Sensibility, Virginity, Possession and the Polity of Power: A Postcolonial Reading of Fleda’s Quest of Aesthetic and Ethical Autonomy in The Spoils of Poynton

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Abstract: I argue that Fleda Vetch’s more and more assuredly disinterested appreciation of beauty endows her with an aesthetic-ethical freedom lacking in Mona and Mrs. Brigstock and Owen and Mrs. Gereth, all prisoners of their own self-interest, from which Fleda manages finally to wrest only Owen. Immanuel Kant’s opposition of interest to disinterest illuminates the disparate subjectivity of these characters just as Edward W. Said’s idea of interest illuminates their clashing possessive and hegemonic agendas, accounting for their aesthetic and ethical judgments in relation to every dimension of human experience, sexual, social, political, economic, historical, and cultural. Fleda’s final freedom is undiminished by the destruction of Poynton’s treasures and her renunciation of Poynton’s owner, Owen. Whereas Tina burns Aspern’s archive herself, Fleda has to rely on chance, if chance it is, to burn Poynton’s artefacts. Fleda’s sexual stasis helps her discover disinterestedness while Mona fails to achieve satisfaction of pleasure due to her predetermined interests for the possession of Poynton through her marriage with Owen.
1. Introduction
The Spoils of Poynton (Henry James, 1897) takes up the matter of the aesthetic and ethical autonomy of a solitary and underprivileged but also educated and impressionable young English woman’s quest for beauty of a kind left unanswered by Tina’s predicament in The Aspern Papers. I argue that Fleda Vetch’s more and more assuredly disinterested appreciation of beauty endows her with an aesthetic-ethical freedom lacking in Mona and Mrs. Brigstock and Owen and Mrs. Gereth, all prisoners of their own self-interest, from which Fleda manages finally to wrest only Owen. Immanuel Kant’s (1790) opposition of interest to disinterest illuminates the disparate subjectivity of these characters just as Said’s (1978) idea of interest illuminates their clashing possessive and hegemonic agendas, accounting for their aesthetic and ethical judgments in relation to every dimension of human experience, sexual, social, political, economic, historical, and cultural. Fleda’s final freedom is undiminished by the destruction of Poynton’s treasures and her renunciation of Poynton’s owner, Owen. Whereas Tina burns Aspern’s archive herself, Fleda has to rely on chance, if chance it is, to burn Poynton’s artefacts. The novel narrates a fight for possessions among the Gereths and Brigstocks and a fight against possession and possessiveness between Fleda and both families.

I argue that Mona’s desire to possess Poynton through marriage to Owen in order to absorb both into Waterbath and all it represents precipitates a Kantian-cum-Saidian conflict between interest and disinterestedness among herself and her suitor, her mother and his mother, and Fleda as his mother’s minion and her rival for his suitor’s favor. Poynton is a work of art created by Mrs. Gereth at her husband’s pleasure and under his aegis, the harvest of many years’ collecting and curating. For, Owen Poynton will become his property and he its patriarch whereas for Fleda it is an aesthetic revelation. Possession of Poynton remains the ultimate aim of Mrs. Gereth, Mona and Owen, even when Owen falls under Fleda’s influence without adopting her generously disinterested contemplation of its destiny. In this context, Owen’s appreciation of art-objects and of Fleda demonstrates his lack of disinterest and the competitive possessiveness he shares with Mona.

Mrs. Gereth explicitly proposes to Fleda that she exploits her sexuality to persuade Owen to abandon Mona whereas Juliana and the lodger together maneuver Tina into an analogous predicament that Tina struggles to understand. James presents Fleda’s and Tina’s sexuality as inalienably their own, not a possession that can pass to another by gift, payment or theft. However, their suitors vary markedly in their understanding of beauty. The lodger is aesthetically astute and acquisitive and wants to possess the poet’s papers for his personal and professional ends; but Owen is aesthetically and ethically stupid and possesses no imagination to understand beauty until Fleda comes his way while he is pursuing control of Poynton for Mona’s sake. James presents two different kinds of suitors, one who deliberately provokes a sexual crisis in a young woman’s life for his own interest, another who is pushed around by three women who each hope for something different from him. The lodger knows the significance of beauty in terms of profit, unlike Owen who may, under Fleda’s influence, sense only vaguely the free satisfaction of the pleasure of beauty. Fleda’s conception of aesthetic-ethical freedom is different from Tina’s. Fleda from the outset conceives of beauty as a disinterested pleasure whereas Tina almost succumbs to the lodger’s exploitation before she belatedly realizes her capacity for disinterested aesthetic and ethical judgment. Fleda works ardently to free Owen from Mona’s taint but Tina takes a while to understand the possessiveness that taints the lodger’s appreciation of the papers. Fleda, Mrs. Gereth, Juliana and the lodger are all aesthetes, but Fleda’s aestheticism is redeemed by disinterest whereas the others’ is not. Tina, Owen, Mona and Mrs. Gereth are not aesthetes, but
Tina comes to understand the beauty of her own being and of the lodger’s as she achieves a disinterested view of the papers that imprison them both. Fleda does not quite redeem Owen as he fails to transcend Mona’s prejudice. But Tina may have redeemed the lodger from his biased understanding of beauty, if that is why he recounts his strangely self-incriminating story just as he does.

Fleda’s appreciation of beauty transcends the interest-disinterest dichotomy as she surmounts others’ colonizing interests in her aesthetic, sexual and ethical autonomy by transfiguring her ideas of her own chastity. Mrs. Gereth’s nomination of Fleda as the priestess of Poynton aligns the value of her virginity with the value of Poynton’s spoils, effectively giving the spoils a desire and agency of their own in deciding to whom they must belong. Mrs. Gereth regards Fleda’s beauty and virginity as a bulwark against the Brigstocks and Owen’s patriarchal denigration of his mother’s prerogative. But Fleda cannot allow her virginity to serve as Mrs. Gereth’s beautiful bait even as she sympathizes with her plight as victim of a patriarchal prerogative whose possessive demands completely overwhelm hers. Fleda reasons that patriarchy may be baffled and disarmed more effectively by her disinterestedness than by Mrs. Gereth’s reactionary and contrary self-interest, which tarnishes and may even defile the beautiful art-objects they both covet. Pure beauty transcends whatever is adherent to social, cultural and political interest and prejudice just as virginity transcends its instrumentalization as a sexual, social, and economic commodity. In this way, Fleda’s virginity is robustly substantial but not corporeal, a moral essence rather than a physiological accident. Conflict arises when Owen perceives Fleda’s virginity as a means to reconcile his desire for Poynton with his regard for his mother. Owen then becomes a masculinizing force and a sexualizing agent and his pursuit of Fleda becomes a scheme of territorial occupation. Fleda’s character evolves, as do Isabelle’s and Tina’s, against a background of characters who do not or cannot, as she finally attains disinterestedness by freeing herself from her feminine interest in Owen as a favor to him. Owen is attracted to Fleda’s autonomy and liberty that endow him with whatever mature sense of his own sexual being he may finally achieve. Fleda sympathizes keenly with Owen’s lack of freedom from Poynton and Mona as if it could so easily have been her own lack and tries to create a breathing space in which Owen might fashion his own freedom through disinterest.

In the light of Kant’s concept of pure aesthetic judgment and Said’s concept of interest, my proposition is that Fleda rises to the level of disinterestedness by surmounting her possessive desire for Owen, whose pursuit of the spoils of Poynton marks him as a prisoner of Mona’s moral taint and aesthetic debility, however much he discovers a pleasure in the beauty of Fleda’s generous disinterest. Mrs. Gereth regards Mona’s incapacity to comprehend the beauty of Poynton as equivalent to moral debauchery, but we might regard her own fiercely possessive spirit as no less debauched. Mrs. Gereth and Mona’s competitive desires for the spoils of Poynton are equally vitiated by self-interest.

2. Critical tradition and debates
Many studies of Spoils analyze the interrelation of aesthetics and ethics, including Roxana Oltean, Stuart Burrows, Victoria Mills, Kimberly Vanderlaan, Peter Rawlings, Bonita Rhoads, and Deborah Wynne. But such two studies, Bill Brown’s Now Advertising: Late James and Victoria Coulson’s Things, are most relevant to my discussion of James’s aesthetic-ethical vision. Brown compares American and British advertising culture with James’s aesthetic presentation of the auras of things, and Coulson posits an innate relation between material things and bodies through aesthetic representation. These two critics and their fellows emphasize the ethical consequence of the aesthetic judgments that serve to free James’s heroines from any interest in acquiring others’ possessions or becoming others’ possessions, allowing them to achieve a Kantian and Saidian disinterest.

Brown’s view of James’s aesthetic-ethical relations depends on his comparison between James’s metaphorical allusions to objects in Spoils and novel contemporaneous advertisements that did
not focus on the display of objects in physical terms. Discussing the paradox of the presence of the objects, Brown identifies a process of de-objectification in James's aesthetic in which things function as historical acts of materiality rather than things as such:

I want to imagine the occultation of the object in James's fiction as a more minor yet significant "historical act," one that fits awkwardly within a less familiar narrative: a narrative not of the subject but of the object. This is a narrative wherein, to borrow Lukács's formula, "the character of things as things" disappears . . . Lukács ascribes this disappearance to the saturation of society with the commodity form, but the character of things as things had already faded, quite profoundly, within aesthetic theory (within the Third Critique) and far more noticeably in what came to be called modern art. (Brown, 2009, p. 10)

Brown's proposition of the growing absence of things as things in Jamesian narrative explains historical acts of materiality as powerful ideological tools that work more like opinions in aesthetic inquiry. Brown considers such things more as auratic than material entities. In Spoils, according to Brown,

Poynton is mostly characterized by homogenizing accounts of its resplendent luminosity: "the shimmer of wrought substances spent itself in the brightness; the old golds and brasses, old ivories and bronzes, the fresh tapestries and deep old damasks threw out a radiance" . . . The material mise-en-scène is more auratic than artifactual, and the fire with which the novel concludes can be read as an allegory of the fate of the spoils within the novel's descriptive register. (Brown, 2009, p. 11)

Perception of an actual thing is diminished to the rhetorical presentation of an historical aura that projects a sense of the past onto the mind of the reader. Brown argues that

Character, in this case, might thus be said to emerge as a system for registering the effectiveness of physical objects, which, as effects, are not objects so much as "things": physical presence transposed into metaphysical potency. (Brown, 2009, p. 11)

For Brown, comprehension of these objects cannot be separated from the impression they create in the mind of the character encountering them and confronting the mystery of materiality. In relation to every character's pursuit of things in their lives in the novel, Brown proposes that

Such metaphysics can be understood phenomenologically, and thus this novel (among others) can be understood to register—but also to dilate and re-temporalize—what William James called, in his essay on "The Thing and Its Relations," . . . "pure experience": the kind of experience that precedes the organization of the experienced world into object forms . . . but also the epistemological dimension; it can characterize both a character's and a reader's experience. (Brown, 2009, pp. 12, James, 1996, 93)

Proposing a link between James's presentation of material objects in his novels and British and American advertising culture, Brown argues that things owe their existence in the novels to the market economy. Mrs. Gereth's pursuit of beauty and Mona's both depend on the material presence and possession of things, contrary to Fleda's spiritual understanding of beauty. Brown notes the economic, commercial imperative behind Mona and Mrs. Gereth's conflict over the possession of beauty, and reflects that the

transformation in advertising, part of an "organized system of commercial information and persuasion, . . . part of the modern distributive system in conditions of large-scale capitalism," amounted to forgoing what Williams terms "genuine information" for "the now familiar technique of slogan and association" . . . Information about the product—about its constituent parts, about its function, about its reliability—gave way to an association of the product with a certain way of life. Advertising fosters, one might say, a certain dynamic of having and being wherein to have a certain product enables you to be someone else. (Brown, 2009, p. 15)
Brown points out that the new culture of advertising purports to transcend the physicality of the products it promotes even though their physical acquisition remains paramount, and that James's novels follow a similar path in representing art objects as elements of an “image culture [that] as such always seems to threaten the status of the depicted object, and of objects tout court” Brown, 2009, p. 19). But Brown examines this aspect of James insufficiently, because the duplicitous dematerialization of commercial goods, a sophistication of the imperial hegemonic interests addressed by Said, is quite unlike the freedom from economic, commercial interest that Adela tries ardently to achieve, an immunity from advertorial appeal.

