

AESTHETIC VIRGINITY, ETHICAL LIBERTY AND THE AUTONOMY  
OF BEAUTY: POSSESSIONS AND THE POETICS OF  
POSTCOLONIALISM IN *THE ASPERN PAPERS*

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ABSTRACT

I argue that *The Aspern Papers* takes up the question of aesthetic chastity in terms of the unnamed narrator's pretended courtship of Tina when he was a lodger in her home, through which she finally achieves aesthetic-ethical freedom as a single woman. Like Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Tina at first does not appreciate her suitor's self-interestedness, but then manages to establish her aesthetic-ethical autonomy by rendering her virginal spirit proof against its objectification and exploitation by the lodger, in a Kantian parable of freedom. Juliana's jealous possession of Jeffrey Aspern's papers and her imperious guardianship of Tina prompt a sustained exploration of Kantian and Saidian notions of interest and disinterest, in which Juliana's machinations are generally comparable to Madame Merle's. Kant's idea of interest refers to bias in the formulation of aesthetic judgement, lacking the disinterest of a truly dispassionate judgement of beauty. Edward Said's notion of interest represents imperial prejudice. From these two complementary perspectives, Tina's struggle to transform her presumed feminine interest in masculine sponsorship allows her finally to attain complete disinterestedness in relation to the sexual, familial, historical, and political forces that press on her. On the other hand, the lodger's ardent pursuit of Aspern's private papers, tokens of the poet's aesthetic achievement, involves an imperial agenda to wrest control of them for his own interest as a man of letters and connoisseur of poetry.

Keywords: Postcolonialism; feminism; aesthetic-ethic; European-American; Henry James.

## 1. Introduction

I argue that *The Aspern Papers* takes up the question of aesthetic chastity in terms of the unnamed narrator's pretended courtship of Tina when he was a lodger in

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her home, through which she finally achieves aesthetic-ethical freedom as a single woman. Like Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Tina at first does not appreciate her suitor's self-interestedness, but then manages to establish her aesthetic-ethical autonomy by rendering her virginal spirit proof against its objectification and exploitation by the lodger, in a Kantian parable of freedom. Juliana's jealous possession of Jeffrey Aspern's papers and her imperious guardianship of Tina prompt a sustained exploration of Kantian and Saidian notions of *interest* and *disinterest*, in which Juliana's machinations are generally comparable to Madame Merle's. Kant's idea of *interest* refers to *bias* in the formulation of aesthetic judgement, lacking the *disinterest* of a truly dispassionate judgement of beauty. Edward Said's notion of *interest* represents imperial *prejudice*. From these two complementary perspectives, Tina's struggle to transform her presumed feminine *interest* in masculine sponsorship allows her finally to attain complete *disinterestedness* in relation to the sexual, familial, historical, and political forces that press on her. On the other hand, the lodger's ardent pursuit of Aspern's private papers, tokens of the poet's aesthetic achievement, involves an imperial agenda to wrest control of them for his own *interest* as a man of letters and connoisseur of poetry.

The lodger's autobiographical first-person narration charts his response to Tina's personal and cultural situation as it reveals the complexity of the *interest* and *disinterest* involved in each character's relation to the poet's papers and to their personal, national, and international significance. As a would-be colonizer and conqueror, the lodger contests Juliana's power as the guardian of the papers to keep them in Europe, hoping to repatriate them and free Aspern's American patrimony from the obscurity of Juliana's private reliquary and Venice's overwhelming display of art treasures that outshine them. The American stranger's arrival in Juliana's palazzo creates two aesthetic conflicts, between himself and Juliana and between himself and Venice, as if he were Jason in pursuit of the Golden Fleece. Venice's immense cultural power and mercantile history and Juliana's immense personal power and romantic history rouse his patriarchal and patriotic avarice. Likewise, Juliana's exploitation of Tina portrays her lack of *disinterest*. Juliana's jealous hold on Aspern's legacy prompts her to enlist an initially unsuspecting Tina in her battle against the lodger. The lodger enters Juliana's antique palace representing the American public that wants to *free* Aspern from his imprisonment as an expatriate's private legacy. Aspern's aesthetic obduracy and Venice's immense cultural inertia prove more than a match for the American lodger's cunning and bravado, and yet, caught in the crossfire of this struggle, Tina emerges as the victor, defeating all efforts to sacrifice her chastity, her aesthetic and ethical autonomy, to their imperial ends.

The old Venetian palazzo serves as a convent in which Juliana completely rules Tina, confining her to its impenetrable rooms and dark corners, disguising

her aesthetic suppression beneath its Venetian allure. The arrival of the American stranger breaches the hitherto impregnable wall that has secured Juliana's hold on Aspern's literary and personal legacy and reveals the lodger's *prejudice* as a would-be conqueror intent on possessing the papers through his plan to cultivate the palazzo's derelict garden, which represents Tina's stifled sexuality. For the lodger, the seduction of Tina is a conduit to secure the Aspern papers, but for her unexpectedly it becomes a genuine sexual awakening, for which the lodger is the hapless catalyst, and in which Tina liberates herself from everyone's patriarchal hold on her, to achieve aesthetic and ethical freedom as a chastity impregnable to all claims on it except her own. However, patriarchal American power and its Venetian agent try to exploit Tina's virginity in order to enforce Aspern's phallographic rule of her sexual being. But Tina's aesthetic sensitivity, awakened by the garden that the lodger cultivates and the sights of Venice that he shows her, eventually grows strong and self-conscious enough to transcend the competing imperial *interest* she and Juliana have in her, which she defeats by burning the papers and refusing the lodger's hand. Juliana's chastity involves self-subjection to the man of her dreams, whereas Tina's involves her free commitment to her own dreams, surpassing physical *need* and constituting Kantian *disinterestedness*. Moreover, she burns Aspern's papers to free not only herself but also the lodger from their power to deprive both of them of their autonomy, which the lodger may retrospectively concede in his retrospective narrative. Her final realization of her aesthetic autonomy confirms her virginal inviolability and she redeems her earlier flaw of desire for the papers as Aspern's new *legatee* by disposing of them in terms of her Kantian *duty* to do so. The lodger's desire to pry the papers from their Venice strong box proves that he is imprisoned in his self-interest in wanting to publish *them for* other readers avid for the same privileged grasp of Aspern's legacy. However, Tina's achievement of aesthetic autonomy becomes a *favour* she confers on the lodger to help him achieve a *partial* understanding amid his bewilderment when he writes about it much later, however unsteady and puzzled his notion of aesthetic and ethical *disinterestedness* may remain.

## 2. Critical conspectus

The association of the aesthetic and the ethical is subject to recurring debate in criticism on *The Aspern Papers*. For this analysis, I focus on Francis O'Gorman's "Fabulous and Illusive: Giorgione and Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*" (2006) and Liisa Stephenson's "Reading Matter: Modernism and the Book" (2008) as both of them conceive the relation between the aesthetic and the ethical as a site of intrigue. O'Gorman perceives James's aesthetic-ethical thinking in the cultural

and historical context of the Venetian past. On the other hand, Stephenson deals with the conflict of property and propriety from an aesthetic-ethical perspective. O’Gorman’s idea of the historical ruin of beauty relates it to moral decay. Stephenson traces an aesthetic-ethical conflict over the possession of a writer’s work between his family and friends and his editors and readers. In addition to O’Gorman and Stephenson, I consider, always from the perspective of Kant and Said, the critical appraisals of Bruce Robbins (2012), Roxana Pana-Oltean (2001), Peter Rawlings (2003), and Sarah Salter (2014), as they explore matters of personal *interest* and *disinterest* in relation to aesthetics and ethics. O’Gorman’s idea of the aesthetic-ethical relation in *The Aspern Papers* is cultural and historical, comparing James’s fascination for Venice with John Ruskin’s. O’Gorman associates Venice in James’s writing with literary and cultural fame rather than a more obvious visual aesthetic appeal. O’Gorman takes:

terms coincidentally brought together in that sentence from *Italian Hours* – the concatenation of Venice with a concept of fame made from writing – to suggest a hidden element of the imaginative transactions of *The Aspern Papers* and its meditation on authorship.

(O’Gorman 2006: 175)

He then claims that:

Reconstructing this aspect of the cultural environment with which *The Aspern Papers* engaged in the corners of its imagination suggests the sensitivity of its thinking about artistic reputations, questions of the endurance of legacies after death, the knowability of artistic personalities, the coded representations of their sexualities, and the resonances of Venice as a city setting incontrovertibly appropriate for such meditations.

(O’Gorman 2006: 176)

O’Gorman argues that James presents Venice as a place of historical repression, in which treasures are secreted or lost, withdrawn from the present into an obscure past or living death, taken hostage and then released, if ever, only in exchange for another hostage, its canals akin to the Styx, ferrying souls between some kind of life and some kind of death. O’Gorman sees Aspern’s personal life and literary legacy as a microcosm of Venice’s cultural life and historical legacy, as they appear to a modern American man of letters:

In describing the text’s awareness of history that was both lost and in curious proximity, James was obviously speaking of his narrator’s sensations on meeting Juliana but was also more obliquely figuring the condition of the ruins of Venice herself.

(O’Gorman 2006: 180)

O’Gorman highlights James’s shifting from Florence to Venice the narrator’s meeting with Juliana:

*The Aspern Papers* was, indeed, to be a continually indirect meditation on the Queen of the Adriatic as actual and mythologized space. The story of the unnamed writer’s attempts to secure the remaining papers of Jeffrey Aspern, poet and once lover of Juliana Bordereau, takes its starting point from historical Florentine fact, but more distant and remotely processed elements of biographical and literary forces shape its imaginative contours too.

(O’Gorman 2006: 181)

O’Gorman crystalizes his aesthetic-ethical concern by contrasting the cultural mythology surrounding Florence with that surrounding Venice, uniquely famed for its vanished glory and moral disintegration. The lodger sees it as embodying the:

Venetian myth of lost beauty and life, figuring the ancient city’s condition in that of Juliana, the once astonishing woman of a poet’s ideals. It draws heavily on a Ruskinian association between the ruined city and moral decay, plotting a narrative of desire – as does *The Wings of the Dove* – that places moral degeneration in a domestic drama amid a location permanently marked by fall.

(O’Gorman 2006: 181)

Drawing on Ruskinian aesthetics, O’Gorman explains how the long historical and economic decline of Venice come to symbolize moral disintegration, rather than the vigorous moral and intellectual debate that Florence continued to symbolize:

Shifting the Clairmont story from the city of Savonarola to Venice, James richly extended the text’s meditation on faded splendor, the lingering of the past into the present, the patterns of lost desire, and the trajectories of ethical degeneration.

