the inn's hall, who despite her knowledge refuses to listen, represents the would-be voyeur, the spectator who is hardly satisfied with heavy breathing and would like to see more and more. Both nightdress and tweed jacket are fetish: baring some body parts but not others, the jacket and skirted camisole display the seam between body and clothing. The costume-fetish entices the spectator to imagine, but does not show, the things that

nobody (yet everybody) wants to see. Ironically, a tiny ad for Merchant Ivory's *The Golden Bowl* appears in the lower left of Hohenadel's cultural-studies *New York Times* piece. "My advice is: just watch it," the ad runs across its top, a quote from Peter Travers's *Rolling Stone* review.

Merchant Ivory's heritage film and costume drama version of *The Golden Bowl*, then, exhibits periodized expatriate sex in a faux "British" film (see Glancy). The novel, which Jhabvala adapted, is perfect material for Merchant Ivory, a film company whose three most prominent members are Indian, American, and British, respectively. They live in the same apartment building in New York City and together in mansions in upstate New York. Bonded in a "deep emotional" way, according to actress-chef Madhur Jaffrey, the "Merchant Ivory family" has lived, worked, and partied together for more than thirty-five years (Long 32). In addition, each family member fell in love with a culture other than his or her own: Merchant with Paris—its brasseries, patisseries, and outdoor markets, its architecture and décor; Ivory, with India, through painting and filmmaking; and Jhabvala, herself a Polish-German Jew who moved to Britain during World War II, with India, where she lived for many years with her husband, C. S. H. Jhabvala. This internationalized, deeply cosmopolitan group of high-culture and gourmet-food addicts has been drawn to the metropolitan and expatriate writings of Jean Rhys, Kasuo Ishiguro, Jhabvala herself, and, most often, of E. M. Forster and Henry James (Long 12–32). "The feeling I had about Europeans coming to India," Jhabvala said of James, "he had about Americans going to Europe" (Pym 35). Given the Merchant Ivory fascination with cross-cultural encounters, it is not surprising that the company has been attracted to such material. Indeed, Forster's theme in *Howards End*—"only connect"—articulates the cultural, class, and sexual-orientation boundary crossings that Merchant Ivory so often script and shoot (Craig 12).

It is ironic that Merchant Ivory is viewed as heritage film's originators, since such period drama is associated with a "national," usually British, culture. Yet Merchant Ivory has produced and filmed its movies in New York, London, Paris, and India; their films attract viewers not in "domestic" and "export" markets but in multiculturalized nations around the globe.[1] Indeed, *The Golden Bowl* boasts an internationalized cast, each playing against national type. Merchant Ivory's filmic hybrids are seen as heritage film primarily because their seemingly national-cultural "British" films have been so successful with critics and at the box office. Whether international-hybrid or heritage film, however, Merchant Ivory specializes in "quality" period drama about acculturation (see Merchant). As Bruzzi says, when costume fails to call attention to its artifice, its constructedness, its spectacular function as body décor—as it does in Francis Ford Coppola's vampire extravaganza, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1993)—it appears transparently authentic yet designed to display costume drama's fetishistic ideological project. *The Golden Bowl* also prioritizes female eroticism (see "Jane Campion"). Seeking to wed fetishism with heritage, Merchant Ivory failed to secure the middlebrow, acculturated and acculturating audience it sought. The 1990s cycle of Henry James heritage-and-costume-drama films may well be, in the new millennium, out of date.[2]

NOTES

[1] Indeed, Ismail Merchant takes great pleasure and pride not only in describing the wrap-night dinners he cooks for his stars, staff, and crews in borrowed kitchens but the many distributors from around the world whom he hustles at Cannes and the many financiers he attracts from major metropolitan sites (36, 69–75, 113).

[2] I would like to thank Laurie Bandazian at Lion's Gate and Mary Murphy at Merchant Ivory for helping me review the film.

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