On the other hand, Coulson contends that “talk about things in texts always implies an argument about the referential capacity of language,” (Coulson, 2010a, p. 322) so that the linguistic and textual nature of things in James's novels depends on an entire albeit elusive system of signification that gives aesthetic and ethical discourse its meaning. Noting Marxist and Freudian interpretations of manufactured or desired things as fetishes, Coulson draws attention to the semiotic and hermeneutic aspects of materiality in language and stresses that James establishes a complex relation between the rhetorical presence of things in the text and their existence in the material reality of a commodified capitalist world. Coulson promises that

Through the example of The Spoils of Poynton, I will show that James is working with both a semiotics and a hermeneutics of material, which is to say bodily, presence. The things in James's writing, and the thing that is James's writing, offer us a rich repertoire of possibilities for reconceiving the connections between language and the body. (Coulson, 2010a, p. 323)

Coulson establishes that James's characters remain ignorant of the nature of material things as ideological tools, arguing that James dwells on the law of dispossession and a reactive possessiveness that oppresses women throughout the novel:

This is indeed a novel about dispossession, acutely attuned to the gaps and lacks in the lives of its heroines, but James is very clear about the nature of what is missing: Mrs. Gereth is the victim of English primogeniture, forced by her son’s impending marriage to leave Poynton and the possessions that symbolize the creative activity of her married life, while Fleda, “with her mother dead, hadn’t so much even as a home” … The occlusion that James locates at the heart of his novel is “the effacement to which English usage reduce[s] the widowed mother” and the motherless, unmarried daughter alike. (Coulson, 2010a, p. 323)

However, I argue that Fleda frees herself from this oppressive regime when she achieves a dispassionate disinterest in the beauty that the regime suborns and denatures, in which Mrs. Gereth imprisons herself to the end. Coulson stresses the intimate bond and conflict between the widowed mother and unmarried daughter:

The Spoils of Poynton combines a thoroughly politicized protest against the negation of women’s labour by patriarchal property law, with a fully psychologized analysis of its heroines' passionate efforts to reconstitute the mothering environment that each has lost. The sense of lack that many critics have registered in this text can best be understood, I propose, as James's evocation of the physical and affective needs of bodies for care and for protection; and the work of the novel, I want to argue, is to develop a language that, like the objects and environment of Poynton, may model a creative reconnection to the bodily nurture that we cannot do without. (Coulson, 2010a, p. 324)

Coulson regards the novel as an indictment of patriarchal property law and of its disregard for woman’s labor, offering an anti-Kantian view of Fleda's taste in terms of her economic, social and sexual needs, rather than her aesthetic and ethical transcendence of them. Coulson insists that language, aesthetics, and ethics cannot be detached from body, despite the social and economic forces that try to detach them from it
James’s novel is keenly alert to the capacity of various environments to orchestrate particular bodily relationships between people and things; spatial and affective relationships between people and things are understood as a function of each environment. The paradox of the nineteenth-century museum lies in its combination of visual accessibility and tactile prohibition: a large number of precious things are displayed, without charge, but also without any possibility of physical intimacy. (Coulson, 2010a, p. 326)

But whereas for Fleda Poynton is a place whose beauty frees her from herself, for Mrs. Gereth it is a material extension of her bodily and social consequence. Yet Coulson argues that James “redefines the aesthetic as the synaesthetic, rethinking language as a medium of polysensory communication” so that art becomes a medium of personal satisfaction in which the aesthetic is reduced to a physical interest:

If the text is a material environment, so the reader comes as a body into relation with the things of the fictional world, at the same time as the things of the fictional world model the text’s own projection of an imaginary body for the reader. (Coulson, 2010a, p. 328)

Coulson’s thesis thwarts any interpretation of the novel that takes proper account of the ideological harm that interest as defined so broadly by Kant and Said can do to all who pursue it aesthetically and ethically.

3. Theoretical perspectives

3.1. Kant

Kant and James’s conception of aesthetic-ethical judgment is comparable, for both observe it as disinterest perception of beauty thus presuppose aesthetic and ethical autonomy. For Kant, aesthetic judgment actualizes in the capacity to determine intuitive and imaginative understanding of beauty without any intellectual, rational and skeptical conceptualization, although subjective nevertheless it has no relation to physical and sensuous perception:

sensations can be objective … but not the relation to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, by means of which nothing at all in the object is designated, but in which the subject feels itself as it is affected by the representation.(Kant, 2000, §1, p. 89)

According to Kant, the validity of satisfaction lies in its independence from needs and desires. For the “satisfaction” that follows any predetermined “interest,” entails instrumental, possessive, and appetitive designs hence “biased” (Kant, 2000, §2, pp. 90–91). Discussing the inevitability of the symbiotic equation of aesthetic and ethic, Paul Giles (2013) argues that for Kant despite of their innate difference aesthetic precedes ethics for when sensibilities accord with moral feelings genuine taste acquires its unalterable form.

Kantian conception of agreeable satisfaction presupposes physical fulfilment and only “gratifies” us sensuously (Kant, 2000, §3, pp. 91–92), as judgment developed on the sensory perception are not free for being overshadowed by intellectual concepts hence an aesthetic judgment has to be free of the concepts of intellect, reason and ideas as Rodolphe Gasché (2002) explicates. Similarly, Kantian judgment of the good valorizes the “reason” thus is not devoid of “concept of an end … [and]interest” (Kant, 2000, §4, pp. 92–93) and authenticates it prejudiced. However, according to Kant, the judgment of the beautiful corresponds to the roles of imagination and comprehension of beauty in an aesthetic experience that stimulates the reflective and intuitive sensitivity and purely “pleases” without ends because the “beautiful is a disinterested and free satisfaction; for no interests, neither that of the senses nor that of reason,” follow it. Drawing upon Schopenhauerian assertion of beauty as an experience of considering things without interest, Bart Vandenabeele (2001) argues that beauty cannot be associated with determinate concepts rather it is an experience of beauty when one forgets himself/herself being part of a chain to which we all belong. Hence to Kant the judgment of the beautiful is pure “disinterested” satisfaction of
taste (Kant, 2000, §5, p. 95) that in Gasché’s (2002) words generates provision to conceive a tenable relation between ethics and the beautiful to establish free satisfaction.

Defining the judgment of the beautiful as a freely imaginative satisfaction above and beyond all rationale and physical constraints, Kant associates its role as “favor,” a pure satisfaction that recognizes no concepts of familial, social, historical, cultural, political, etc., obligations (Kant, 2000,§5,p. 95). Arguing that favor is a subjective phenomenon to follow interests, James DiCenzo (2015) explains that for Kant, “favor” is used to designate a preferential judgment based on non-rational factors. As such the rationale of favor underlines the act of munificence and kindness to be conferred upon without following any need, obligation and wish as “interest spoils the judgment of taste and deprives it of its impartiality” (Kant, 2000, §13,p. 107).

Extending the idea of disinterest and interest, Kant presents the view of free and adherent beauty correspondingly. Paul Guyer (2002) observes this dichotomy of free and adherent beauty as a contrast between perceiving beauty of an object exclusively in its own terms or as a component in a larger whole by way of form and function where free beauty encourages imagination and adherent narrows and constricts it. According to Kant, the principle of the judgment of taste is subjective and is only comprehensible in the framework of universal communicability of human sensibilities, intuition and insight. Kant explains that beauty is not an idea for idea signifies concept of reason and in turn does not leave the judgment free. However, for Kant, that archetype of taste which is based on indeterminate idea of reason and cannot be presented through concepts but in the representation of human figure portrays the faculty of presentation is the imagination. For understanding of beauty is only human experience for “human being alone is capable of an ideal of beauty, just as the humanity in his person, as intelligence, is alone among all the objects in the world capable of the ideal of perfection” for possessing sensitivity, intelligence, imagination, intuition ingrained in his/her nature as an archetype of beauty (Kant, 2000, §17,p.117; p.119). Jerome Langguth (2000) affirms that ideal judgment cannot be formed in direct presentation rather it finds its manifestation in ideal of human beauty. And ideal of human beauty symbolizes the archetype of taste not in terms of beautiful object rather in terms of a symbol of an ideal judgment of taste. As such Kantian humanism presupposes it an ideal unified symbol of shared honors, respect and reverence that connects it with morally good in the idea of highest purposiveness, goodness of soul, purity, strength or repress only fathomable by ideas of reason and depth and force of imagination (Kant, 2000, §17,p. 120). Developing the analogy of the beautiful with morally good, Allison (1997) argues that reflection of the beautiful is analogous with the reflection on the morally good as it brings with it a consciousness of a certain ennoblement and of the value of others making it a simultaneous equation between objective and subjective phenomenon.

Developing the idea of imaginative reflection that the faculty of imagination is a prerequisite to comprehend beauty, Kant claims that it is through this great force of imagination to attain “unprejudiced … broad-minded … consistent” vision of reflective and intuitive “duty” (Kant 2000, §40, p. 176) that establishes the idea of aesthetic-ethical autonomy. Christoph Menke (2008) argues that this aesthetic reflection originates aesthetic freedom and in turn endows an ethical significance to it and establishes a point of comparison of moral and aesthetic judgments as autonomous and self-legislating facts. Kant’s view of moral duty to universal humanity unravels itself in “intuition and reflection” as a favor attained in disinterested reflection (Kant 2000, §41, p.176,§42, p. 179).

Only human being has the ability to cultivate taste to the highest degree as duty to set an example to be followed by other human beings to improve their aesthetic faculty (Vives, 2000). For Kant considers “coarse and ignoble” who do not appreciate beautiful nature and restrain its pleasure and satisfaction to sensory perceptions (Kant, 2000, §42, p. 182). Kant claims that for being an intuitive phenomenon, aesthetic experience requires a nonphysical, apolitical, ahistorical, acultural etc., comprehension of beauty purely based on “imagination, understanding, spirit and
taste” (Kant, 2000, §50, p. 197) as only this ideal perception of beauty engenders the expression of “aesthetic ideas” (Kant, 2000, §51, p. 197). As Steven Ravett Steven Ravett Brown (2004) expounds that these aesthetic ideas enrich our understanding and sensitivity for pure beauty and augment our intuition of rules that describe it. Arguing further the inseparability of imagination to acquire disinterested pleasure of beauty Kant perceives it as a consequence of the creation of aesthetic ideas.

Claiming that Kant allocates the conception of double freedom in the production of fine art, Marguerite Murphy (2008) argues that the comprehansion and appreciation of any object of art being free from capitalist and ulterior interests therefore grant it validity of the universality of judgment. Extending the view of double freedom with art and aesthetic, Kant upholds the difference between aesthetic and moral similar to the difference between intuitive and symbolic. According to Kant moral corresponds to “concept” thus biased, and intuitive understanding of beauty establishes the view of aesthetic autonomy in determining the judgment of taste.