(O’Gorman 2006: 181)

O’Gorman’s consideration of Venice’s vanished glory and moral decay suggests to him that the novel exploits the “city of traces and lost biographies to enrich its thinking about authorship, bereavement, and literary survival” (O’Gorman 2006: 182). O’Gorman perceives these cultural transactions as making any aesthetic-ethical freedom highly improbable, given the crushing power of the twin legacies of Aspern’s residual personal power and Venice’s residual cultural power.

In short, O’Gorman makes it possible to read Tina’s pursuit of aesthetic-ethical freedom as a paradox, as Venice exerts its historical and cultural power simultaneously as a kind of imprisonment and as a source of imaginative vitality through which to regain long-lost liberty. As such, the narrator’s endeavour to seduce Tina threatens to confine her morally and deprives her aesthetically at the same time as it promises accidentally to free her as a moral actor and as a judge of aesthetic and literary achievement.

On the other hand, developing an aesthetic-ethical argument based on the legitimacy of possession and ownership of aesthetic material, Stephenson considers the conflict between property and propriety. Stephenson compares the vulnerability of literary archives to publishing scoundrels akin to colonial conquest, capitalist exploitation, and display of taste and the power: “Archives, James implies, are analogous to unknown or unexplored territory. As private papers, archives exemplify “esoteric knowledge” (Stephenson 2007: 98).

Stephenson considers the contest between the private property rights of family and friends to literary material and the common good of allowing the reading public and its agents, editors and publishers, to appreciate such aesthetic material in as informed a way as possible. Keeping in view the lodger’s *interest*, Stephenson argues that:

appreciation and appropriation are never free from the constraints of intimacy or the responsibilities of property and propriety. If he were to become a “relation”, a legitimate proprietor of the papers, things would be “different”, indeed. Ironically, however, becoming a proprietor also would entail losing possession of his liberty as a single man and his so-called editorial “objectivity”.

(Stephenson 2007: 98)

The lodger’s idea of objectivity is hopelessly entangled in his idea of ownership, conceived as a kind of control over the papers and everyone else’s interest in them. From a Kantian perspective, such ownership would deprive him of aesthetic and ethical disinterestedness. Correspondingly, if Tina’s beauty is seen as something to be possessed as a prelude to possessing the papers, it cannot be perceived with *disinterest* or even perceived at all. According to Stephenson, the desire to control the papers either physically or editorially bedevils the lodger’s objectivity of vision. As Stephenson characterizes him:

As a collector and critic of Aspern lore, James’s narrator exemplifies both of these impulses: the “fanatical” and perpetual desire to accumulate as many of Aspern’s “documents” as he can... and the compulsion to do so at the risk of behaving in unseemly or unacceptably familiar ways.

(Stephenson 2007: 98)

Thus, unrelenting greed for the archival material turns the narrator into an intruder, prowler, and would-be thief. Stephenson emphasizes how vividly the lodger haunts a writer as jealous of his privacy as James:

James thus sets out an important relationship between propriety and property, where the former is abused, exploited, and manipulated for the sake of acquiring the latter. The ethical dimensions of this relationship are very familiar to James, who famously burned the bulk of his private papers before he died, and whose own misgivings about being a “publishing scoundrel” are dramatized in this story.

(Stephenson 2007: 99)

Distinguishing between pilfered possessions and genuine intellectual property, Stephenson interprets *The Aspern Papers* as the story of a publisher who acquires literary material unlawfully for personal gain and thereby commits an offence not only against the writer but also against the literary material itself. From this perspective, in working to gain Tina's affection for his own ends, the lodger exploits her beauty as *adherent*, blind to its inherent immunity to any design other than to hint at the possibility of freedom. Stephenson observes that:

James offers up a portrait of the writer as an acquisitive, obsessive, and unscrupulous archivist of the past, one who conspires to secure his literary spoils at almost any cost. The narrator's archive fever is ultimately thwarted by his disregard for the code of conduct or propriety that governs the Bordereau household and that safeguards the precious papers that he covets. A transgression against the rightful owner of the archive is, in the end, a transgression against the papers themselves.  
(Stephenson 2007: 99)

The lodger contemplates committing two felonies, outright theft and suborning Tina, either to act as his co-conspirator in that theft or to enter unknowingly into a marriage of convenience that might well blight her entire life. Juliana serves as the sole owner and guardian of Aspern's literary estate, and the lodger's exploitative arousal of Tina's innocent sexual need reveals Juliana's earlier exploitative suppression of it, as if Juliana foresaw the inevitability of such an assault on her property and the serviceability of Tina in fending it off.

Following Derrida, Stephenson argues that the past functions as an accumulated treasure to be capitalized for certain economic ends:

The "capital" in question in James's story is the past embodied in the preserved papers of Jeffrey Aspern. Archives are economic in the sense that they serve a "conservative function"... an archive "keeps, it puts in reserve, it saves"... As sites of accumulation and conservation, archives have value that can be capitalized on. *The Aspern Papers*, like Derrida's *Archive Fever*, considers the value of archives. The intrigue surrounding the value, use, and ownership of the Aspern archive forms what I call a conspiracy economy in *The Aspern Papers* – a system of schemes, plots, and manoeuvres directed exclusively at capitalizing on archival desire.  
(Stephenson 2007: 100; cf. Derrida 1996: 7)

According to Stephenson, although archives ideally are public entities that respectfully preserve personal and private information for the common good, James's novel suggests that Jeffrey Aspern deliberately engineers a posthumous fight between privacy and publication of whose compatibility he was entirely unpersuaded. In this light, Stephenson identifies the narrator's archival "infatuation" as the author's *bête noir*, given James's own monomania about privacy, echoing a propensity of his period. Stephenson traces the narrator's confusion between the papers' pecuniary worth as commodities and their aesthetic value as tokens of a poet's imagination:

By treating the great writer's papers as a commodity, the narrator diminishes their literary value. James's authorial disapproval of this exploitative use of archives is evident in his satirical portrait of the narrator and his faux scholarly pursuit, yet at the same time James seems to acknowledge the falseness of this position, particularly in light of his own appetite for archival exploitation and appropriation. (Stephenson 2007: 105)

Hence, Stephenson suggests that James is as ambivalent about his own self-interest as a private person and his disinterest as a novelist as Aspern appears to have been, with the lodger calling them both to account for the mixed moral signals they give to their readers, his bad faith elicited by theirs. As such, Stephenson questions the aesthetic and ethical propriety of an author's supposedly superior right to his own work. In this context, Stephenson observes that:

James suffered from profound anxiety about what "dark spots" his private papers might elicit to mar his reputation after his death. *The Aspern Papers* is, therefore, a portrait of the writer's own apprehensions about archival interference and the perils of literary veneration.

(Stephenson 2007: 107)

In using his own life as the crude matter from which he crafts his stories, and in profiting from it, how does the novelist differ from his editor or biographer? As Stephenson explains:

The biographer is, then, one who usurps or commandeers private archives. Like the narrator, the biographer views his subject's personal history as a commodity, a form of crude matter that can be "worked" up or crafted and then sold on the market. While the biography is not a modern phenomenon, James's alignment in *The Aspern Papers* of commerce and economy with archive fever suggests that the modern biographer aims, above all, to profit from the past.

(Stephenson 2007: 115)

Is an author's surreptitious self-commodification any less unethical than an editor's or biographer's blatant commodification of that author? How free of pilfering can any artistic or literary enterprise be? As Stephenson notes:

Both *The Aspern Papers* and *The Spoils of Poynton* feature disputes over the rightful ownership and unauthorized appropriation of material objects. The central intrigue of both fictions lies in the fierce rivalry of collectors. James pits collector against collector, as if to test one character's love for her objects by setting it against another's desire for those objects. Since possession is the ultimate aim, theft or unlawful appropriation is permissible.

(Stephenson 2007: 120)



In both cases, readers of *The Aspern Papers* and *The Spoils of Poynton* are asked to consider with disinterest apparently insoluble problems of self-interest that may render such disinterest implausible if not impossible.

In brief, O’Gorman’s historical and political analysis of aesthetic and ethical autonomy is closer to Said’s conception of postcolonial prejudice and interest, whereas Stephenson’s psychological and biographical analysis is closer to Kant’s conception of prejudice and interest which I regard as largely compatible readings of James’s psychologically and politically acute enquiry into the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of human freedom.

### 3. Theoretical framework

#### 3.1. Kant

This paper takes Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (2000 [1790, rev. 1793]) as a heuristic guide to explain the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of James in *Aspern*. Following this, I will reproblematicize Said’s postcolonial philosophy of *interest* and *disinterest* as building on Kant’s theory of judgment, to show that Tina achieves individual autonomy through a radical reconceptualization of virginity and chastity as a decolonizing of her being.

James’s notion of aesthetic and ethical ideals is closely comparable to Kant’s notion of the *disinterestedness* of pure aesthetic judgement. For Kant, aesthetic judgement is determined by *intuition* and *imagination* without any empirical consideration or intellectual conceptualization for “the subject feels itself as it is affected by the representation, “without the implication of any desire” (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 89). Kant draws an absolute distinction between the unblemished judgement of taste and ethical thought, as in the latter, satisfaction intertwines with the representation of an object to create an interest, and thus a “bias”. (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 90–91) However, despite this differentiation, Kant attempted to bring aesthetics and ethics into a symbiotic equation, claiming that genuine taste is predicated upon the harmonization of sensibility and moral feeling (Giles 2013: 99). As both Kant and Rodolphe Gashé explain, the moment judgement is determined by a sensation or concept of its understanding, it ceases to be free (Gashé 2002: 60). Hence, the agreeable and the good judgements depend on desire: they “please by means of reason” and entail the “concept of an end...[and] some sort of interest” (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 92). And as all “interest presupposes a need or produces one [...]”, judgment of the object is no longer free (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 93).

The elementary purity of a Kantian judgment of taste lies in the *beautiful*, which reconciles the imagination and the understanding in an intrinsic aesthetic experience. For Kant, the *beautiful* merely “pleases” without ends because the

“beautiful is a disinterested and free satisfaction; for no interests, neither that of the senses nor that of reason” (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 95), follow it. In this regard, Bart Vandenabeele argues that beauty is devoid of determinate concepts, for no causal connection can be forged between judgements of beauty and empirical ones (Vandenabeele 2001: 719). As a corollary, judgement of the *beautiful* develops the pure “disinterested” (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 95) satisfaction of taste and as Gasché claims, only under the provision of free satisfaction or disinterestedness, can a relation between the beautiful and ethics exist (Gasché 2002: 65). According to Kant, a judgement of the beautiful is in our *favour*, due to it being a *free* satisfaction with no obligation and its entailing an imaginative fulfilment which escapes historical, social, cultural constraints (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 95). James DiCenso explains that the underpinning logic of this “favor” lies in the idea of non-rational factors (DiCenso 2015: 34), such as an act of benevolence escaping compulsion.