3.2. Aesthetic chastity
Kant’s notions of favor and duty establish the probability to associate the dynamics of aesthetic and ethic with the sexual beings of Mona, Fleda, Owen and Mrs. Gereth as their sexual proclivities problematize their judgments about ethics and beauty. Fleda’s vision of her chastity and virginity drives the view of Kantian duty she imposes on herself thus, becomes a favor for Mrs. Gereth, Mona, and Owen and helps to comprehend the complexes of power structure and relations that restrain her judgment about beauty and ethic in lieu of her familial, political, historical, social, etc., liberty. James’s treatment of the practical difficulties of Kantian assumption of disinterestedness in his protagonists’ life develops an aesthetic and ethic account of her quest of disinterested freedom from her antagonists’ possessive desires but also from sexual, feminine, conjugal and personal preoccupations. For Jamesian heroine’s liberty finds its realization in every walk of her life—nuptial, domiciliary, gender, sexual, financial, class, territorial and global. Jamesian view of aesthetic chastity may imply sexual rebuff, for this chastity constitutes her beauty contrary to non-prescriptive relation of aesthetic and sexuality as Brian Keith Henry (2002) argues. James’s heroine’s notion of chastity parallels an ideal vision of woman’s self—being free of sexual, familial, and physiological prejudices opposite to Jane Lydon’s (2007) perception of virginity as feminine “innocence” in the historical perspective of power structure. Discussing the inevitable relation between aesthetic and feminist politics, Ewa Plonowska Ziarek (2012) argues that though, it serves as a resource to think about the differences between gender, sexuality and politics, yet it interrogates aesthetic as a secondary aspect of feminist politics.

However, James conception of aesthetic freedom serves as an image of a broad-based freedom that governs on heroine’s entire scope of life. As Denis Flannery’s (2011) claim that women in James represent the pulls and pushes of cultural situation metaphorically amid which they have their beings. Flannery’s version of James’s female character’s rejection for sex as a strategy to encounter the pressure of cultural prejudices corresponds to my view of aesthetic chastity as a means to attain aesthetic freedom as we both perceive virginity as a model of beauty, and as an idea analogous to the purity of an object of art and a personal subjective resilience comparable to the purity of virginity (Martínez-Fernández, 2002). Although Eric Savoy (2006) maintains that sexuality problematizes epistemic difficulties to understand its role in the determination of the judgment of beauty, rather I argue that heroine’s sexuality unravels her aesthetic and ethical accomplishments instead of her biological and financial attainments. Hence, I claim that Jamesian heroine’s virginity exemplifies her aesthetic-ethical liberty—a strength and power of her volition through the denunciation of sex in the perspective of her role as confidante, sister, mistress and heiress to contest her masculine occupation. Fleda’s dispassionate appreciation of Poynton’s beauty compels Mrs. Gereth to appoint her it’s priestess because “only you, in all the world, because you know, you feel as I do myself, what’s good and true and pure” (p. 54). As such I argue that aesthetic virginity becomes a crucial element of Fleda’s ethical image of self-representation. Fleda’s virginity transcends its physical dimension and develops into a moral and ethical contingency supporting her to transcend patriarchal control in interpersonal relations with
Mrs Gereth, Owen and his father. Discussing the significance of the gendering of ethics, Lynette Hunter (2001) observes it as a helpful philosophy to comprehend the problems of those people who are peripheral and excluded from power.

Asserting that capitalism’s exploitative relations govern on physical body, John Champagne (2014) drawing upon David Shapiro’s argument of the close relation between aesthetic texts and political economy, asserts that this relation creates an imaginative space to envision not only the aesthetic object rather it provides an empirical pattern to construe aesthetic subjects. And in this perspective Fleda as an aesthetic subject explains how she is assessed as a beautiful object or as a means to value aesthetic objects in economic terms thus, demonstrates her possessors’ interests. Most ironically, the possibility of aesthetic and ethical freedom appears greater in Fleda than in any of the male characters in Spoils. Discussing the global significance of capitalist and imperial expansion at the century’s turn, Anna Despotopoulou (2014) argues that Jamesian women remained marginalized, disadvantaged, economically persecuted as commodities in the hands of the pan-European cosmopolitan man. Regarded as beautiful object by her possessive suitor and his mother, Fleda struggles to possess herself rather than be possessed, to maintain her aesthetic and sexual chastity as an inalienable rather than alienable aspect of her character. Arguing that gendering of autonomy is an internal account of ethics which induces a sexual transformation, Pamela Sue Anderson (2003) maintains that ethics ultimately constitutes regendering of sexist conditions. This regendering of aesthetic freedom portends that Owen in terms of his incapacity to surpass his interests thus, becomes weaker than Fleda. Grounding aesthetics in politics, Robin Robin James (2013) upholds that aesthetic serves as a medium to maintain and change the relations of oppression and privilege. In this perspective, Fleda’s aesthetic and ethical chastity exerts the view of a counter-disruptive strategy against her suitors’ masculine gaze that seeks to usurp her aesthetic-ethical authority over themselves. According to Peg Brand and Mary Brand and Devereaux (2003) feminism and aesthetic help identify the genesis of male gaze in women’s bodily freedom, and argue that representations of female body allegedly describes interests in art and in turn argue for women’s body as an art object or a medium for political engagement or interchangeably as a personified sexuality. As such, James portrayal of Fleda’s struggle to achieve fourth dimension develops Kant’s ideal of beauty and ethic in the conflict of political, social, sexual and patriarchal power. For Mrs. Gereth and Owen, Fleda’s beauty is alternative to artwork, in Anna De Biasio’s (2008) words for her suitors she is desired by a masculine aesthetic gaze evocative of competitive connoisseurship. In Kendall Johnson’s (2014) words the connoisseur’s world of collection though is hermetic yet represents an autonomous world of unique objects thus, authority. Mrs. Gereth tries to exploit Fleda’s inner beauty to help her retain the beautiful artworks and patriarchal estate of Poynton, urging Fleda and Owen to marry for her benefit rather than theirs. But Fleda frees herself from Mrs Gereth’s exploitation only be freeing Owen from it as well, the beauty of Poynton affirmed only by its destruction and her own inner beauty only by her not marrying. In brief, the idea of aesthetic chastity speaks to the gender roles that James’s heroines negotiate as they free themselves from others’ valuations of their worth and character.

### 3.3. Dialectics of imperialism and dynamics of political autonomy

Said’s notion of disinterestedness in imperialism helps to interconnect the phenomenon of sexuality and gender, Kant’s equivocation to observe it in his conception of disinterestedness to construe aesthetic-ethical judgments. Discussing the inevitable association of aesthetic with the ideological formations, Stephen Pulsford (1996) though describes aesthetic experience apolitical yet states it inexorably politically positioned. In this regard, Said’s views of disinterest and interest establish challenging argument about the association between aesthetic, ethical and political dynamics of imperialism and freedom.

Interrogating the relationship between aesthetic and system of privilege and oppression in the context of power politics, Robin Robin James (2013) solicits that privilege and oppression exploit aesthetic as a medium to regulate society. Jamesian female protagonists’ life can be observed as a political accounts in the context of imperialism developing their histories as stories of
colonization and struggle to subvert their internal and external subjection in a network of masculine interests similar to Said’s (2003) argument that ideas, culture and histories can only be translated by placing them in the complex of power structure and nexus of interests. In this context, taking R. S. Herr’s (2013) argument of women’s historical and political agency in the backdrop of imperialism, I argue that Jamesian concept of aesthetic virginity foreshadows the illustration of women’s agency in broader context.

Fleda works her way imaginatively to aesthetic chastity to subvert her inner colonization. James’s display of Mrs. Gereth’s pursuit of Poynt’s unique and historical objet d’art explains her struggle to own a colonial property as one of the colonist’s political actualities to implement imperialist order (Said, 2003). Arguing that imperial order maintains its force on the quest and satisfaction of interests, Said (2003) maintains that it functions on the political and economic raison d’être. Said (2003) further argues that imperial culture implements its control to manipulate and incorporate its differences by means of political, cultural and moral power with the law of orthodoxies and aesthetic canon. Interestingly, James compares aesthetic-ethical judgments of characters in their personal and impersonal transactions whereby urban and suburban dichotomies become cites of differences in terms of Said’s (2003) view who believes that geographic frontiers are adjunct with social, ethnic, and cultural dynamics, which is why territorial boundaries define unfamiliarity for being observed as space outside one’s own.

Similar to this, these territorial dichotomies of urban and suburban aesthetic orders reflect in Poynt’s and Waterbath. Alice Maurice (2015) imagines it as opposing aesthetics, however, I observe it in terms of characters’ varied sensibilities. As such this imaginative disparity and clash is comprehensible in term of Radhika Jones’ (2008) view of colonial hierarchies. In regard to this, K. Boudreau’s (2010) view that this colonial template involves an agency of human relation that works around radical political affiliations make these contrasts palpable. In Spoils, this conflict of self and other is represented as Said (2003) employs the poetics of space in the idea of imagined geography and history to dramatize the distance and difference in postcolonial perspective.

James’s incessant engagement with the built environment places such as Poynt, Waterbath, Ricks, and Kensington exhaustively define every human character in relation to them. Considering place as permeating identity of a character, Costa (2017) points out that Jamesian portrayal of spaces is used to communicate human sentiments. According to Costa (2017), in Jamesian narrative, space renders explicit and implicit references that epitomize the material world of the narratives ontologically therefore represents the internal reality of characters. In this connection if Spoils is observed the owners of these places tend to become monstrous through owning or desiring to own them, most grossly Mrs. Gereth, and Mona. Their houses and gardens render their personalities hence, their ethical position.

Another central aspect of the self and other binary in Spoils is concerned with feminine and masculine relations in terms of the traditional roles of master/servant, weak/powerful, ruled /ruler, or invaded/invasion respectively. In this regard, Said’s argument that the core of the imperial power relations lies in the historical baggage for being a universal scale for considering all the potential forces operating in the field of historical evolution helps to observe women’s virtue as a burdened endowment of “historical” subjectivity (2003) improbable to be subverted but by achieving a socio-political, historical, cultural and sexual disinterest. However, James sees it in the cultivation of aesthetic disinterest as a strategy to defy and reconfigure oppressive gender roles. Fleda’s chastity foreshadows her aesthetic and ethical freedom for being unsullied of feminine prejudices and biases for those who want to exploit it for the satisfaction of their masculine or patriarchal interests as she finds herself trapped in the pursuit of art where she herself is considered as a prize piece for Mrs. Gereth to sustain her empire of spoils as Said remarks that one of the agenda of Empire is the quest of art (Said, 1993). As Poynt includes French pieces made during the reigns of “Louis Quinze” and “Louis Seize,” a Spanish “Maltese Cross,” and English “Jacobean” furniture, all of which Mrs. Gereth offers Fleda as a reward if she marries Owen, a reward that would transform Fleda herself into an beautiful piece in
Mrs. Gereth's collection (pp. 48,85,82,41). Fleda’s beauty is her chastity. As her chastity guards her against patriarchal captivity as a duty and consequently counteracts to destabilize appropriation of her “identity” (1994). In this regard, Robert C. J. Young (1995) considers the colonial operation as an experience of sexual exploitation, as it entails the imitation of patriarchal discourse (Richardson, 2000) of power to imprison, violate and abuse beauty for the satisfaction of their interests.

4. The spoils of poynton

4.1. Waterbath

Fleda’s “little rural walk” around Waterbath develops into an encounter with its “ugliness and stupidity” and “imbecilities of decoration, the aesthetic misery of the big commodious house,” persuading her that its owners, the Brigstocks, are the prisoners rather the masters of their prejudices. When Gayan Prakash argues that “colonial reality appears in . . . estranged representation” (Prakash, 1995, p. 4) she may well have in mind outlandish places such as Waterbath, which strikes Adela as alien and hostile:

To get away from it and out into the air, into the presence of sky and trees, flowers and birds, was the necessity of every nerve. The flowers at Waterbath would probably go wrong in colors and nightingales sing out of tune. (p. 35)

At the outset “Fleda Vetch was dressed with an idea” not unlike Mrs. Gereth’s that the Brigstocks were “less developed” than they, aesthetically, ethically and intellectually. Mona initially appears to Fleda as a stranger to beauty because Waterbath is and was always bereft of it. She takes Waterbath’s eccentric architecture and bizarre decoration to represent accurately the Brigstocks’ provincial bigotries. Fleda’s tour of a setting she thinks Philistine provokes a spiritual “need” to escape its overarching “dreadful” and “intimate ugliness” (p. 36). But Said warns us about the establishment, here by Fleda acting as Mrs. Gereth’s acolyte, of such cultural differences on allegedly aesthetic and ethical grounds:

It is perfectly possible to argue that some distinctive objects are made by the mind, and that these objects, while appearing to exist objectively, have only a fictional reality. A group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call “the land of the barbarians” (Said, 2003, p. 54).

Just who the barbarians are, whether the guests or the hosts, each so strange to the other, cannot yet be clear even though the narrator, faithfully echoing the visitors’ condescension, boldly proclaims that Waterbath evinces an ugliness fundamental and systematic, the result of the abnormal nature of the Brigstocks, from whose composition the principle of taste had been extravagantly omitted. In the arrangement of their home some other principle, remarkably active, but uncanny and obscure, had operated instead, with consequences depressing to behold, consequences that took the form of a universal futility. (p. 37)

Pierre Bourdieu (1984), holding an anti-Kantian view of aesthetic judgment as a function of social class, would surely find more than enough evidence here to prove his thesis about relative aesthetic distinction, with these two factions of the haute bourgeoisie contesting each other’s privilege to judge and acquire beautiful things as they see fit.

Fleda and Mrs. Gereth’s distress at Waterbath’s aesthetic barrenness proves psychically and viscerally intense:

The house was bad in all conscience . . . they had smothered it with trumpery ornament and scrapbook art, with strange excrescences and bumpy draperies, with gimcracks that might
have been keepsakes for maid-servants and nondescript conveniences that might have been prizes for the blind … They had gone wildly astray over carpets and curtains; they had an infallible instinct for gross deviation and were so cruelly doom-ridden that it rendered them almost tragic. Their drawing-room, Mrs. Gereth lowered her voice to mention, caused her face to burn, and each of the new friends confided to the other that in her own apartment she had given way to tears. There was in the elder lady’s a set of comic water-colours, a family joke by a family genius, and in the younger’s a souvenir from some centennial or other Exhibition, that they shudderingly alluded to. (p. 37)

For Fleda no less than for Mrs. Gereth, Waterbath reflects the emptiness, baseness and wildness they purport to find in the Brigstocks’ ignoble nature and outlook:

The house was perversely full of souvenirs of places even more ugly than itself and of things it would have been a pious duty to forget. The worst horror was the acres of varnish, something advertised and smelly, with which everything was smeared: it was Fleda Vetch’s conviction that the application of it, by their own hands and hilariously shoving each other, was the amusement of the Brigstocks on rainy days. (p. 37)

They regard the Brigstocks’ immense aesthetic labor as the epitome of the acquisitive machinery of imperial commerce and presume that Mrs. Gereth’s immense aesthetic labor is of an entirely different kind. But both are trapped by the aesthetic interests that Bourdieu well describes, neither yet capable of Saidian or Kantian aesthetic autonomy.

That Mona appears to Fleda somewhat uncivilized, even dehumanized, indicates how thoroughly Fleda and Mrs. Gereth initially agree on the absence of beauty from the Brigstocks’ lives. In Fleda’s eyes, Mona’s gait and garb are those of a tribal princess or even a caparisoned horse:

Miss Brigstock had been laughing and even romping, but the circumstance hadn’t contributed the ghost of an expression to her countenance. Tall, straight and fair, long-limbed and strangely festooned. (p. 39)

Fleda sees Mona as a barbarously exotic other in line with Mrs. Gereth’s quasi-colonial aesthetic imperium that colonizes sympathetic natives like Fleda and routs those like Mona who resist colonization. But we could also regard Poynton and Brigstock aesthetics as rival fashions competing for market dominance. According to Rebecca Strauss, a fashion can become a resistant force as it operates in the affective, politically complex aesthetics of modern everyday life, and even clothes that are unfashionable are nevertheless not outside of fashion’s social logic. Paradoxically imbricated in and resistant to mass carceral society, its imperial extension around the globe, its exploitative economic practices, and its unflinching social violence, fashion also paradoxically aligns with progressive and even utopian politics of resistance. This resistant force of fashion has been invisible to analytic models based in the theory of commodity fetishism, to dismissals of fashion as so much frivolity, and to frameworks that accuse fashion of conspiring with a patriarchal, imperialist capitalism. (Strauss, 2013, p. 130)

But Mrs. Gereth and Fleda do not view the Brigstocks as a rival fashion house, but rather as incapable of beauty of any fashion, much as Conrad’s European adventurers regard the Congolese in Heart of Darkness, as Achebe (1977) contends, as savages. Fleda observes Mona as an animal she might see on a safari:

she stood there without a look in her eye or any perceptible intention of any sort in any other feature. She belonged to the type in which speech is an unaided emission of sound, in which the secret of being is impenetrably and incorruptibly kept. (p. 39)
Fleda interprets in just this way Mona’s “puerility—in the horse-play” she displays. Although Peter Hulme cautions that in a Caribbean context “Ugly in appearance” often refers not to intrinsic physical characteristics but to extrinsic cultural features (Hulme, 1986, p. 40), Mrs. Gereth does not think the Brigstocks can ever change their spots, whereas Fleda comes to hope they may. Mrs. Gereth takes Mona’s appearance and demeanor to invite her forcibly to civilize or rather subjugate her. As Said argues in a grander context, in relation to the difference between the civilized and the uncivilized, the “point here is that the space of weaker or underdeveloped regions like the Orient was viewed as something inviting … interest, penetration, insemination— in short, colonization” (Said, 2003, 219). In this light, Mrs. Gereth’s encounter with the Brigstocks reveals her ideological bias.

Robyn R. Warhol perceives Mona’s speech as “disnarration” that carries

implications of the kinds of faces the Brigstocks do not possess, faces “it would be possible to describe,” with “expression,” “a look in [the] eye,” and “perceptible intention.” Such faces— describable in novels generally, but not in this one— would be more real to Fleda than the countenances she encounters in the Brigstocks. (Warhol, 2007, p. 265)

Warhol’s suggestion that “disnarration” implies absence of identity underpins Fleda’s initial reduction of Mona to a faceless entity, her shock falling in with Mrs. Gereth’s colonial disgust with inferior people who cannot even communicate clearly. Fleda observes that Mona’s

expression would probably have been beautiful if she had had one, but whatever she communicated she communicated, in a manner best known to herself, without signs. (p. 39)

We might recall Hulme’s argument that a lack of intelligible speech is presumed by the supposedly civilized an intrinsic trait of barbarians who

by definition, are incapable of such communication. Their complete lack of language, exemplified in … gabbling, is a dramatization of their inability to form a community: they are condemned to a life of ceaseless hostility. (Hulme, 1986, p. 161)

As Mrs. Gereth and Fleda cannot understand Mona, they perversely conclude there is nothing they do not already understand about her. Mrs. Gereth perceives Mona as a desperate plunderer ready to steal Owen and thus Poynton from her, driven by a “need of expansion” and territorial acquisition (p. 38). Mrs. Gereth immediately tries to counter Mona’s marauding designs:

The party began to stroll together to the house, and Fleda had again a sense of Mrs. Gereth’s quick management in the way the lovers, or whatever they were, found themselves separated. She strolled behind with Mona, the mother possessing herself of her son, her exchange of remarks with whom, however, remained, as they went, vividly inaudible. That member of the party in whose intenser consciousness we shall most profitably seek a reflection of the little drama with which we are concerned drew a yet livelier impression of Mrs. Gereth’s intervention from the fact that ten minutes later, on the way to church, still another pairing had been effected. Owen walked with Fleda, and it was an amusement to the girl to feel sure this was by his mother’s direction. Fleda had other amusements as well: such as noting that Mrs. Gereth was now with Mona Brigstock; such as observing that she was all affability to that young woman; such as reflecting that, masterful and clever, with a great bright spirit, she was one of those who impose, who interpose themselves. (p. 39)

Fleda admires Mrs. Gereth as might a sheep admire the shepherd who favors her above another in her flock. By her deft shepherding Mrs. Gereth sorts the sheep from the goats in the hope of thwarting the “peril” of Mona’s matrimonial designs on Owen and Poynton (p. 41). According to Robert J. C. Young’s postcolonial reckoning, marriage and

economic and sexual exchange were intimately bound up, coupled with each other, from the very first. The history of the meanings of the word “commerce” includes the exchange both
of merchandise and of bodies as sexual intercourse. It was therefore wholly appropriate that sexual exchange and its miscegenated product, which captures the violent antagonistic power relations of sexual and cultural diffusion, should become the dominant paradigm through which the passionate economic and political trafficking of colonialism was conceived. (Young, 1995, p. 181)

Mrs. Gereth wants to manage her son’s marriage to thwart a rival’s attempted takeover of an enterprise she insists belongs to her, shocked to find herself subject to another’s colonial ambition. Mona’s pursuit of Poynton through Owen is seen as an act of transgressive sexuality by an inferior barbarian wanting to expropriate the beautiful possessions of her civilized superiors by suborning Owen, even though he must realize that such a mismatch would be perverse and unnatural:

He had been in ugly houses enough, but had escaped that particular nightmare. Nothing so perverse could have been expected to happen as that the heir to the loveliest thing in England should be inspired to hand it over to a girl so exceptionally tainted. (p. 43)

Waterbath would so indelibly taint Poynton, that Mrs. Gereth anticipates aesthetic “humiliation” and a “violation” of taste:

Mrs. Gereth spoke of poor Mona’s taint as if to mention it were almost a violation of decency, and a person who had listened without enlightenment would have wondered of what fault the girl had been or had indeed not been guilty. (p. 43)

The enlightenment with which Fleda listens to Mrs. Gereth here is not the same as the that with which she will listen to her later, as the irony of listening “without enlightenment” becomes clearer along with the falsity of Mrs. Gereth’s aesthetic and ethical judgments.

Fleda at first falls in with Mrs. Gereth’s certainty that Mona’s underlying colonial agenda is to possess Poynton even though they believe her incapable of appreciating its beauty. They fear Mona means to wrest Poynton’s valuables from them

“By every means in her power.” “But surely not because she understands and appreciates them?” “No,” Mrs. Gereth replied, “but because they belong to the house and the house belongs to Owen. If I should wish to take anything she would simply say, with that motionless mask, ‘It goes with the house.’ And day after day, in the face of every argument, of every consideration of generosity, she would repeat, without winking, in that voice like the squeeze of a doll’s stomach, ‘It goes with the house – it goes with the house.’ In that attitude they’ll shut themselves up.” Fleda was struck, was even a little startled by the way Mrs. Gereth had turned this over - had faced, if indeed only to recognize its futility. (p. 44)

Mrs. Gereth’s fear, which infects Fleda, is that as one of Poynton’s “new proprietors,” Mona, will pursue what Helen Tiffin calls the “material imperial practice” of colonialism (Tiffin, 1995, p. 98), Mrs. Gereth hardly able to imagine the “horrors they would perpetrated in the house” by occupying it but certain that “Mona would approach Poynton in the spirit of a Brigstock and that in the spirit of a Brigstock she would deal with her acquisition” (p. 45). At this early stage Fleda has not yet freed herself from a deference to those who possess things, recalling that Brown demonstrates how “the word ‘things’ in the Jamesian lexicon names a potent source of attraction, conflict, and anxiety” (Brown, 2002, p. 223). The Brigstocks’ anticipated conquest of Poynton causes Mrs. Gereth to imagine her art treasures amid

the abominations they would inevitably mix up with them – the maddening relics of Waterbath, the little brackets and pink vases, the sweepings of bazaars, the family photographs and illuminated texts, the “household art” and household piety of Mona’s hideous home. (p. 45)
Brad Evans recognizes the connoisseurship and possession of art-objects as inevitably a mode of ascendance in James and argues,

In the novels and stories, consciousness takes shape in the intersubjective relays and gaps between characters and their relations—relations both to other characters and to things, and more complexly to other characters by way of things. (Evans, 2015, p. 1)

The possession of things suggests not only power and dominance generally but also aesthetic superiority specifically. Gauri Viswanathan argues that “the development of the aesthetic sense or the disciplines of ethical thinking—can be vital in the process of sociopolitical control” (Viswanathan, 1987, p. 2.) and stresses that imperialists exploit the rhetoric of aesthetics and ethics to exercise authority and hegemony over their subjects, as Fleda sees Mrs. Gereth’s aesthetic and ethical casuistry working ineffectively and counter-productively to subject Mona to her power.