For Kant, *free satisfaction* in the *beautiful* cannot rest on the principles of utility or concept, as it would reduce them to a *means* to achieve a determined *end*. As an example, one cannot identify the *beautiful* with the *perfect*, because to represent a formal objective purposiveness (which can be either external, i.e., the utility of the object, or internal, i.e., the mere form) without an end is “a veritable contradiction” (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 111–112). Kant relates the dichotomy of *disinterest* and *interest* to “free” and “adherent” beauty respectively. Perceiving beauty in terms of form and function, Guyer asserts that *adherent* beauty restricts the imagination, whereas *free* beauty induces it (Guyer 2002: 361).

There is no objective rule of taste by which beauty can be judged – only the feeling of the subject. Hence, beauty is not an idea, because, unlike the latter, it does not rest on a concept of reason, but on the faculty of presentation (imagination), deeply ingrained in human perception (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 117). Following this, Kant argues that only human beings can “aesthetically judge” beauty in terms of ideal representation, because they are vested with the innate value of intelligence, intuition, and imagination (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 117, 119). In this regard, Jerome Langguth affirms that understanding the ideal of human beauty as the archetype of taste makes sense only if we regard it as an ideal judgement of taste. This is held because we can form no direct presentation of an “ideal judgment” (Langguth 2000: 102). Kantian humanism entails the intrinsic values of mutual esteem and deference in a combination of ideal humanity and morality, a combination which nurtures a human’s understanding of the highest purposiveness – goodness of soul, purity, repose. The former requires “pure ideas of reason and great force of imagination” (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 120). The subsequent view of the force of imagination is seen as one of the prerequisites for moral ideas. Henry E. Allison

interprets Kant's conception of the beautiful as the symbol of the morally good, thus creating a parallelism between beauty and morality and hence, between subjective and objective phenomena "[for both] involve a harmony of freedom and lawfulness, which brings with it a consciousness of the value of others" (Allison 1997: 71).

Developing the idea of imaginative reflection, Kant claims that the "appreciation and understanding of the beauty is dependent upon the faculty of imagination", which transcends the subject's "prejudice" and endows it with *disinterestedness* or an *unforced duty* (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 137, 174). Through this, Kant created the idea of a complex aesthetic-ethical freedom (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 176), as aesthetic reflection is experiencing ourselves as free (an idea which bears ethical significance). Accordingly, what aesthetic and moral freedom have in common is that "the mind is also conscious of being ennobled... above a mere receptivity for pleasure derived from sense impressions" (Menke 2008: 58). Kant's conception of moral *duty* is based on the worth of a universal "humanity", revealed through "intuition and reflection" as a *favour* and *free satisfaction*, sensed in the imaginative pleasure we take in disinterested reflection ((Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 176. 179). As Daniel Arenas Vives has it, for Kant, only when individuals cultivate their taste "to the highest degree possible" with each occasion, are they making a right judgment of taste (Vives 2000: 153).

Kant argues that aesthetic experience is an intuitive and imaginative understanding of ideal beauty, devoid of any appetitive, moral, or historical consideration (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 197). In this light, Kant establishes that our appreciation of beauty leads to the "expression of aesthetic ideas" (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 197), our sensitivity to them allowing us to intuit the order and rule of thought as Steven Ravett Brown explains: "through an aesthetic idea, a concept is made richer and consistent with those rules which can, to some extent, describe it" (Brown 2004: 489). Discussing the significance of imagination in the pleasure of beauty, Kant relates it to the production of aesthetic ideas, characterized as free in the sense that the mind occupies itself without ulterior regard to any other end, or interest, but with satisfaction (Murphy 2008: 148). Kant maintains an absolute distinction between *aesthetic* and *moral* considerations by differentiating the *symbolic* (corresponding to the concept) from the *intuitive* (establishing moral autonomy) (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 225). Hence, for Kant, our aesthetic autonomy is the highly suggestive, albeit somewhat uncertain propaedeutic for moral autonomy, although not its necessary and sufficient condition.

### 3.2. Aesthetic chastity

Kant's preclusion of gender and sex to establish aesthetic judgement provides space for the application and understanding of the ideas of *duty* and *favour* to offer an opportunity to associate the aesthetic and sexual dimensions of Tina's life, as James foregrounds gender as problematizing judgements about ethics and aesthetics in *Aspern*. In this perspective, Tina's notion of her own virginity or chastity, as a duty she owes herself and a *favour* within her jurisdiction to endow others, develops subsequent dynamics of the power associations that restrains the exploitation of her judgement which Kant regards as indisputably her personal, about both ethics and aesthetics, a quid pro quo that forbids her political, familial, and social liberty related to entire scope of her life. In *Aspern*, James takes up the practical difficulty of Kant's judgement of *disinterestedness* in relation to Tina's life which is under the control of others and presents an explanation of the significance of aesthetics and ethics in her life in which he differentiates *disinterested* sovereignty not only from others' possessiveness but also from a self-possessiveness no less oppressive and imprisoning. In the Jamesian context of woman's liberty, aesthetic judgement signifies her freedom encompassing her entire being, personal, national, sexual, and financial. As such, the Jamesian view of aesthetic chastity involves not a factual rebuff of sex to determine private desire, but it is fundamentally a personal pliability rather than a physical possession. In this relation, James' idea of virginity supplants the purity of her vision that precludes her feminine self. Virginity, for James, cannot be understood as "the historical innocence of women", as Jane Lydon calls it (Lydon 2007: 164). It is a concept that a virgin is analogous to an object of art – pure, untainted, and unsullied, rather than considering this purity as a personal power impervious to bodily penetration, through which "purity...[is] achieved...[in her] virginity" (Martínez-Fernández 2002: 105). Disputing Eric Savoy's view that "Sexuality',...is not the kernel of our being... [rather it leads] to profound heuristic difficulties" (Savoy 2006: 250), I argue that Tina's sexuality in her growing relation to the lodger reveals her aesthetic and ethical accomplishment, rather than financial "fructification". I claim that Tina's chastity epitomizes her aesthetic-ethical autonomy.

Tina's truth of aesthetic virginity lies in the fact that either as niece or heiress, she has to either conform or contend with Aspern's patriarchal authority. She closely represents Lynette Hunter's observation that ethics has a close connection with gender in demonstrating women's "peripheral" (Hunter 2001: 205) treatment in the social hierarchy. Tina's virginity acts not merely as a physical possibility but develops into a realization of ethical force, helping her to defy patriarchal control of her virginity in the matrimonial marketplace for economic gains. Drawing upon David Shapiro's view of "aesthetic subjects" in

the perspective of the politics of gender and race, John Champagne writes that “capitalism’s exploitative relations...act on the body” (Champagne 2014: 195) for social and instrumental *interests*. Escalating the view of the exploitation of women’s sexual relations, Mimi Schippers & Erin Grayson Sapp adjoin women’s femininity as the “embodiment of patriarchal domination and oppression” (Schippers & Sapp 2012: 28). Most ironically, the possibility of aesthetic and ethical freedom appears greater in the case of Tina than the lodger, despite the lodger’s claim that “it is not supposed easy for women to rise to the large free view of anything” (*Aspern*, 45).

Tina’s aesthetic virginity becomes an aspect of her ethical vision. Although being regarded as an old spinster for the lodger, Tina’s new-gained possession of *Aspern*’s papers produces “a rare alteration in...her look of forgiveness, of absolutism, which made her angelic. It beautified her; she was younger” (*Aspern*, 141) to be possessed by the lodger to possess beautiful papers, yet in tandem she superimposes the representation of one of the “disenfranchised, impoverished, or victimized women... as commodities themselves...[in the] pan-European [perspective] (Despotopoulou 2014: 145) of capitalist and imperial expansion rather than a free aesthetic agent. Developing the view that the internal critique of the transformation of the gender and sexist conditions corresponds to ethics, Pamela Sue Anderson considers the “lived reality of the relation of autonomy to vulnerability and... the gendering of autonomy” (Anderson 2003: 150) Anderson’s conception of the re-gendering of independence implies that in the social and political hierarchy Tina’s internal transformation helps her exonerate her feminine *interest* and in turn unravels the mystery of the lodger’s incapacity to be absolved of his masculine *prejudices*. As Robin James, citing Jacques Rancière, argues, the “aesthetic, for Rancière, is the primary means or medium through which relations of privilege and oppression are maintained and/or changed” (James 2013: 104; cf. Rancière 2000: 11).

Tina’s aesthetic and ethical virginity exerts the view of a counter-hegemonic stratagem against the lodger’s imperial gaze that deems to appropriate her authority over her, as Dianne Sachko Macleod so aptly and acutely observes, for “collectors” (Macleod 2013: E2) of female bodies as objects and means of the transmission of their possessive desires. Tina seeks to free herself from the lodgers’ “male gaze” (Brand & Devereaux 2003: ix) of *interests* to use her as a means to possess *Aspern*’s material legacy that as Peg Brand and Mary Devereaux observe has its roots in women’s bodily freedom. As such Tina’s aesthetic knowledge entails a proto-feminist redefinition of her own chastity as a sacrosanct autonomy, rather than as a materially frangible or economically fungible commodity. James’ representation of Tina in a way brings Kant’s idea of the beautiful and of the moral back into the fray of sexual and social experience and patriarchal power. Although at first Tina dutifully acquiesces in the

contradictory roles that Juliana and the lodger assign her as their proxy, she eventually works her way free of both, recognizing her personality and her beauty as her own, rather than as another's legacy or gift or purchase. Although both the lodger and Juliana may believe themselves the selfless devotees of Jeffrey Aspern's legacy, they both become energetic abusers of the trust placed in them by Tina, whose true beauty finally obliterates the spurious beauty that subjects Aspern, Juliana, and the lodger to its infernal rule.

### 3.3. Imperialism: Political heteronomy vs. political autonomy

Kant's evasion of the experiences of sex and gender can be remedied by considering the place of *disinterestedness* in Said's philosophy of imperialism in order to contextualize James's treatment of women's autonomous aesthetic and ethical judgements. Said helps us work around Kant's non-empirical account of such judgements as they encounter the power dynamics of imperialism. In this connection, Stephen Pulsford notes that the "politicization of the aesthetic exposes ideological formations", implying that while aesthetic experience may not be inherently political, nevertheless all actual instances of it are politically situated and productive (Pulsford 1996: 7). Said's ideas of *interest* and *disinterest* generate dynamic questions about the relation of aesthetic, ethical, and political autonomy. Arguing that the aesthetic is a medium for the construction and maintenance of socio-political privilege and oppression, James adds that "systems of privilege and oppression operate primarily through the aesthetic" (James 2013: 104). If one considers Tina's life as a political past of colonization in miniature in all varied ways, Said's view of cultures and histories of nations in the "configurations of power" (Said 2003 [1978]: 5) helps explain Tina's aesthetic chastity as a symbol of "women's 'historical and political' agency" in the realm of imperialism as R. S. Herr explains women's position in a patriarchal world (Herr 2014: 6).