Given Waterbath’s “primitive” aesthetics and its owners’ “blankness” towards beauty, Mrs. Gereth wonders “How could a Brigstock possibly understand what it was all about? How, really, could a Brigstock logically do anything but hate it?” when contemplating Poynton (p. 49). Hulme defines the dichotomy between the “civilized” and the ‘primitive’ … [as] ideological, not historical” (Hulme, 1986, p. 83), and clearly Mona’s primitivism highlights an ideological conflict between her and Mrs. Gereth, sure that she “couldn’t, wouldn’t rise” to the challenge of appreciating Poynton’s beauty, given that “the only mode her intelligence suggested of meeting the expectation was to plant her big feet” at Poynton as a savage claims territorial control by physical force. In Kantian terms, Mona senses the agreeableness of Poynton but remains blind to its beauty, as “Agreeableness is also valid for nonrational animals; beauty is valid only for human beings” (Kant, 2000, 95, p. 95). Marianna Torgovnik argues that the primitive exists at the “lowest cultural levels,” (Torgovnik, 1990, p. 8) agreeing with Mrs. Gereth and Fleda’s joint assessment that Mona, “brutally ignorant” of the true “pleasure” of beauty, is moved simply by a “gross avidity” to possess Poynton to remedy her aesthetic lack (pp. 50–1) Mrs. Gereth’s declaration to Fleda that “I could give up everything without a pang. I think, to a person I could trust, I could respect” evinces not only her prejudice against Mona as “a woman ignorant and vulgar” but also her appeal to Fleda obligingly to replace Mona in Owen’s affection (p. 53). Ranu Samantrai notes that imperialists must regard the primitive as aesthetically “impotent” (Samantrai, 1990, p. 14.) to shore up their own power, falling in with Torgovnick’s contention that the notion of the “‘Savage’ highlights the identity theme, the defining of self against other as often involved in the dynamics of defining the primitive” (Torgovnik, 1990, p. 25.)

Mrs. Gereth tries to exploit Fleda’s dutiful aesthetic and ethical disinterest in her campaign to push Mona, a “regular barbarian” from the field (pp. 56,59), whether Fleda signs up willingly as her co-conspirator or remains an innocent dupe. Mrs. Gereth tempts Fleda with serpentine guile:

“You would, of course - only you, in all the world, because you know, you feel as I do myself, what’s good and true and pure.” No severity of the moral law could have taken a higher tone in this implication of the young lady who lacked the only virtue Mrs. Gereth actively esteemed. “You would replace me, you would watch over them, you would keep the place right.”(p. 54)

Mrs. Gereth entices Fleda to become the “priestess” of Poynton (p. 58), perhaps no more happily than Isabelle became mistress of the Palazzo Roccanera and Tina the trustee of Asperrn’s papers. Mrs. Gereth tempts Fleda to give up her freedom in favor of what Deborah Wynne identifies as “property ownership” (Wynne, 2010, p. 143). Poynton becoming Fleda’s property and Fleda becoming Mrs. Gereth’s property. However, the prospect of serving as Poynton’s priestess as well as its best ornamental piece precipitates an aesthetic, ethical, and sexual crisis for Fleda, as Mrs. Gereth appeals to her sense of aesthetic duty to persuade her to exploit her feminine sexual interests, on which,
Shawn O'Toole argues, a “new friendship is formed, that is, on an aesthetic principle, a shared disdain for the crass materialism and ‘cheap gimcracks in this awful age’” (O’Toole, 2006, p. 147). To achieve her entirely self-interested ends, Mrs. Gereth implores Fleda to exploit and sacrifice her “disinterested attachment” to beauty and her chastity by seducing Owen for the sake of Poynton’s beauty and their allegedly mutual interests in it (p. 59). Mrs. Gereth invites Fleda to descend to Mona’s level and violate her own aesthetic and sexual being for the greater good, as Mrs. Gereth defines it.

4.2. Poynton

As first appears to Fleda, Poynton belongs inalienably to Mrs. Gereth: it is her “complete work of art,” its art-objects hers, the artful work of collecting them also hers, and perhaps even her investment of interest in them an art (p. 41). Poynton is Mrs. Gereth’s actual and aesthetic empire and Fleda enjoys it entirely at Mrs. Gereth’s sovereign pleasure. Its cornucopia of art treasures and Mrs. Gereth’s passion for them overwhelm Fleda:

These were neither more nor less than the things with which she had had time to learn from Mrs. Gereth that Poynton overflowed. Poynton, in the south of England, was this lady’s established, or rather her destabilished, home. (p. 41)

Fleda understands that Poynton was the lifelong systematic enterprise of Mrs. Gereth and her late husband, who was its sole legal owner just as their son is now its sole legal owner. Mrs. Gereth’s truly extraordinary taste and her curatorial acumen chafe against England’s patriarchal hierarchy and history, as she must have known throughout her married life, surely arming herself in advance to defend her treasures:

Mrs Gereth’s collection stands out in high relief. It surpasses the types of bourgeois interiors described by William Loftie and Eastlake. She is a collector on a grand scale. Her Louis Quinze furniture, Venetian velvets and oriental China link her to the eighteenth-century amateur and man of taste … Mrs. Gereth’s is a “phallic” form subscribing “a model of patriarchal collecting in which … [her] only option is to transform feminine acts of consumption into masculine acts of labour” (Victoria Mills, 2009, p. 673).

Mr. Gereth appears to have resigned the role of patriarch to his wife, though necessarily only for the term of his natural life, after which the role must pass to his son. Mrs. Gereth’s acquisition and collection of artworks may evince a hegemonic and imperial authority, but the law regards it as delegated by her husband rather than her own:

There had been in the first place the exquisite old house itself, early Jacobean, supreme in every part; a provocation, an inspiration, the matchless canvas for a picture. Then there had been her husband’s sympathy and generosity, his knowledge and love, their perfect accord and beautiful life together, twenty-six years of planning and seeking, a long, sunny harvest of taste and curiosity. (p. 41)

Mrs. Gereth plays the husband and her partner her consort, implicitly emulating Queen Victoria. Poynton is the Victorian British Empire in miniature and Mrs. Gereth a Victorian Britannia in miniature, animated by what Patrick Colm Hogan calls a deep “feeling of a communal self, based in a real or imagined history” (Hogan, 2000, p. xi) of the Empire. This helps us understand that Mrs. Gereth’s collection epitomizes a national and international imaginary and that Mrs. Gereth, as such a collector, according to Natalia Sucre Fombona, “illuminates the subjectivity of individual property, of ownership, that is, subjectivity as it is constructed in bourgeois society” (Fombona, 1997, p. 1).

But as Mrs. Gereth’s acquisitions result from her own indefatigable labor, as well as that of her husband acting at her direction, they cannot simply be regarded as rentiers enjoying the fruits of imperial dominion but rather the kind of patrons for whom the artefacts were specifically made. As Mills argues, collectors
are both producers and consumers as collection forming can be read as work . . . collections as being “saturated with our labor” . . . but pleasure is also apparent in the exercise of aesthetic judgment, the acquisition of objects, the “wanting” and “possessing” of them and in the relationship between collector and collected. (Mills, 2009, p. 671)

From Mills’s standpoint, Mrs. Gereth does not simply master all the prior owners, dealers, and artists subject to her, but is mastered by the appeal made by artists and their intermediaries to support their artistic labor, as the production of fine art has still not been assimilated into the capitalist paradigm of dichotomous subject-object positions. Rather, Mrs. Gereth begins to act imperially when she tries to bribe and suborn Fleda into acting as her agent in a projected guerrilla war with the Brigstocks by seducing her son, whose aesthetic and ethical education she appears to have entirely neglected. Owen appears, for whatever reason, entirely and obtusely unmoved by his mother’s plausible claim and “personal gift, the genius, the passion, the patience of the collector— a patience, an almost infernal cunning, that had enabled her to do it” (p. 42). Mrs. Gereth also allows her avarice for material possessions to eclipse any maternal prepossession in favor of her son with whom she will not share her beautiful things because he cannot appreciate their aesthetic value. James acknowledges the force of Mrs. Gereth’s reasoning by endorsing Fleda’s intuitive initial agreement with it, leading Kimberly Marie Vanderlaan to observe that in James’s art and aesthetics and in those of his disciples,

The use of art objects, relics, and other physical forms borrowed from the sister arts in these authors’ fiction evokes a sense of history, of the authors’ place in it, and perhaps most importantly, of the authors’ understanding of how the arts contribute to the construction of cultures. (Kimberly Marie Vanderlaan, 2005, p. 6)

Mrs. Gereth decides to wield the spoils of Poynton as a weapon of aristocratic aesthetic taste against arrivistes such as the Brigstocks who see them solely as cultural and real capital to be valued and traded at market rates. The legitimate purchase and possession and proper appreciation of art-objects demonstrates, in Jonathan Readey’s terms, precisely the “aristocratic exceptionalism and autonomy” (Readey, 2008, p. 260) that Mrs. Gereth claims in the face of her capitalist and patriarchal rivals and on behalf of herself and her female spiritual heir Fleda Vetch.

Mrs. Gereth and her husband “had had in every corner of Europe their swing among the demons of Jews,” thereby effectively redeeming the wares they bought, leaving Mrs. Gereth convinced “that she was herself the craftiest stalker who had ever tracked big game”(p. 42) during her sojourn among tribes both subdued and unsubdued. As Anne Christine Coon explains,

What Mrs. Gereth most wants known about herself is that she is the mistress of Poynton. Mrs. Gereth’s estate is, by her own description, everything Waterbath is not; it is the tasteful and graciously arranged gallery of a lifetime of cautious acquisition, and she is its creator and its guardian.(Coon, 1986, p. 114)

Mrs. Gereth must from the beginning have anticipated “the dread of the inevitable surrender” of Poynton to its legal heir, a dread with which we must deeply sympathize even as we wonder why Mrs. Gereth did not conduct Owen’s aesthetic education along the lines urged by Friedrich Schiller. Along with James and Fleda we feel Mrs. Gereth’s plight keenly:

The house and its contents had been treated as a single splendid object. No account whatever had been taken of her relation to her treasures, of the passion with which she had waited for them, worked for them, picked them over, made them worthy of each other and the house, watched them, loved them, lived with them.(p. 43)

Mrs. Gereth insists that aesthetic values must eclipse all economic considerations, although the latter underwrites her acquisition of all the art objects that she wishes to keep for herself and withhold from the Brigstocks and her Brigstock-smitten son. But her apparently unimpeachable
right to enjoy them carries an imperial political import, of a kind that Kim Vanderlaan identifies in all such “aesthetic acquisitions” (Kim Vanderlaan, 2011, p. 42):

Poynton was the record of a life. It was written in great syllables of colour and form, the tongues of other countries and the hands of rare artists. It was all France and Italy with their ages composed to rest. For England you looked out of old windows – it was England that was the wide embrace. (p. 47)

Through her art collecting Mrs. Gereth joins what Jonathan Arac identifies as a “lineage of aesthetic historicism” (Arac, 2012, p. 234.) that entrenches the cultural and economic hierarchies of past imperial commerce. James even-handedly both celebrates and censures Mrs. Gereth’s enterprise when the narrator notes that in the “art of the treasure-hunter, in selection and comparison refined to that point, there was an element of creation, of personality” (p. 46). As Mrs. Gereth is treated so unjustly, we may extenuate her fault as Fleda does, and as Tina extenuates the lodger’s fault, but as Isabelle cannot bring herself to extenuate Mme. Merle’s fault even though Osmond’s mistreatment of both of them is equally brutal.

Mrs. Gereth appeals to Owen without much immediate effect:

“The best things here, as you know, are the things your father and I collected, things all that we worked for and waited for and suffered for. Yes,” cried Mrs. Gereth with a fine freedom of fancy, “there are things in the house that we almost starved for! They were our religion, they were our life, they were us! And now they’re only me – except that they’re also you.” (p. 53)

Yet Mrs. Gereth’s proclamation of her idiosyncratic but impeccable taste is typical of every claimant to a kindred cultural nobility, as Bourdieu explains:

In fact, the generalizing tendency of the cultivated disposition is only a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for the enterprise of cultural appropriation, which is inscribed, as an objective demand, in membership of the bourgeoisie and in the qualifications giving access to its rights and duties. This is why we must first stop to consider what is perhaps the best-hidden effect of the educational system, the one it produces by imposing “titles,” a particular case of attribution by status, whether positive (ennobling) or negative (stigmatizing), which every group produces by assigning individuals to hierarchically ordered classes. Whereas the holders of educationally uncertified cultural capital can always be required to prove themselves, because they are only what they do, merely a by-product of their cultural production, the holders of titles of cultural nobility—like the titular members of an aristocracy, whose “being” defined by their fidelity to a lineage, an estate, a race, a past, a fatherland or a tradition, is irreducible to any “doing” to any know-how or function—only have to be, because what they are because all their practices derive their value from their authors, being the affirmation and perpetuation of the essence by virtue of by which they are performed. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 23.)

Bourdieu does not quite capture Mrs. Gereth’s cultural position as a woman whose legal and social entitlement to nobility is not her own, only the gift first of her husband and then of her son. Aesthetic value is to economic value as woman is to man, bound to serve.

The barbarism that Mrs. Gereth sees in almost all those who covet Poynton evokes Said’s binary scheme:

this universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is “ours” and an unfamiliar space beyond “ours” which is “theirs” is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary. I use the word “arbitrary” here because imaginative geography of the “our land – barbarian land” variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for “us” to set up these boundaries in our own minds; “they” become “they” accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from “ours”. (Said, 2003, p. 54)
Neither Owen nor the Brigstocks accept Mrs. Gereth’s binary scheme. Furthermore, according to Cheryl McEwan, “British women’s historical experience, in all its complexity and variation, … [is] often bound up culturally, economically and politically with imperial concerns and interests” (McEwan, 2001, p. 97), as Mrs. Gereth’s international collecting of foreign artefacts transforms, however modestly, those bound to enforce and obey England’s extra-territorial aesthetic and ethical jurisdiction.

Mrs. Gereth’s attachment to her collection is quasi-maternal:

There isn’t one of them I don’t know and love – yes, as one remembers and cherishes the happiest moment of one’s life. Blindfold, in the dark, with the brush of a finger, I could tell one from another. They’re living things to me; they know me, they return the touch of my hand. But I could not let them all go. (p. 53)

Mrs. Gereth’s sense of the aesthetic value of Poynton grows out of her quasi-maternal toil for her progeny and their nursery that absorb her being so that, according to Sean O’Toole, her “subjectivity is displaced … onto material interiors” (O’Toole, 2012, p. 33). Mrs. Gereth feels “not the crude love of possessions; it was the need to be faithful to a trust and loyal to an idea” (p. 63). The need to subjugate and acquire control of a place in order to exercise power over it belongs not to Mrs. Gereth but to Mona, whose imperial colonizing motives follow Said’s doctrine that “to take possession of territory,”

The important thing was to dignify simple conquest with an idea, to turn the appetite for more geographical space into a theory about the special relationship between geography on the one hand and civilized or uncivilized peoples on the other. (Said, 2003, p. 216)

The Brigstocks, and Owen when under their influence, regard Mrs. Gereth as uncivilized, not without reason. Although Nicola Nixon believes that the novel “does not in fact begin by positing conflicting constructions of femininity” (Nixon, 1993, p. 43) in terms of Mona and Mrs. Gereth, the text suggests otherwise. Clearly, Mona arrives at Poynton to conquer and colonize another’s realm, by accepting the perfectly legal fiction that it never belonged to Mrs. Gereth in the first place, but first to her husband and now to her son. Although she behaves like a “bored tourist in fine scenery,” Mona certainly knows how to plant her “big boot-toes” firmly on the ground as she envisages pulling up Poynton’s “winter garden” to build a “billiard room” (pp. 50,52,55–56). Mrs. Gereth, on the other hand, along with Tina in The Aspern Papers and the Touchetts in The Portrait of a Lady, regards gardening as both beautiful and aristocratic. As Leslie Marmon Silko notes, “Gardens were emblems of social status, success, and power—imitations of the gardens of European royalty—and demonstrations of conspicuous consumption” (Silko, 2012, P. 211). Imperialism involves mercantile capitalists annexing not only the gardens of foreign subjects but also the gardens of the cultural nobility whose domain they colonize no less relentlessly than any other.

Poynton’s galleries and grounds epitomize England’s noble and historic beauty. Oltean observes that such an

English scene, speaking overtly of cultural and geographic difference, stands, of course, under the sign of the highly seductive “picturesque” … figured as an object of desire for the ambivalent tourist. (Oltean, 2001, P. 186)

But it is even more an object of desire for the upwardly mobile and avaricious Mona, whose “geographical appetite” (Said, 2003, p. 216) can be appeased only by making the scene her own. Mona’s characterization of Poynton as an “old shop” (p.52) denigrates the picturesque in favor of the fashionable, pushing Mrs. Gereth into the past. Mona, in Peter Rawlings’ terms, “refuses all history” (Rawlings, 2003, p. 273) and in David Spurr’s terms, “surveys and invades” (Spurr, 1993,
p. 28). Poynton as a colonial adventurer. According to Peter J. Betjemann, Mona’s mother comes armed with sales catalogs and tourist pamphlets to assess the market value of Mrs. Gereth’s wares:

Mrs. Brigstock tours the remarkable collection of French, and Italian antique at Poynton – handicrafts made by the best artisans “of the more laboring ages” – while clutching a decorative magazine. Her “formula of admiration” is that every antique she sees appears “in the style” of something else. Mrs. Brigstock thus exemplifies an attitude towards craft that, I will suggest, is the central drama of material objects in The Spoils of Poynton in the age of style guides … and decorative magazines. (Betjemann, 2004, p. 206)

Mona appears as a sauntering imperialist surveying the spoils that she anticipates will become hers as Owen’s spouse, albeit hardly Samantrai’s “colonial explorer of exotic lands who travels in order to complete his knowledge of history” (Samantrai, 1990, p. 33), given that she has no interest at all in the past.

For Mrs. Gereth and Fleda as her sympathizer, Mona is the “enemy,” an apostle of ugliness who intends Poynton’s “dishonour” and spoliation (pp. 66,65) in a “counter-historical” (McWhirter, 2005, p. 171) campaign to deprive Mrs. Gereth of her past. Bonita Rhoads reads Spoils as a “commentary on social transformations” (Rhoads, 2012, p. 148) among which we must surely number the colonization of the cultural nobility by the merchant class and the nobility’s anti-colonial resistance to it. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that “decolonization is the veritable creation of new … women” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 7), and certainly Mona becomes a conqueror and Mrs. Gereth a native chieftain who refuses to be colonized, with Owen and Fleda their harassedd intermediaries. Thus Mrs. Gereth sallies forth like Queen Boudica or Queen Elizabeth defending her realm against an alien invader:

She planted herself there as a heroine guarding treasure. To give up the ship was to flinch from her duty … She trod the place like a reigning queen or a proud usurper; full as it was of splendid pieces it could show in these days no ornament so effective as its menaced mistress. (p. 63)

Mrs. Gereth and Mona are the champions of two competing empires come face to face like many before them who, according to Said, “fought over the same terrain, contested the same history” (Said, 1993, p. 240). But James feared the new order more than the old, with the prospect of aesthetic and ethical autonomy growing ever dimmer. As Stephanie Foote remarks,

James was therefore even more distressed by the perverse democratization of taste, by the sinister spread of the common upwards. He was acutely observant of the increasing vulgarization of the upper classes, of the apparent surrender of the elite to the evaluative mechanisms of the aspiring parvenu, signaled in the elite class’s inability to withstand the blandishments of new money and their concomitant failure to uphold – or even mourn – the standards of a “high” and sacralized culture. (Foote, 2006, p. 45)

But, on the contrary, Millicent Bell insists that

Mona’s disdain of the aestheticism of Poynton has its validity. Mona knows that things are things, and is contemptuous of the claim that Mrs. Gereth’s possessiveness is superior in some way to her own feeling of entitlement. The implied equivalence of Poynton and Waterbath may be seen as an expression of the modern economy which has made the Brigstocks rich; it illustrates the way all the resources of modern society, the intellectual and the personal as well the material, become items of abstract exchange value.(Bell, 1991, p. 211)

But things are not merely things, and aesthetic value is not merely exchange value, even though Mona’s exploitation of Owen may echo Mrs. Gereth’s of her husband, about which we know very
little. Mona certainly intends to expel her prospective mother-in-law from Poynton because her son's legal right extinguishes hers, history belonging essentially to men and only accidentally to women.

Owen's “stroll” around Poynton reveals to Fleda his patriarchal and masculine interests (p. 59). Although he may be “beautiful,” he is also “stupid and has “no imagination” and no sense of beauty (pp. 40,61), and so Fleda acknowledges that he is a “strong young man, who had a right to judge and even a reason to loathe her” (p. 60).The law endorses his male interests and biases. The house and its history belong to him, and his mother’s self-proclaimed autonomy can only be a frolic of her own imagination because she is legally no more than an agent, first her husband’s and now her son’s. Eric Savoy observes that the novel explores the collision between what might be called “extreme collecting” and other sorts of values and ethical demands, such as the mutual obligations of parents and children.(Savoy, 2001, pp.268, 270)

Mrs. Gereth’s extraordinary aesthetic judgment and art acquisitions magnify immensely the ethical conundrum of patriarchal inheritance and property law, symbolized by Owen’s insistence on establishing and maintaining the one monstrosity of Poynton: all tobacco-pots and bootjacks, his mother had said – such an array of arms of aggression and castigation that he himself had confessed to eighteen rifles and forty whips. He was arranging for settlements on his wife, he was doing things that would meet the views of the Brigstocks. (p. 72)

These emblems of his phallocratic interests certainly suggest a deeply troubled relation between a son and his mother who preferred trophy hunting (hence the rifles) and strict discipline (hence the whips) to child rearing and loving kindness, as if she were his father’s double rather than his mother.