Tina works her way imaginatively to aesthetic chastity to transcend the "imperial interests" of her collector in much the same relation as an imperialist claims the ownership of a colonial property to materialize his "political actualities" (Said 2003 [1978]: 11) for his predetermined political and economic "interests" (Said 2003 [1978]: 12). According to Said, this imperial culture hinges on the:

distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical... a whole series of "interests"... [that] expresses... power intellectual... [and] power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral.

(Said 2003 [1978]: 12)

James explores the lodger and Tina's *disinterestedness* of aesthetic and ethical judgements explicitly in terms of American expatriates in Italy in an international setting and their judgements about national and international things and people, as Said notes from the perspective of the geographical boundaries of social, ethnic, and cultural ways to mark the disparity between the "foreign" (Said 2003 [1978]: 54) and native, where the foreigner is determined as a stranger and alien. Aspern describes this "geographical conundrum" in terms of an incursion of an American into impervious Italy (Said 2003 [1978]: 56). Anglo-American and European-American conflicts are portrayed through this self/other, colonizer/colonized, possessor/possessed dichotomies, probing the "opposing aesthetics" of the infinite imaginative space of unbridgible differences not in terms of style as Alice Maurice maintains but in terms of Juliana, Tina, and the lodger's varied sensibilities and levels of satisfactions (Maurice 2015: 81). These clashes and disagreements are an offshoot of "colonial hierarchies", as Radhika Jones is not alone in asserting (Jones 2008: 6), and in Boudreau's words they involve "human relations... formed in the context of... radical political affiliations" (Boudreau 2010: 32), energizing the "two poles of the international scene, Europe and America, the opposed ends of an imaginary transatlantic bridge" (Pana-Oltean 2001: 180). The *self* and *other* dichotomies within these diasporic territorialities, according to Pei-Wu, "starts from 'a condition of estrangement'" (Wu 2009: 3) especially felt by American expatriates, such as the American lodger in Italy, or Boudreau in Italy; and James himself as Walker argues for the problem of identities in the European-American context in both appears as "the 'Other' – the operatic Italian, the stereotyped image of the foreigner – [to] speak in the discourse that constructs it" (Walker 2000: 15). Thus, the lodger, appears as a stranger in a strange milieu, bound by a "colonizer/colonized polarity, where the historicist notion of history gathers 'people without history' into its fold" and plays its "role as the 'unconscious tool of history'" (Prakash 1995: 4).

The depiction of "the poetics of space" and of places and place visualized by Said where it "acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process" (Said 2003 [1978]: 55), reinforces the dichotomy of self/ other as a political question. James's incessant engagement with the built environment places such as... the canals and squares of Venice in *Aspern* exhaustively defines every human character in relation to them and to their cultural, economic, and political significance. These places both imbue their inhabitants with a certain character and are in turn imbued with a certain character by their inhabitants. Addressing James's rendering of "character in terms of place and thing", N. V. S. Costa argues that:

James's spatial portrayal is used to communicate human affections, shape our wishes, and channel our apprehensions. Space... therefore, [is] intrinsically connected to the representation of the internal reality of characters.

(Costa 2017: 177)

The owners of these places tend to become monstrous through owning or desiring to own them, most grossly Juliana. The Venetian palazzo, the lagoon, and Florence personify their owners and Aspern, Juliana, and Tina coalesce themselves in the form of their places.

James pursues closely one of the significant dimensions of the self/other binary relation in the lodger and Tina's relation in terms of a dominant and triumphant man and a vulnerable and surmountable woman, in the context of sociopolitical privilege. The essence of all such imperial power relations, these alien and alienating imperial *interests*, endow or rather burden women with their "historical' subjectivity, above all, non-active, non-autonomous, non-sovereign with regard to itself" (Said 2003 [1978]: 97), from which women can free themselves only by achieving a *disinterest* that can see beyond and work against these cultural, historical, political, gender, and sexual *biases* that have in effect colonized them with heteronomous "interests... commercial, communicational... cultural" (Said 2003 [1978]: 100). For Said, as improbable as attaining "disinterested objectivity" (Said 2003 [1978]: 148) may be, it is still imperative, as the colonizer-colonized relation is as much aesthetic and imagined as it is ethical and actual, involving coercive and spurious representations of oneself passed off and misrecognized as one's own self-representations. James sees the cultivation of aesthetic disinterest as a strategy to resist and reconfigure oppressive gender roles. In her experience of gendered colonialism, Tina remains under the "colonial gaze" (Hunt 2002: 1) of the lodger's interests, prejudices, and biases.

Tina finds herself enmeshed in the pursuit of the Aspern spoils. Brewis argues that "art as a tangible value" (Brewis 2012: 95) sustains not only its cultural and aesthetic value but also its political significance. As Said comments, "Empire follows art" (Said 2003 [1978]: 13). The Venetian palazzo contains the unpublished papers of the American poet Jeffrey Aspern, secreted by Juliana Bordereau and coveted by the lodger, both of whom value Tina according to her use in their negotiation over the papers, one trying to suborn her aesthetically and sexually, the other moralistically. To link the aesthetic and the political in James, Jonathan Arac draws on Said when he identifies in *The Golden Bowl* the "transfer of culture, the passing on of tradition, as a Roman triumph in which the winners display the spoils of victory" expropriating the "anonymous toil' of all those upon whose labour the 'cultural treasures,' the masterpieces, depend" (Arac 2012: 235), very much agreeing with Simon Potter that inevitably "empire conjures up images of... dispossession... exploitation and political repression"



(Potter 2004: 32). In this colonial scenario, beauty as chastity is the heroine's defence against masculine conquest, her *duty* to herself that is also a redemptive *favour* to her would-be conquerors, contesting the ugliness of their *prejudices* and *interests*, their "counter discourse" of aesthetic autonomy (Thieme 2001: 2), a mechanism to resist the "inner expropriation... of identity" (Hall 1994: 395) given that, according to Ranu Samantri, "the power of imperialism functions at the level of desire and identification" (Samantrai 1990: 6), Robert C. J. Young regards the colonial encounter as a penetrative and thus a "sexual" activity (Young 1995: 181), as "colonial discourse mimics the strategies of power embedded in patriarchal discourse" (Richardson 2000: 2). Tina becomes a victim to the lodger's "imperial expansion and colonization" (Bernhardt 2009: 6) who, however, exposes his *prejudices* and *biases*.

#### 4.1. The Venetian palazzo

In an "unvisited, unapproachable... sequestered and dilapidated old palace" in Venice live Juliana and Tina:

two shy, mysterious and, as was somehow supposed, scarcely respectable  
Americans – [who] were believed to have lost in their long exile all national quality.  
(*Aspern*, 45)

The "great cold tarnished Venetian *sala*, the central hall of the house, paved with marble and roofed with dim cross-beams" establishes the view that Tina is one of its many imprisoned "spoil[s]" stretching back into Venetian "antiquity" (*Aspern*, 46). The lodger targets Tina in a city that "contained so many much greater curiosities" that, in Sara Blair's words, it "instills a 'desire to embrace it to caress it, to possess it'" (Blair 1996: 51). Venice is "a city of exhibition" that displays exotic beauty "strange beyond all strangeness" (*Aspern*, 48) to lure the *stranger* generally as the Venetian palazzo tempts the lodger specifically. For him, the palazzo:

was a house of the class which in Venice carries even in extreme dilapidation the dignified name... It was not particularly old, only two or three centuries; and it had an air not so much of decay as of quiet discouragement, as if it had rather missed its career. But its wide front, with a stone balcony from end to end of the *piano nobile* or most important floor, was architectural enough, with the aid of various pilasters and arches; and the stucco with which in the intervals it had long ago been endued was rosy in the April afternoon.  
(*Aspern*, 49)

Despite its decayed appearance, the monumental architecture of the palazzo exerts its "imposing" patriarchal authority (*Aspern*, 50) on Tina. According to

Eric Savoy, “Jeffrey Aspern is a figurative projection of the canonical imaginary”, revealing “the ideological construction” of Venetian masculinity (Savoy 2010: 64).

The lodger’s interest in the residents and contents of the palazzo strikes Tina as “a fine case of monomania”, the kind of passion that Sergio Perosa personates in American art collectors in Europe avid for Old World spoils, whom he sees as the:

new “barbarians” looting the world from, and for, the shores of America: “the deluge of people, the insane movement for movement...the American, the nightmare – the individual consciousness – the mad, ghastly climax of denouement...”. The Americans looming up – dim, vast, portentous – in their millions – like gathering waves – the barbarians of the Roman Empire.

(Perosa 2008: 153)

The Americans reprise the role of the Vandals and join their Northern European allies in plundering older Mediterranean Empires. The lodger’s “siege” of Tina (*Aspern*, 46) aims to take the possession of the “relics and tokens... mementoes, of tangible objects” in the palazzo made valuable by their sequestration from an inquisitive public. As Clare Pettitt observes:

the value of things and objects in James’s work suggests that, “[i]n James’s political economy, value may not amount to the quantity of human labor congealed within an object, but it does amount to the sociality, the history, and the habits congealed there”.

(Pettitt 2016: 142; cf. Brown 2003: 186)

As Venice’s artistic and literary treasures have been accrued through colonization, conquest, and commerce, so they are destined to be despoiled by the same means, given what Oltean calls the North American and Northern European “image of the city as a would-be museum of collectables” (Oltean 2003: 271) defining their acquisitive *interest* in it. But the resistance to such despoliation comes even more from those who are Venetians by choice rather than by birth. The lodger reflects as he schemes to pilfer the papers:

The old woman won’t have her relics and tokens so much as spoken of... I can arrive at my spoils only by putting her off her guard, and I can put her off her guard only by ingratiating diplomatic arts. Hypocrisy, duplicity are my only chance. I’m sorry for it, but there’s no baseness I wouldn’t commit for Jeffrey Aspern’s sake.