Fleda realizes that at Mrs. Gereth’s urging and in Owen’s eyes she is now “Mixed up with the spoils there, rising before him as if she were in a manner their keeper,” at the very time Owen realizes that “I never knew how much I cared for them. They’re awfully valuable” (p. 92), he newly admits without yet understanding what kind of value he means, faced with a modern version of the judgment of Paris, having to choose between the ideas of Poynton presented to him by his mother, a possessive Hera; Mona, an acquisitive Aphrodite; and Fleda, a pensive Athena: three beautiful women epitomizing three different notions of aesthetic and ethical judgment. Already Mona’s fiancé, Owen hesitates over his choice when he belatedly discovers what a “fine vessel” Fleda truly is (p. 107), leading Thomas J. Otten to observe that James “charts the flow between persons and artifacts” (Otten, 2006, p. xxii.). At the same time, Fleda tries to reestablish her autonomy, reasserting her aesthetic and ethical chastity after having accepted the role of Mrs. Gereth’s agent as the “priestess” or palladium of Poynton’s beauty. Owen’s original desire to possess the spoils of Poynton is complicated and frustrated by his emerging need to possess Fleda, even as Fleda urges him to outgrow the absurd idea of love as a kind of possession. Fleda's instrumental, self-centered sense of “duty to serve as Poynton’s priestess (p. 115) matures into a truly Kantian “duty” to free not only herself but also others from their blinking interests (Kant, 2000, 940, p. 176). Victoria Coulson argues that

Late Jamesian texts are sticky fictions furnished with sticky objects. Mrs. Gereth. Fleda, Kate and Charlotte—the late-Jamesian sisterhood of anguish, ruthless heroines, whom we might term the furniture-fanciers – struggle through a pitiless society, seeking to defend themselves from poverty and despair. (Coulson, 2004, p. 115)

But Mrs. Gereth and Fleda are not only fellow furniture-fanciers but also, as women, themselves furniture that others fancy. Owen’s declaration to Fleda that “You’ve been beautiful … exquisite,”
even a “treasure,” foregrounds the “commerce” of his aesthetic and social enterprise (p. 119). Fleda worries that Owen’s attraction to her evinces his pursuit of “bargains” rather than the “triumphant gage of the innocence of the young man’s heart” (pp.121,125). Carol Faulkner argues that Fleda’s imagination works with its most feverish intensity when faced with knowledge that is both deeply desired and profoundly terrifying … Rifles and whips, along with continued references to Owen’s teeth, seem significant in terms of what they may reveal about Owen’s true nature.(Faulkner, 1994, p. 144)

Yet such alarming paraphernalia may reveal more about his mother and his unstable relation to her than about his own true nature, as Fleda seeks to free him not from himself but from his mother and from Mona and, in the end, even from herself.

4.3. Ricks

Mr. Gereth’s deceased maternal aunt’s house at Ricks affords a measure of “refuge” to his widow that she finds grossly inadequate. Ricks “was amply furnished, it contained all the defunct aunt’s possessions” but “It wasn’t a place like Poynton” (p. 61). Its emptiness and ordinariness exacerbate Mrs. Gereth’s aesthetic and material crises, not least because she knew her reasons for believing that the maiden-aunt’s principles had had much in common with the principles of Waterbath. In short the only thing she would ever have to do with the objets d’art of Ricks would be to turn them out into the road. What belonged to her at Poynton, as Owen said, would conveniently mitigate the void resulting from that demonstration. (p. 64)

Owen suggests his mother take what artworks she likes best with her, after he evicts her from Poynton, and move into the picturesque cottage. But Fleda soon discerns that Mrs. Gereth “recognized in time that this venture would be weak … The place was crowded with objects of which the aggregation somehow made a thinness” (p. 68). Mrs. Gereth’s difficulty in fitting into Ricks sharpens the singularity of her aesthetic self-definition, which separates her not only from the Brigstocks but also from her Gereth in-laws. As she “gazed” at the “salvage of the wreck” (pp. 68, 70), we can hardly fault her sense that the beauty of the art objects is diminished by their relegation to a cottage that transforms them into curios. Although for Tamara L. Folliniarth galleries and museums serve as “alluring shapes of liberation and self-realization” (Follini, 2010, p. 244) not all exhibition spaces are created equal. Ricks elicits from Mrs. Gereth her righteous indignation as she reminds Fleda that “I’m too savage and odious” (p. 73) to acquiesce in the infringement on her autonomy even more than the confiscation of her property. She establishes the actuality of an invader and plunderer of exotic sites to carve her history by scheming confiscations, systematic acquisitions and collections of things from their historical provenance. Mrs. Gereth’s inner Boudicca emerges in definitive form.

As Mrs. Gereth struggles to retrieve Poynton and its precious contents, Fleda is certainly sympathetic to a familial and material embarrassment and distress increasingly like her own, yet also, according to Wynne, “seems to transcend such materialism because she cared nothing for mere possession. She thought solely and incorruptibly of what was best for the objects themselves” (Wynne, 2010, p. 145). Fleda refuses to regard people and art objects in terms of their usefulness to her whereas Mrs. Gereth cannot regard them in any other way. But although McWhirter perceives in the conflict between the Gereths and Brigstocks “the violence of an elitist … bourgeois cultural hegemony” (McWhirter, 2005, p. 172), we may be forgiven for preferring Mrs. Gereth’s possessiveness to Mona’s, as Mrs. Gereth indulges and nurtures her collection whereas Mona would simply capitalize it. As Mrs. Gereth shows Fleda around,

Everything was in the air – each history of each find, each circumstance of each capture. Mrs. Gereth had drawn back every curtain and removed every cover; she prolonged the
vistas, opened wide the whole house, gave it an appearance of awaiting a royal visit … all her old loves and patience, all her old tricks and triumphs.(p. 71)

Guy Davidson views the collector’s acquisition of art-objects in quasi-colonial terms as expropriation, tearing them from their proper places and purposes:

promiscuously “tumbled together,” these commodities, the “loot,” … of empire’s “far-off victories,” have, the description encourages us to assume, been violently abstracted from the context of their production and inserted in the marketplace of the metropole, where they maybe “applied to a hundred uses and abuses” unrelated to their maker’s original intentions. (Guy Davidson, 2007, p. 27)

But Mrs. Gereth’s imperial swagger may be fanciful and ironic and the artists’ original intentions more complex and amenable than this allows, especially as most artworks involved would have been made on commission or for sale. Thinking generally of the characters in James’s fictions, George Monteiro claims that

Each of them works, with varying degrees of success – not to win a game per se – but to establish pertinent facts, fit pieces to a puzzle, or search out the mystery at the center of some web of relationships. The efforts of Mrs. Gereth of The Spoils of Poynton, however, are of a different sort. She is more like Poe’s schoolboy, intending to win all the marbles. (Monteiro, 2009, p. 83)

Yet Mrs. Gereth is nothing like a precocious schoolboy. Her husband’s death shocks her out of her fantasy that possessions are progeny, as she belatedly realizes that nothing is hers except by others’ grace and favor. She must but cannot trump Mona’s legal and materialist claim with a counter-claim based on “an imaginative possession of things,” as F. G. Novak characterizes it (Novak, 2013, p. 150).

The fight for Poynton is a microcosm of imperial and colonial political conflict, each battle and battleground pitching claim against counter-claim, together mapping the progress of the war as in an atlas of military history. Jose Rabassa notes that such an atlas “reopens territories to domination and appropriation within a historical dimension (Rabassa, 1993, p. 192), just as Graham Huggan notes the affinity between the art of cartography and discursive colonial practice:

The exemplary role of cartography in the demonstration of colonial discursive practices can be identified in a series of key rhetorical strategies implemented in the production of the map, such as the reinscription, enclosure and hierarchization of space, which provide an analogue for the acquisition, management and reinforcement of colonial power. (Huggan, 1989, p. 115)

Poynton, Ricks and Kensington are mapped in this way, as are the more numerous battlefields of The Portrait of a Lady. Mrs. Gereth retreats to Ricks as to the last remaining fastness of her realm, from which to plot to regain her lost dominion. As Said reflects,

The important thing was to dignify simple conquest with an idea, to turn the appetite for more geographical space into a theory about the special relationship between geography on the one hand and civilized of the uncivilized peoples on the other. (Said, 2003, p. 216)

In this case, Mrs. Gereth contemplates the re-conquest of her civilized realm from the uncivilized usurpers who have suborned her son into turning against her. Sergio Perosa proposes that “the drama hinges squarely and destructively on a fight for the possession of … ‘old things’ and ‘household goods’” (Perosa, 2008, p. 157) without noting that families and women are themselves all too often regarded as such things and goods.
To fill the “great gaps in the other house,” Ricks, Mrs. Gereth plans to transfer to it her salvaged “trophies” and “the very best pieces—the morceaux de musée, the individual gems” from Poynton (pp. 80, 81). Daniel Hannah argues that imperialism entails the ornamentation and embellishment of cultural and political power by the colonial properties it acquires, to secure “the ordering, binding, and comprehending of ‘imperial society’ through an “essentially” hierarchical “ornamental mode” (Hannah, 2010, p. 33). Mrs. Gereth commandeers Ricks not only to redeem its aesthetic nullity and provinciality but also protect the aesthetic palladium without which she could never reclaim Poynton as truly her own. Exiled by her son as was Ovid by Augustus, Mrs. Gereth takes with her Poynton’s greatest treasures, as Fleda realizes when she gasps

“And even the Maltese cross!” That description, though technically incorrect, had always been applied at Poynton to a small but marvelous crucifix of ivory, a masterpiece of delicacy, of expression and of the great Spanish period, the existence and precarious accessibility of which she had heard of at Malta, years before, by an odd and romantic chance – a clue followed through mazes of secrecy till the treasure was at last unearthed. (p. 82)

Mrs. Gereth brandishes the cross to vanquish the Brigstocks, her son as their dupe, even an innocent maiden aunt, all foes whose infidelity she thereby links to that of the Spanish Moors. The “ideological overtones of historical inevitability” (Ferguson, 1992, p. 87) that Marjorie Ferguson detects in all imperial discourse can be heard in Mrs. Gereth’s hopeful presumption that the believer will ultimately prevail. But Fleda senses that Mrs. Gereth’s use of her artworks as weapons tarnishes them terribly, distressed by the accommodation Mrs. Gereth furnishes for her at Ricks:

...a harmony without a break, the finished picture of a maiden’s bower. It was the sweetest Louis Seize, all assorted and combined – old, chastened, figured, faded France. (p. 85)

But it feels “false” (p. 91), designed to reward her and punish Owen left behind in Poynton’s emptied halls.

Lee Clark Mitchell notes “the link between physical possessions and psychological self-possession” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 23) that Fleda later identifies as the mark of a colonial adventurer when she comes to see Mrs. Gereth as a “terrible woman” prone to express “the loud lawful tactless joy of the explorer leaping upon the strand. Like any other lucky discoverer she would take possession of the fortunate Island” (p. 121), here fortunate only because the Island is unguarded and the islander already dead. Yet Fleda is equally persuaded of the power that Poynton’s artworks exert over their aesthetically sensitive owner, and that Mrs. Gereth acknowledges their dominion over her rather than hers over them. Thinking of her own miniscule accomplishment as a watercolorist, Fleda recalls that

Poynton, moreover, had been an impossible place for producing; no art more active than a Buddhistic contemplation could lift its head there. It had stripped its mistress clean of all feeble accomplishments; she sometimes unrolled, her needles and silks, her gold and silver folded in it, a big, brave, flowery square of ancient unfinished “work”; but her hand had sooner been imbrued with blood than with ink or with water-colour.(p. 131)

Poynton decrees an aesthetic and ethical disinterest as thoroughgoing as the Buddha’s, a discipline that Fleda acquires at the same rate at which Mrs. Gereth loses sight of it, so that “Mona’s interest” and Mrs. Gereth’s tragically converge (pp.145,142), both prejudiced in favor of their personal interests when judging artworks. As Christine A. McBride concludes, the “English custom of primo-geniture” (McBride, 2007, p. 255) vitiates both Mrs. Gereth’s judgments and Mona’s, neither permitted the autonomy that only Fleda senses as an imaginative necessity even though a legal and economic impossibility. McBride perspicaciously notes that “Possession supplies James with a powerful lens, trained upon material culture and its role in class definition” (McBride, 2005, p. 7) and, I would add, trained equally upon aesthetic culture and its role in self-definition.
4.4. Kensington

Owen finds Fleda shopping on Oxford Street in London by following his phallocratic sexual interests rather than any interest in art because, Fleda realizes, he “hadn’t a sense of beauty” (p. 64). Owen is shopping for consorts, having contracted to purchase one before realizing the greater value of another. Their encounter in the shop precipitates a sexual “crisis” in Fleda as she perceives that Owen’s “incongruous offers” to buy her things are meant to tempt her to defect from his mother’s camp to his. He tries to interest her in

a travelling-rug, a massive clock, a table for breakfast in bed, and above all, in a resplendent binding, a set of somebody’s “works.” His notion was a testimonial, something of the sort usually done by subscription and in this case indeed perhaps the Brigstocks would contribute. (p. 75)

Most revealingly, according to Victoria Coulson, Owen offers Fleda a

“small pin-cushion … in which the letter F was marked out with pins” … Fleda’s pin-cushion models the self as a skin structure whose identity is an articulation of the surface, not a property of the core.(Coulson, 2010a, p. 25)

He has come to appreciate Fleda’s beauty without realizing that her refusal to use people and possessions for her own advantage is the essence of her beauty, along with its promise of conferring the same power of refusal on others. He may want to bargain with her in order to transcend all bargaining, to complete a “transaction” between them (p. 93) to free himself from all transactional thinking. But he cannot yet appreciate her beauty in its freedom, only her prospective adherent beauty as his consort, in accordance with Kant’s distinction (Kant, 2000, §16, p. 114).