(*Aspern*, 51)

The lodger’s project to possess Aspern’s “literary remains” (*Aspern*, 51) is clearly an instance of how, in Said’s terms, “politics in the form of imperialism bears upon the production of literature, scholarship, social theory, and history” (Said 2003

[1978]: 14). The lodger's project identifies him as a colonial agent. For Said, colonial writing such as the lodger's narrative entails "a re-appropriation of the historical experience of colonialism, revitalized and transformed into a new aesthetic of sharing and often transcendent re-formulation" (Said 2003 [1978]: 353) that presumes the colonizer is a better custodian and connoisseur of art than the newly colonized community that created it. Christophe Ribbat reminds us that:

Imperialism's culture, Edward Said states, "was not invisible, nor did it conceal its worldly affiliations and interests"... Empire, in Elleke Boehmer's words; was (and is) "a textual exercise".

(Ribbat 2007: 10; cf. Said 2003 [1978]: xxi; Boehmer 1995: 13)

The lodger glosses over the worldly interests that move him as well as those that may have moved Aspern, as his desire to possess the "author's private papers" (Tucker 2010: 55, 168, 203) exposes his "preoccupation" as part of America's emerging colonial appetite for art of every period and every people.

In this imperial scenario, the architecture of Juliana's palazzo resembles that of Milly Theale's in *The Wings of the Dove*, setting Tina like Milly in "a pre-Christian, pre-modern past that is, in a sense, pan-historical, encompassing all of history without providing a direct referent to any of it" (Meeuwis 2006: 62). Yet, as Juliana and Aspern already hold Tina hostage to their literary fame, the lodger's no less exploitative project casts him in the role of rescuer, whatever contrary role he intends to play. He inadvertently teaches Tina freedom from all interest even as he seeks her concurrence with his. Andrew Hewish notes that the "house the narrator enters is cast as a house of mourning, steeped in the presence of the past" (Hewish 2016: 255), its emptiness, and impoverishment, depict Tina's life. The narrator marvels at the palazzo's

impenetrable regions, and I looked at the place with my heart beating... It had a gloomy grandeur, but owed its character almost all to its noble shape and to the fine architectural doors, as high as those of grand frontages... surmounted with old faded painted escutcheons... between them hung brown pictures, which I noted as speciously bad, in battered and tarnished frames... the grand obscure vista contained little else to minister to effect. It was evidently never used save as a passage, and scantily even as that.

(*Aspern*, 55)

Here, the lodger's aesthetic sensibilities are those of a neophyte, an American tourist, a figure often drawn by James whenever, according to Esther Sánchez-Pardo González, he

introduced in his fiction what he called the international subject – that is, the reaction of expatriate Americans to the impact of the older and more sophisticated Europe.

(González 2008: 30)

Comparing James and Hawthorne's conception of old houses, Nicole Waller writes that Hawthorne's protagonist Holgrave in *The House of the Seven Gables* reflects that "houses should never be built for permanence because they embody the heavy weight of history" (Waller 2011: 253). The palazzo's mysteriously empty interior provides a plausible picture of Tina's captive psyche. In Robbins' words, "All history is imperial... or colonial – history" (Robbins 2012: 195), Tina's included, which is also more specifically the "treacherous history" (Rawlings 2003: 274) that Rawlings traces to James's ambivalence towards the past. For Tina, the Venetian palazzo epitomizes the totalitarian, infallible, and implacable past that imposes on her its biases and prejudices, which nevertheless have failed to crush her spirit.

The lodger's incursion into the prison, treasury, and tomb in which Aspern's papers and his hostage are confined characterizes him as abductor, felon, and grave robber – an imperialist intent on claiming, conquering, and colonizing another's world. The extravagant and eccentric architecture of the palazzo recalls a fantastic Piranesi prison, beginning with the

dusky sala, where the bare scagliola floor gleamed vaguely in a chink of the closed shutters. The place was impressive, yet looked somehow cold and cautious... with opening the door from above by the usual arrangement of a creaking pulley, though she had looked down at me first from an upper window, dropping the cautious challenge which in Italy precedes the act of admission. I was irritated as a general thing by this survival of medieval manners.

(Aspern, 54)

The lodger's preliminary forays into the obscure recesses of the palazzo prepare him for the frontal assault on Juliana's bedroom, sacred to her union with Aspern. He casts himself as her opposite, conforming to James's early inclination to dichotomize Europe and America. Kate Stanley notes in his earlier novels:

James's difficulty in bridging... dichotomies that assert an unbridgeable rift between American and European experience in James's early novels – new versus old, innocence versus experience, freedom versus fixity.

(Stanley 2013: 17)

The lodger's entrance disturbs the political, historical, and familial stasis of the palazzo. For Cristina Giorcelli, the lodger evinces some of James's own aesthetic consciousness that attended unfailingly to all "aspects and appearances – above all to the interesting *face* of things" (Giorcelli 2012: 219). But he never loses sight of his self-interest and self-importance, or his need to fit himself to his mission:

Could you very kindly see a gentleman, a travelling American, for a moment? The little maid wasn't hostile... She coloured, she smiled and looked both frightened and pleased. I could see that my arrival was a great affair, that visits in such a house were rare and that she was a person who would have liked a bustling place.

(Aspern, 54)

The maid's ambivalence about the stranger suggests the flurry of a native's first contact with a colonizer, which according to Wu "starts from 'a condition of estrangement'" (Wu 2009: 3) and destabilizes the identity of both. Oltean's observation that "America... stands under the sign of unread ability, alienation" and "[h]allucinating foreignness" (Pana-Oltean 2001: 181, 182) is confirmed by the maid's bafflement about the lodger's business. The arrival of the American in Europe precipitates a power struggle for aesthetic and moral superiority in the exercise of power, not so much "a tale of displacements between two continents, America and Europe" (Tambling 1999: 43) as a tale of "Americans' confrontation with the world" (Foeller-Pituch 2003: 292).

The arrival of the American in the old Venetian palazzo restructures, according to Oltean, Tina's "sensorial world" into a "colonization scenario—the scene of conquest, seduction, and revelation"(Oltean 2003: 274) Comparably, according to Kim Vanderlann, with reference to Eugenia's view of the estate in *The Europeans*, the "'large, solid, irreproachable basis of existence the place seemed to her to indicate'... reflects the colonizer's desire for a solid base of power" (Vanderlaan 2011: 46). The lodger explains that by the way in which the maid

pushed forward the heavy door behind me I felt my foot in the citadel and promised myself ever so firmly to keep it there. She pattered across the damp stony lower hall and I followed her up the high staircase – stonier still, as it seemed – without an invitation. I think she had meant I should wait for her below, but such was not my idea, and I took up my station in the sala.

(*Aspern*, 54)

Characteristically, James's narratives tend "to feature 'new' Americans confronting an 'old' Europe whose most salient feature is an unimaginably deep past, a past so deep that it can only appear amoral and perhaps unmoralizable" (Robbins 2012: 193), but here Americans rather than Europeans are amoral, trying to exploit each other by suborning Tina to achieve their contrary aesthetic ends. In this scenario, the American stranger's "intrusion" into Tina's life (*Aspern*, 61) is that of a colonist "invading 'virgin' territory" (Richardson 2000: 11) to claim it, and her, as his own. However, this incursion becomes her opportunity to transform her idea of aesthetic "virginity" from a physiologically defined asset that can be bargained for to a psychologically generated and maintained autonomy. In this respect, James's description of the palazzo in terms of its secret chambers and dusky corners "demonstrates the crucial role of feminized images of the 'unknown world' laid out for male exploration" (Chambers & Watkins 2012: 297), James emphasizes Tina's social, political, and historical actuality in Venice, leading Sarah Salter to claim that here "James combats his aversion to 'political actuality' [and] 'escape from authority and history'" (Salter 2014: 245). Rawlings's idea of how James's characters react to

history helps us see that the lodger's exploration implies exploitation, to pernicious *ends*:

In many of the short stories in particular, imperatively – but often impossibly, and usually transgressively – the past is resurrected, investigated, and embraced, or (re)presented as synthetic... There is also the familiar Jamesian strategy of declaring the past to be inaccessible, unspeakable, or unutterable... past experience is often projected as unrepresentable... anchored in the “fatal futility of fact”. There are characters trapped in the present struggling for the “backward reach into time”, and others, haunted and transfixed, who seek to expiate or redeem the past.

(Rawlings 2003: 275)

The lodger's toil to possess Aspern's “palpable imaginable *visitable* past” (James 2003: 164) reveals him as a pirate and imperialist. Interpreting the lodger's editorial and biographical desire to expropriate Aspern's art as a romantic narrative, Salter relates it to the lodger's vision of himself as Aspern's rightful heir, freeing the poet's estate from its unfruitful and obtuse trustees:

In *The Aspern Papers*, James presents the literary historian – his unnamed narrator – as a condottiere of the romantic age... Grimly pursuing his desired objects, the narrator wants to capture a suppressed history of private documents so as to enjoy a more consistent relation with the literary past.

(Salter 2014: 245)

The lodger sees himself as Aspern's kin and heir, with a claim to his patrimony superior to that of his female dependents, who lack his manly literary spirit. Recognizing James's modulations of style related to individual attachments to a history of personal and cultural relations and identifications, Salter observes:

Pivoting between ahistorical impersonality and personal “ignominy”... style emerges as a vehicle for exploring individual attachment to history's “system of relations”, the ways in which history provokes its dramatizers (a role James saw himself performing) to both identification and analysis.

(Salter 2014: 242)

The lodger's bigotry and acuity are given equal rein, to the point at which, in Venice's obscurity, his “penetration fails” (James 2003: 28), his venture being to prove to Tina that he wields a potent masculine force in his aesthetic and ethical judgements, until she comes to understand that interest such as his “spoils the judgment of taste and deprives it of its impartiality” (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 107).

#### 4.2. The Venetian garden

The lodger, fond of the “idea of a garden in the middle of the sea” (*Aspern*, 62), decides to cultivate a garden in the middle of the Bordereau's palazzo. His duplicitous scheme becomes obvious when he follows Mrs. Prest's “happy

suggestion” to “become an acquaintance” first by becoming “an intimate” of Tina in order to find the “excuse” he “needed” to embark upon this imperial task of piracy (*Aspern*, 45, 47). His venture demonstrates an “interest [that] presupposes a need or produces one; and as a determining ground of approval it no longer leaves judgment on the object free” (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 95). The lodger presumes that Tina languishes in a virginal “misery” and sexual despondency that only his masculinity can cure. The narrator imagines that Juliana and Tina desperately need him, given that the decrepitude and emptiness of the palazzo symbolizes theirs:

Besides, a big house here, and especially in this *quartier perdu*, proves nothing at all: it’s perfectly consistent with a state of penury. Dilapidated old palazzi... you can form no idea of their domestic desolation... The other idea that had come into my head was connected with a high blank wall which appeared to confine an expanse of ground on one side of the house. Blank I call it, but it was figured over with the patches that please a painter, repaired breaches, crumbings of plaster, extrusions of brick that had turned pink with time; while a few thin trees, with the poles of certain rickety trellises, were visible over the top. The place was a garden and... it gave me my pretext.

(*Aspern*, 50)

The narrator’s description of the house contrasts the Kantian view of the hypothetical painter with the instrumental view of the visitor intent on achieving his own *ends*. The derelict garden provides the lodger with an alibi for his psychic assault on Tina in quest of *Aspern*’s papers. Relating gender, history, and art, Jeanne Campbell Reesman notes that

the garden is an image of isolation that brings to bear complex relations among gender, history, and art; it is an enclosed tangled world that gives the narrator his pretext for entering the female space of the Bordereau palace to cross, in effect, the border between himself and the sexualized past that he treasures.

(Reesman 1998: 155)

The isolated, enclosed, private space of the garden symbolizes Tina’s purity and virginity, with the lodger its self-appointed connoisseur and conqueror. This helps understand the reality of the Bordereau’s feminine position in the context of history, art and gender. Emblematically, the garden corresponds to the female body.

I disagree entirely with Brian Keith Henry’s view that the lodger’s vitality will cure the women’s sterility:

the nameless editor represents biological regeneration as well as the creation and maintenance of aesthetic ideals. The Bordereau women enforce a life-denying regime, “feigning death” in their isolated chambers, observing a rigid celibacy and turning their back on their potential for childbearing.

(Henry 2002: 279)

James merely adopts the lodger's self-serving sexism and misogyny as his own, given that celibacy and lack of children are in no way inherently life-denying. Likewise, Robert L. Caserio misunderstands Tina's receptivity to the lodger and her compliance with Aspern's patriarchy:

The younger woman is a daughter-figure in regard to the narrator's female rival and his male beloved, and a figure... who is either too tight or too tiny to afford his penetration. But because *she* desires the narrator, the younger woman will allow his continuing seduction of Aspern, even though the poet is structurally equitable with her father.

(Caserio 2010: 10)

Ultimately the lodger may appreciate Aspern's literary and aesthetic legacy much less deeply or acutely than Tina finally does after resolving her identity crisis. The possession of the women's body plays a significant role in developing the imperial masculine allegory of her subjugation and his victory. Laura Fishman writes that the "female body, especially in a virgin state, has typically served as a symbol of the land, and of unexplored territory in particular" (Fishman 2002: 66), including competing aesthetic and ethical jurisdictions. The lodger's quest for the papers by means of his conquest of Tina entirely overlooks the possibility that her dormant aesthetic and ethical insights, once aroused, may embody the significance of those papers more comprehensively than his ever could.

Discussing the significance for James of the female body in the construction of aesthetic judgement, Jane Thomas argues that

In each text the sculptural figure becomes an icon of desire that mediates between a transcendental and a kinetic aesthetic with bodily drives. At the same time, it situates aesthetic desire firmly in the arena of didacticism and gender politics.

(Thomas 2010: 246)

In making "love to the niece" (*Aspern*, 53), the lodger does not for one moment imagine that Tina might develop her own ideas about aesthetic theory and gender politics, which is what she actually does. According to Janise G. Roselle, "the metaphorical conflation of the female body with conquerable territory continues to be a dominant cultural trope" (Roselle 2012: 203), and as Reesman further explains:

As land is often portrayed metaphorically as a woman's body... the site of discovery in the tale will consistently be presented in terms of female spaces. Women's bodies metaphorically provide access to the past, to the "truth", to the "real thing", as James was fond of calling it, but in the end it seems this *medium* takes over from what is to be discovered, the so-called content of art.

(Reesman 1998: 150)



In this setting, Tina begins to understand the palazzo's garden as her alter ego or proxy, allowing her partly to experience her seduction by the lodger contemplatively, as if another were its subject, allowing her to develop a Kantian self-abstraction from her personal interests. Geraldine Murphy views the lodger's deplorable "ethics and aesthetics of using people, especially women" (Murphy 2010: 282) as a means to his end as the theme of the novel.

When the lodger asks Tina if the "garden belongs to the house?" he implicitly asks her if she also belongs to the house and if so how, ultimately arousing in her questions about what belongs to her, and to whom she may entrust it. Her rejoinder to the lodger provides a glimpse of her repressed personality:

"Yes, but the house doesn't belong to me". She was a long lean pale person... and she spoke very simply and mildly. She didn't ask me to sit down... and we stood face to face in the empty pompous hall. 'Well then, would you kindly tell me to whom I must address myself? I'm afraid you'll think me horribly intrusive."  
(*Aspern*, 55)

Tina's identity ("if she were the niece") may not puzzle the lodger as much as it immediately puzzles us and later puzzles her, as she comes slowly to understand her state as a kind of imprisonment and disenfranchisement, asked to exchange one jailer for another. In his own chivalric scenario, the lodger offers Tina the gift of his virility to cure her feminine infertility and awe her with his masculine potency. In this regard, Katherine E. Fleming proposes that

colonized lands... are understood in gendered terms and are typically portrayed as female, in juxtaposition to the presumed masculinity of the colonizer's homeland.  
(Fleming 2002: 39)

The lodger's goal is to save the papers from Aspern's illegitimate and incompetent female dependents, thinking Tina so witless that she must admire his favour as entirely beyond her merit. His theatrical effort to open the shutters of closed windows in old, unvisited rooms is meant to stir her repressed sexual emotions and conventional feminine *interests* to attain his decidedly non-sexual *ends*:

"I mean only from one of those windows – such grand ones as you have here – If you'll let me open the shutters". And I walked toward the back of the house. When I had advanced halfway I stopped and waited as in the belief she would accompany me... "I've looked at furnished rooms all over the place, and it seems impossible, to find any with a garden attached. Naturally in a place like Venice gardens are rare. It's absurd if you like, for a man, but I can't live without flowers".  
(*Aspern*, 56)

Although by declaring his love for flowers he advertises his disinterested aesthetic judgement, the lodger's taking it on himself to open the shutters of her

home suggests he wants to take possession, charitably to demonstrate their incompetent or deficient housekeeping and their need for a man about the house. As if reading a script that the lodger supplies, Tina concurs, regretting that she must do without flowers, and the sexual bounty they symbolize, because “it costs too much to cultivate them, one has to have a man”. The lodger immediately responds, having heard the words he wanted to put in Tina’s mouth and sensed the need he wanted to arouse in her:

“Why shouldn’t I be the man?” I asked. “I’ll work without wages... You shall have the sweetest flowers in Venice”. She protested against this with a small quaver of sound that might have been at the same time a gush of rapture for my free sketch.

(*Aspern*, 56)

The lodger’s plantation scheme renders him the representative of a new imperial tyranny. According to Said, the relation of the colonizer to the “exotic locale” entails a “sensual indulgence” and labels him a “flamboyant imperialist” (Said 1993: 231). Similarly, the lodger’s scheme promotes his phallic power. Demonstrating his masculine capacity to “throw open the shutters” of the closed windows of the palazzo, he thereby hints to Tina that he can offer her hymeneal release, in an incursion and conquest profitable for both of them. The lodger is pleased by his performance:

I had now struck the note that translated my purpose, and I needn’t reproduce the whole of the tune I played. I ended by making my entertainer believe me an undesigning person, though of course I didn’t even attempt to persuade her I was not an eccentric one. I repeated that I had studies to pursue... that I delighted in a garden... the dear old house should be smothered in flowers. I think it was the flowers that won my suit, for I afterwards found that Miss Tina... had an insatiable appetite for them.

(*Aspern*, 57)

The lodger’s stoking of Tina’s insatiable appetite to attain his purpose exemplifies his *prejudice*. According to Leigh Anne Duck, a “plantation” is established by the colonizer in “the form [of]... an oppressive machine” to acquire control (Duck 2010: 849). Having planted in Tina the *need* for a garden, the lodger’s plan to “cultivate the soil of the tangled enclosure” aggravates her identity crisis, and when she protests that “nothing here is mine” she grossly underestimates what she possesses and has a right to possess, even as he sharpens her sense of sterility and sparks her radical sexual metamorphosis.

The lodger’s ostentatious performance of opening the windows that overlook the uncultivated garden is meant to unravel and contest Tina’s subjection to *Aspern*’s antiquated despotic and Oriental (Venetian) aesthetics of female beauty by inviting her to share his modern American liberality of taste. The lodger’s description of the garden corresponds to Tina’s repression:

Seen from above the garden was in truth shabby, yet I felt at a glance that it had great capabilities. She made no rejoinder, she was so lost in her blankness and gentleness, and I exclaimed: "You don't mean to say you're also by chance American?" "I don't know. We used to be". "Used to be? Surely you haven't changed?" "It's so many years ago. We don't seem to be anything now".

(*Aspern*, 57)

The lodger exploits the great capacity for aesthetic beauty that Tina retains despite her deracination and denaturing, to awaken her to the sexual prerogatives of her suppressed American identity and liberty that she could regain by recognizing his guiding masculine power. The lodger dissembles and finesses his satisfaction in his opening gambit:

I did count it as a triumph, but only for the commentator – in the last analysis – not for the man, who had not the tradition of personal conquest.

(*Aspern*, 59)

For the lodger, possession of the garden portends his possession of Tina, which portends his possession of the papers, the first two cultivated only as a ploy for "getting hold of... [the] 'spoils'" (*Aspern*, 63). Endorsing feminist and post-colonial critiques of the "scene of subjectification", Samantrai deplors the traditional identification of the masculine with authority and the feminine with a need for such authority that underwrites the subjugation of women, who are passed from one man to another supposedly for their own good (Samantrai 1990: 6), as the lodger imagines he releases Tina and the papers from the grip of *Aspern's* dead hand.

The lodger explores and assesses the palazzo's interior as if it were Tina's psyche, reminiscent of an Edgar Allan Poe tale:

We ascended to the upper floor and visited a long succession of empty rooms. The best of them looked over the garden; some of the others had above the opposite rough-tiled house-tops a view of the blue lagoon. They were all dusty and even a little disfigured with long neglect, but I saw that by spending a few hundred francs I should be able to make three or four of them habitable enough. My experiment was turning out costly, yet now that I had all but taken possession I ceased to allow this to trouble me... She took no notice of the unswept condition of the rooms and indulged neither in explanations nor in apologies.

(*Aspern*, 67)

Jennifer Sue Scappettone notes a synecdochic relation between the palazzo, the garden, and Tina that emphasizes their shared prolonged hymeneal integrity:

Conjuring the image of a walled garden...Venetian palace... as one peers into adjacent gardens, "the view is mainly a view of barriers".