The shopping scenes in Spoils certainly resemble those that Davidson considers in The Golden Bowl in which Charlotte and the Prince

look at “objects” “tumbled together in the shop windows … luxury artifacts and women’s faces in the Prince’s gaze suggests that the novel will develop its interest in the inter implication of consumer and sexual desires through an emphasis on the exchangeability of the female body.(Davidson, 2007, p. 26)

Fleda is the only one among his mother’s associates, whose beauty Owen appreciates precisely because his mother has considered his interests in cultivating her, even as Fleda must deny both angler and fish the pleasure of treating her as bait as they reconcile themselves at her expense, much as Isabel struggles to elude Osmond and Mme. Merle’s designs on her. Sexually aroused by Owen as she is, Fleda must nevertheless place his ethical redemption before her desire to possess him. Her aesthetic autonomy gives her a sense of how she might achieve such sexual autonomy. Yet she too readily contrasts her supposedly ideal love with the love she rather ungenerously attributes to Mona:

To have loved Owen apparently, and yet to have loved him only so much, only to the extent of a few tables and chairs, was not a thing she could so much as try to grasp. Of a different manner of loving she was herself ready to give an instance, an instance of which the beauty indeed would not be generally known. (p. 105)

Fleda’s “lovely imagination” persuades Owen that she is a “beautiful … exquisite … treasure” (pp. 112,119) whom he wants to possess as his wife, to placate his mother and do justice to his inheritance, but only at the cost of dispossessing his fiancée and thereby doing the Brigstocks a grave injustice. Owen’s later arrival at Fleda’s Kensington home exposes him to the aesthetic “horrors” of her father’s interior décor of which she is exquisitely ashamed (p. 127). Her father’s aesthetic insensitivity, provinciality, and sterility as she somewhat ungenerously sees them are everywhere on display, including his “old brandy-flasks and match-boxes, old calendars and handbooks, intermixed with an assortment of pen-wipers and ash-trays, a harvest gathered in from penny bazaars” (p. 131), as if sexual ardor could flourish only in tasteful surroundings.
Fleda feels least lovely and least free at home in Kensington, confined by chronic despondency and embarrassment over her subjection to others’ aesthetic and ethical judgments, and she is moreover disconcerted to see Owen in formal attire rather than in his casual country garb that never failed of suggestions of the earth and the weather, the hedges and ditches, the beasts and birds. There had been days when he struck her as all potent nature in one pair of boots. (p. 134)

Splendidly dressed, he attracts her with a “tremendous” power that Fleda finally feels in all its fullness. Owen enters her home “like a man” come to possess her (p. 155) even though, as Karen Leibowitz notes, both “Owen and Fleda demonstrate an interpretive problem in courtship rituals” (Leibowitz, 2008, p. 20), not quite knowing how to open doors and cross thresholds. Through gripping, opening and closing her door Fleda mimics her struggle to both admit and resist her desire to relinquish her autonomy and to enable her suitor to do likewise. In Stephen Slemon’s view, such resistance is an act, or a set of acts, that is designed to rid a people of its oppressors, and it so thoroughly infuses the experience of living under oppression that it becomes an almost autonomous aesthetic principle. (Slemon, 1995, p. 107)

For Fleda, both oppressor and oppressed are subject to the same oppression, one is its agent and the other its object. She knows she ought not to take its operation on her personally and hopes not only to elude Owen’s sexual agenda but also free him from it. Fleda maintains her chastity, her aesthetic and ethical autonomy, to the apparent detriment of her material self-interest, to nurture his and others’ autonomy. According to Jane Thomas, such an aesthetic and ethical ideal is truly contemplative, recognizing that a “purely physical reflex ... is not an aesthetic emotion” and that there is a “complete refusal of bodily drives in aesthetic judgment” because ultimately “art refuses the body” (Thomas, 2010, p. 246.) a Victorian aestheticism that certainly claimed Kant’s imprimatur.

When Fleda and Owen meet in Kensington their roles are reversed, Owen once the provincial now the sophisticate, Fleda once the sophisticate now the provincial. Owen’s desire that Fleda serve as his spouse and Poynton’s chatelaine arouses Fleda’s “sense of necessity” and “strong personal need” (p. 155) to escape his plans for her. Owen’s acknowledgment of her beauty is not free of interest and self-gratification because it serves his diplomatic ends to reconcile himself with his mother at Mona’s expense. Fleda asks him, “Why do you need saving when you announced to me just now that you’re a free man?” According to Wynne, “Despite his sex, money, property, and weapons, Owen fails to maneuver himself into a position of power” (Wynne, 2010, p. 146). Just as Owen earlier needs Mona to counter his mother in one way so now he needs Fleda to do so in another, his phallocratic authority their gift to him rather than an intrinsic or inherited capacity. He admits as much when he credits Fleda with the power to free him from Mona:

“I’m saved, I’m saved - I am! I’m ready for anything. I have your word. Come!” he cried, as if from the sight of a response slower than he needed and in the tone he so often had of a great boy at a great game. (p. 162)

But his supposed freedom requires Fleda to give up hers in favor of his. Fleda says encouragingly “You have pleased me, and you’ve been right and good” (p. 164) to coax him to reconceive his notion of freedom, but Owen’s conception of beauty remains entangled in needs, “reasons” (p. 169), wants and desires driven by familial and economic imperatives. His aesthetic and ethical judgments always depend on personal, social, cultural, historical and political considerations.

Fleda embodies for Owen the beautiful spirit of Poynton just as his mother had hoped and he regards her as such even when he finds her incongruously housed in Kensington. The door she
opens is of her body as his estate not hers. In this scheme for Poynton’s preservation Fleda becomes its palladium, reanimating “the clustered spoils of Poynton” (p. 171). Craving property and propriety, Owen lacks the “purity of passion” and disinterest that informs the pleasure Fleda takes in every experience of beauty, his beauty as much as Poynton’s. He never realizes the Kantian possibility of freedom within himself, guided always by interest. As Kant never ceases to remind his readers, all “interest presupposes a need or produces one; and as a determining ground of approval it no longer leaves judgment on the object free” (Kant, 2000, 95, p. 95). I cannot agree with Christopher Stuart when he argues that Fleda “holds herself to a rigid code of ethics, but in the end her very rigidity causes the most damage, the most human suffering, of all” (Stuart, 1998, p. 174). Self-interest asphyxiates the spirits of those it grips whereas disinterest frees those it uplifts. I likewise cannot agree with Bonita Rhoads when she argues that “Fleda remains, at the close, homeless and destitute” (Rhoads, 2012, p. 159) as a home is not simply real estate and a woman shall not live on bread alone, as the Gereths and Brigstocks discover when Poynton goes up in flames kindled by a deus ex machina most sympathetic to Fleda. I prefer Paula Marantz Cohen’s reasoning that for Fleda “power relationships of gain/loss, victory/defeat, and weakness/strength have no meaning” (Cohen, 1982, p. 114) because her aesthetic and ethical autonomy frees her from them. Owen appreciates Fleda’s aesthetic and ethical autonomy even as he forgoes his own, incorrigibly obtuse toward its beauty. The Poynton Fire destroys everything that the Gereths and Brigstocks value but nothing that Fleda values in her Kantian freedom.

5. Conclusion
In conclusion, my reading of The Spoils of Poynton demonstrates how Fleda’s discovery of the nature of aesthetic judgment informs her sexual self-understanding which in turn informs their ethical thinking and decision-making. This concatenation of the aesthetic, sexual and ethical dimensions of her experience reveals the multi-dimensionality of James’s conviction that the virginity or chastity of the human subject is an inherent and inalienable capacity and energy rather than an accidental or circumstantial incapacity or vulnerability. Chastity is the palladium of the state of autonomous disinterest besieged by an army of heteronomous interests, a palladium whose human form is the beauty of womanly liberty and whose material form is the beauty of artistic accomplishment. Art collectors and suitors share both a possessiveness that supposes artworks and women possessable commodities and a willful ignorance of the immunity of both such embodiments of beauty to their instrumentalizing designs. Fleda discovers the Kantian ethical duty she owes herself and others as she reflects on the Kantian freedom of the aesthetic response with which she may favor the beauty of any element of her experience, including the art objects she encounters. However constrained and even imprisoned by material and familial circumstance, James’s heroine retains her incorrigibly free spirit, though Fleda retains it provisionally, still having only just begins life of as yet unforeseeable character. Mrs. Gereth and Mrs. Brigstock fight to influence Fleda. All these combatants try to suborn for their own ends the sexual desires of a beautiful woman whose initially needy and unattached state they must secure to themselves before she can realize her own need, capacity, and duty to free herself from them. Although The Spoils of Poynton is not overtly political in dealing with the international trafficking of national cultural treasures, The Spoils of Poynton deals with a cultural treasure and a woman both implicitly of considerable representative significance to England’s body politic.

The Spoils of Poynton depicts the attempted seduction of Fleda by self-interested Owen and Mrs. Gereth who exploit the heroines’ susceptibility to the beauty of art and of sensory and perceptual experience more generally. Owen is aided and abetted by other women whom they have already dragooned into his service such as Mrs. Gereth. Owen’s acquisitive interest in Fleda is inextricably entangled with his similarly acquisitive interest in art works or art collections to the beauty of which the heroine is more disinterestedly susceptible. Mrs. Gereth tries to seduce Fleda with her collection of spoils. Fleda is hardly a match for the worldly and selfish interests arrayed against her, but she nevertheless survives, whether in triumph or merely to fight another day.
In brief, I argue that Mona’s pursuit of the spoils of Poynton is a colonialist enterprise prompted by the death of a chieftain whose widow leads a guerilla campaign to defend her realm. For Mrs. Gereth, Mona’s incapacity to comprehend Poynton’s beauty is unforgivable whereas Fleda’s capacity to comprehend it reason to appoint her its priestess to rescue her feeble heir from the colonist’s allure. Fleda comes to understand that beauty can have no owners, only nurturers and trustees, only after struggling with her intense desire to possess Owen’s affection and be possessed by his, and to minimize the injustice done to Mrs. Gereth by a legal and social regime that sets at nought her claim to the art she guards from its foes.

Funding
The author received no direct funding for this research.

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Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Citation information
Cite this article as: Sensibility, Virginity, Possession and the Polity of Power: A Postcolonial Reading of Fleda’s Quest of Aesthetic and Ethical Autonomy in The Spoils of Poynton, Bushra Naz, Cogent Humanities (2022), 9: 2034282.

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