(Scappettone 2005: 122)

The lodger wants to persuade Tina to see herself as sterile, and the palazzo's rooms as ramshackle and decayed, to create in her an aesthetic and sexual void that he might fill with floral beauty and his bee-like virility. Murphy observes that Tina's presence opens up a "romantic possibility" as she starts "constantly overstepping boundaries" established by Aspern (Murphy 2010: 284). The narrator tries to detect discrepancies in Tina's communications:

she seemed to wish to notify me that the Misses Bordereau would take none but the most veiled interest in my proceedings. I guessed that her aunt had instructed her to adopt this tone, and I may as well say now that I came afterwards to distinguish perfectly (as I believed) between the speeches she made on her own responsibility and those the old woman imposed upon her.

*(Aspern, 67)*

The lodger's arrival sparks a conflict in Tina between her Venetian enslavement and her desire for feminine autonomy. He goads her into action to counter her instrumentalization by Juliana. The lodger means to excite Tina's desire but hide from her his self-interest in doing so. He identifies Tina with the forces that withhold the papers from him, a hapless native to be enticed from Juliana's control, fitting Jenny Sharpe's conception of a "colonised subject" (Sharpe 1995: 99) as the prisoner of a phallographic system that Juliana has devised to exercise Aspern's authority. The lodger's urge to open windows symbolizes his sense of Tina as a closed book, with as many pages yet to be opened as the palazzo has windows:

We looked out of a good many windows, for there was nothing within the rooms to look at... I asked her what several different objects in the prospect might be, but in no case did she appear to know. She was evidently not familiar with the view – it was as if she had not looked at it for years – and I presently saw that she was too preoccupied with something else to pretend to care for it.

*(Aspern, 67)*

Tina's pleasure and surprise at the prospect of her own susceptibility to sexual cultivation induce a radical quandary within her. Her realization of her aesthetic vulnerability complicates the novel issue of her personal freedom in relation to her indirect "possession of the papers" in which she discovers that the lodger is unswervingly "interested" (*Aspern*, 68) for his own *ends*. In this regard, Tina's unreflecting proclamation that "There's nothing to tell. We're terribly quiet... We've no life" defends her compliance with patriarchal authority. In Gerard de Nerval's Oriental voyage narratives, Said notes that along with the feminine, "the Orient is identified with commemorative absence" (Said 2003 [1978]: 184). The congruence of feminine and Oriental silence and inscrutability suggests that Tina's imprisonment in Juliana and Aspern's system of relations is ambiguously like a convent and a seraglio, in which she waits to serve at their pleasure rather than her own, closely akin to Pansy's detention in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Said's

idea of absence helps us identify the woman with political silence and marginalization when Tina declares that “I oughtn’t to tell you if I knew” what the lodger wishes her to reveal. This view is entirely at odds with Amy M. Green’s view that “*The Aspern Papers* is a ‘play about young lovers... scheming... personal gain’” (Green 2009: 20). Tina at first defends herself by her proclamation that “[I] must stay with my aunt” (*Aspern*, 69), preferring her longstanding phallocratic captivity. But the lodger’s investment in the garden doles out to Tina quantities of flowers that are meant to burden her with an increasingly heavy debt that she might finally wish the lodger to forgive for a certain consideration, such that Rosenberg argues that the lodger’s association of “appreciation” with “interest”... casts... the narrator in *The Aspern Papers* in the role of a usurer, one for whom there are flimsy partitions between use and abuse (Rosenberg 2006: 258).

For Tina, the lodger’s cultivation of the Venetian palazzo’s garden forces her to confront the “Venetian business” of patriarchy (*Aspern*, 71), as the lodger fancies himself Aspern’s sole legitimate heir:

That spirit kept me perpetual company and seemed to look out at me from the revived immortal face... my prompter. I had invoked him and he had come; he hovered... it was as if his bright ghost had returned to earth to assure me he regarded the affair as his own no less than as mine and that we should see it fraternally and fondly to a conclusion... I felt even a mystic companionship, a moral fraternity with all those who in the past had been in the service of art. They had worked for beauty.  
(*Aspern*, 73)

The lodger’s mystical identification of his interests with Aspern’s is the essential mechanism of patriarchal hegemony, as the lodger wants to capture Tina precisely as Aspern had captured Juliana in the prison of his art, in which they remain after his departure either through death or desertion. For Said, just as “political imperialism governs an entire field of study, imagination, and scholarly institutions – in such a way as to make its avoidance an intellectual and historical impossibility” (Said 2003 [1978]: 14), so does aesthetic imperialism. Fishman argues that “the activities of exploration, colonization, and hence domination” appeal to men equally in their political and imaginative vocations (Fishman 2002: 66). The lodger’s palazzo garden is a miniature colonial plantation, meant to conquer a native community by beguiling and seducing it to his foreign ends. Neither Juliana nor the lodger understands aesthetic disinterest, but they inadvertently allow Tina to do so through their apparently contrary but actually congruent interests. The initially forsaken and uncultivated garden represents the original state of Tina’s sexual being, which the lodger hopes to exploit as he “expropriates... cultivates and settles the ‘wilderness’” (Spanos 2010: 130) that is her desire. His gardening “instrumentally enables” his “circumscription, cultivation, and colonization” (Spanos 1996: 151) of Tina as a conduit to Aspern’s possessions:

I surveyed the place with a clever expert and made terms for having it put in order. I was sorry to do this, for personally I liked it better as it was, with its weeds and its wild rich tangle, its sweet characteristic Venetian shabbiness... Moreover I clung to the fond fancy that by flowers I should make my way – I should succeed by big nose-gays. I would batter the old women with lilies – I would bombard their citadel with roses. Their door would have to yield to the pressure when a mound of fragrance should be heaped against it.

(*Aspern*, 74)

Parodying the excesses of English aestheticism, the lodger surveys the garden as a prospector willing to exchange a bunch of flowers for the untold riches he believes *Aspern's* papers to contain. According to Roselle, the female body and the land are analogous resources to be claimed, cultivated, and despoiled as an imperial practice:

the body is a “wonderland”, but more specifically, the woman’s body in question is a land... the female body as an inert territory awaiting discovery... the “virgin” territories of the “New World”, thereby conflating women’s bodies with land, this should come as no surprise, for the colonial venture itself is a gendered project, predicated on a kind of masculinist fantasy of violating an uncharted... territory.

(Roselle 2012: 201)

The lodger regards Tina’s “stillness” (*Aspern*, 74) as compliant with patriarchal hegemony, and envisages his horticulture as a necessary transgression against it:

The place... had been brutally neglected. The Venetian capacity for dawdling is of the largest, and for a good many days unlimited litter was all my gardener had to show for his ministrations. There was a great digging of holes and carting about of earth.

(*Aspern*, 75)

The lodger’s labour of cultivation transforms the garden into a “place of... sexual interaction, forced and free,... [that recalls] a major part of... [its] colonial past” (Stoddard 2012: 2). To the lodger:

though the delay was long, perceived some appearances of bloom. This encouraged me, and I waited serenely enough till they multiplied. Meanwhile the real summer days arrived and began to pass... I had an arbour arranged and a low table and an armchair put into it; and I carried out books and portfolios... and worked and waited and mused and hoped, while the golden hours elapsed and the plants drank in the light and the inscrutable old palace turned pale and then, as the day waned, began to recover and flush and my papers rustled in the wandering breeze of the Adriatic.

(*Aspern*, 75)

Tambling regards the lodger’s entire narrative as a dubious protestation of heteronormative masculinity in which Tina barely disguises his unmanly ardour for *Aspern*. His aesthetic floricultural excesses

revert to other, non-productive associations of “evil”, specifically homosexuality, whether male or female, and to criminality. They are outside a male economy: Juliana Bordereau tells the narrator... that for him to have flowers in his room is “unmanly”.

(Tambling 2003: 8)

On the other hand, if the flower garden is observed through Graham Huggan’s lens, it becomes an “articulation of feminist cartography which disassociates itself from the ‘over-signifying’ spaces of patriarchal representations” (Huggan 1989: 125). In a very close analogy, John Wiltshire argues, following Said, that in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, “the colonization of Antigua is linked to the colonization of Fanny Price’s mind and body” (Wiltshire 2003: 307). But both Fanny and Tina achieve an aesthetic, sexual, and ethical autonomy that proves impregnable and unassailable by others’ avaricious “interest” in their yielding their belatedly won freedom (*Aspern*, 87). Rawlings’s idea of “freedom from history” (Rawlings 2003: 273) helps place Tina’s escape from her Venetian incarceration. Tina does not join Juliana in telling the lodger that it “isn’t a manly taste to make a bower of your room”, and must second the lodger’s rejoinder that “it has been the amusement of philosophers, of statesmen in retirement; even, I think, of great captains” (*Aspern*, 92), by which they declare their autonomy, which the lodger presumes exclusively phallocratic but which Tina discovers can be hers as well. Through his horticultural toil the lodger certainly intends to arouse in Tina a self-interest that aligns with his self-interest, but accidentally triggers her discovery of a disinterestedness that eclipses both his interest and Juliana’s.

To recapitulate, the lodger’s cultivation of the derelict garden parallels his attempted cultivation of Tina’s derelict spirit, which paradoxically awakens her sense of aesthetic and ethical autonomy and of chastity as a spiritual power rather than a physiological and social constraint. Tina’s beauty hardly impresses the lodger, and for him remains adherent, instrumental, even hypothetical. The lodger’s predetermined scholarly and personal *interest* stifle any more genuine aesthetic sensibilities.

#### 4.3. The Venetian canals and lagoon

The lodger’s subsequent endeavour to persuade Tina to help him grab *Aspern*’s papers, still submerged within Venice’s general inscrutability, involves launching her on a journey through the city’s canals and into its lagoon, hoping to subvert her virginal innocence by their aesthetic splendour, presented as a “bargain” to satisfy her feminine *interests* (*Aspern*, 92). Concerning its narrative reticence, Diane G. Scholl argues that in *The Aspern Papers* “subtle innuendo and strategy repeatedly alter and shift the dynamics of power” (Scholl 2013: 73). The lodger plays the Grand Canal as the trump card of his aesthetic strategy, he the

professional gambler and she his prospective victim. Ribbat argues that the history and geography of Venice's "oceanic perspective links James's fiction to the colonial imagination" (Ribbat 2007: 2). It is Juliana who suggests to the lodger that he takes Tina to the Piazza, as if to control them both:

"Take her to the Piazza; it used to be very pretty", Miss Bordereau continued, addressing herself to me... Let her look at the shops; she may take some money, she may buy what she likes"... Miss Tina protested in a confusion of exclamations and murmurs; but I lost no time in saying that if she would do me the honour to accept the hospitality of my boat... Miss Tina, without definitely answering this speech, looked away from me and out of the window, quite as if about to weep, and I remarked that once we had Miss Bordereau's approval we could easily come to an understanding.

(*Aspern*, 94)

Juliana demonstrates her authority over Tina by putting her obedience and resilience to the test and challenges the lodger to find that her authority extends not only beyond her immediate presence but also beyond her lifetime.

For the lodger, Tina remains an "agreeable woman" who "gratifies" his *ends* (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 92). He promises Tina the gondola ride to the city's most beautiful public spaces to tempt her to succumb to his designs, to forgo chastity that he regards as no more than subjection to her aunt's will. The lodger reflects that although:

Miss Tina was embarrassed she didn't – as most women would have in like case – turn away, floundering and hedging, but came closer, as it were, with a deprecating, a clinging appeal to be spared, to be protected... From the moment you were kind to her she depended on you absolutely; her self-consciousness dropped and she took the greatest intimacy, the innocent intimacy that was all she could conceive, for granted. She didn't know, she now declared, what possessed her aunt, who had changed so quickly.

(*Aspern*, 95)

The lodger means to mislead Tina for his intended *ends*, whereas she feels the first thrill of a newly possible autonomy beyond the lodger's pushing and Juliana's pulling. Kathryn Wichelns detects in such scenes:

a distinctly hetero-sexual violence at work...; indeed, his interest in obtaining the papers becomes an increasingly physical "pushing". The narrator eventually will simply overpower the women's resistance and take what he wants, what he feels entitled to by right of his (gendered, cultural, linguistic) position; his forceful penetration of their chambers is described in terms that render it a rape.

(Wichelns 2007: 21)



The lodger exploits Tina's aesthetic and sexual *need* throughout their voyage, trying her virginal resistance with his utmost persuasive power as would a Barbary pirate the maiden he has captured. As the lodger records with great satisfaction,

We swept in the course of five minutes into the Grand Canal; whereupon she uttered a murmur of ecstasy as fresh as if she had been a tourist just arrived.

(*Aspern*, 96)

The lodger interprets Tina's aesthetic and sexual responsiveness as favouring his own ends, hoping that the tourist might fall in love with her guide because she falls in love with the beauty to which he guides her, as if it were his gift for which she might exchange a gift of comparable beauty and public benefit, Aspern's papers. First by furnishing her prison with flowers and then by chaperoning her on her first furlough from that prison, the lodger hopes to push Tina's aesthetic, sexual, and ethical identity to its crisis and persuade her to resolve it in his favour. Oltean argues that the:

Jamesian tourist is engaged in a complex reflexive relationship with his environment, which resembles closely the functionalist model outlined by [Susan] Griffin in which the subject, "actively engaged", is "creating a self and choosing a history".

(Pana-Oltean 2001: 182; cf. Griffin 1991: 19)

The lodger attempts to control Tina's apprehension and appreciation of the beauty of Venice and its imperial history and also of the aesthetic value of Aspern's papers, their intimate history. According to Emilija Dimitrijevic:

The narrator's obsession with the poet clearly contrasts with his claim that he is a disinterested party. He is, like Juliana, extremely personal about the letters, although on different grounds. Even though privately obsessed with the poet, the narrator formally endorses the view that Aspern's letters represent a part of cultural heritage.

(Dimitrijevic 2005: 288)

Thus, the lodger's hope that Tina can be compelled by the tide of her responsiveness to him and his favours to offer him the poet's papers, and even her own favours indicates that the canal ride is yet another disingenuous arrangement to subjugate her will and interest to his.

The lodger's exploitation of Tina's sexual *need* for a man uncovers his masculine *bias*. In this context, Tina's ride in the gondola he hires illustrates what he hopes will be his unquestioned command of the direction her life takes, were it not for Venice's unexpected aesthetic power to free her:

We floated long and far, and though my friend gave no high-pitched voice to her glee I was sure of her full surrender. She was more than pleased, she was transported; the whole thing was an immense liberation.

(*Aspern*, 96)

During her voyage, Tina discovers her need for aesthetic freedom, which the lodger misinterprets as her sexual *need* for his male potency, confirming Ribbat's claim that the lodger is driven not by empathy but by "the unwavering exploratory curiosity that made colonialism possible" (Ribbat 2007: 7, 10). Barbara Jensen-Osinski contends that Tina embarks on her voyage in an:

unrealistic but brave attempt to accomplish two things: first, to reconcile the inner conflict with which she has been struggling, satisfying both the narrator and her aunt by giving him access to the Aspern papers while keeping the papers within the family, and, second, to give the narrator a final chance to prove his humanity by joining the Venice family, to which Tina is his key.

(Jensen-Osinski 1981: 4)

But even if this is true to some degree, Tina's deeper impulse contradicts this diplomatic design, which the lodger fondly supposes he can exploit to his own ends:

The gondola moved with slow strokes, to give her time to enjoy it, and she listened to the splash of the oars, which grew louder and more musically liquid as we passed into narrow canals, as if it were a revelation of Venice. When I asked her how long it was since she had thus floated she answered: "Oh I don't know; a long time... I poured, rather, treasures of information... describing also Florence and Rome, discoursing on the charms and advantages of travel. She reclined, receptive, on the deep leather cushions, turned her eyes conscientiously to everything.

(*Aspern*, 96)

Like Satan whispering at Eve's ear, the lodger relishes his own fancied eloquence. But their journey through canal and lagoon, as if through the tides of Tina's body, release her from the virginal ignorance in which she has long been imprisoned, igniting her aesthetic and sexual *interests*, which she appreciates for the first time. González notes, in *The Aspern Papers*,

James's increasing interest in... [the] social uses of material 'things'... [and] the entanglement of consciousness and desire with libidinal, social and material script of attainment or possession.

(González 2008: 28)

But these are precisely the interests that Tina feels and confronts as she develops the capacity to understand and transcend them disinterestedly, in an education that conforms to Friedrich von Schiller's programme:

Art is a daughter of freedom, and takes her orders from the necessity inherent in minds, not from the exigencies of matter. But at the present time material needs reign supreme and bend a degraded humanity beneath their tyrannical yoke. *Utility* is the great idol of our age, to which all powers are in thrall and to which all talent most pay homage.

(von Schiller 2010 [1794]: 483)

In this light, not only must Tina recognize and reject the lodger's utilitarianism but also, given that, according to Kelly Cannon, he "feels licensed to abuse[the] woman" (Cannon 1994: 48) caught in such a scenario as she is, she must disabuse her abuser of his delusions as she frees herself of hers, effectively decolonizing the colonizer. Her insularity is ultimately dwarfed by his.

The lodger ventures to inveigle Tina by showing her the "attraction of the world" not for her sake but for his, as a man of the world and a better master than Aspern. To achieve this, he exploits Tina's presumed sense of aesthetic inferiority by showing her the bewitching shops and beguiling objects in the colonial emporium that Venice then was:

Her spirits revived at the sight of the bright shop-windows, and she lingered and stopped, admiring or disapproving of their contents, asking me what I thought of things, theorizing about prices.

(*Aspern*, 98)

However, the lodger's attempt to allure Tina fails as the showcased objects of exchange suggest to her that she is one of them, on consignment from Juliana. As Vanderlaan argues of colonial trophies, the way in which

specimens are framed (one may note in their lifeless state) and then showcased becomes reminiscent of other "collections" on the estate – an aggregate of "imperialist expropriation".

(Vanderlaan 2011: 51; cf. Davidson 2007: 26)

The picturesque showcasing of art-objects defines Venice as a city of exhibition, whose historical triumphs and victories ultimately evoke those of the Roman Empire. Tessa Hadley argues that *Aspern* is "intensely a material story... based on rapid commercial calculations" (Hadley 2002: 316), and the lodger's connoisseurship of aesthetic objects in the shops establishes the scene of the cultured tourist scrutinizing deals, and transactions for his own personal gain. According to Oltean,

The picturesque constitutes the declared object of the sentimental tourist, who thus encodes the foreign landscape as an object of desire. Jamesian travelers are, like Winterbourne, lovers of the picturesque, and, in the spirit of the nineteenth-century American tourists analyzed by [William] Stowe, they embark on already marked itineraries, heavily loaded with literary associations and cultural memories.

(Pana-Oltean 2001: 182; cf. Stowe 1994)

From this view point, the lodger is a *comprador* of beauty, a foreign buyer or dealer entering a colonial market who exploits his relative privilege to bargain with the local native traders for beautiful artefacts for a questionable price:

I had brought her to the Piazza, placed her among charming influences, paid her an attention she appreciated, and now I appeared to show it all as a bribe – a bribe to make her turn in some way against her aunt.

(*Aspern*, 99)

The lodger's ruse aims at Tina's aesthetic and emotional deprivation, to break the spell that "Aspern's letters and papers" have cast over her as Juliana compels her to serve in their "house of mourning" (*Aspern*, 99, 100). The narrator hopes that his arousal of Tina's sexual desire will prompt the "dreadful sacrilege" of her decision "to depart from an injunction so absolute" by giving him the poet's papers (*Aspern*, 101). Tina is the "*legatee*" of Aspern's "bequest", bound "to abide by the terms" that imprison her in his Venetian legacy (*Aspern*, 102). But, finally and ironically, as Blair argues, "beauty apparently belies the oriental logic of possession" (Blair 1996: 21) and proves it is unpossessable. Meri-Jane Rochelson describes the lodger's pursuit of the papers in the following terms:

The desire for "possession", often repeated in the novel, anticipates the word's use by A. S. Byatt (1990) in another study [*Possession*] of the ethics of biographical scholarship, and indeed James, too, questioned (as his narrator does not) the arrogance involved in the endeavor to possess past secrets. A hint is given in the novel's preface, when James admits that 'one must induce almost any "Italian subject" to *make believe* it gives up its secret".

(Rochelson 2007: 41)

Michael D. Fisher more boldly claims that "*The Aspern Papers* is all about greed – physical, intellectual, and psychological" (Fisher 1999: 157). But although Aspern, Juliana, and the lodger evince various forms and degrees of greed, Tina does not; she is the only one among them who does not crave for something not inherently her own, finally realizing that her chastity is beautiful not because it is subject to another's valuation, action, and power but because it is a token of the resilience and freedom of her own desire, conscience, and taste. During the boat ride through Venice she first dimly realizes her power to make her own way through its maze of canals, even as the lodger imagines that only he can lead her through them, playing Theseus to her hapless Ariadne.

#### 4.5. The palazzo again

The lodger sets off another aesthetic and ethical crisis when he tries to violate Juliana's inner sanctum only to face her "miracle of resurrection" (*Aspern*, 59) as

he forces himself into her “impenetrable” private world. Even when he had first appeared, Juliana had repelled his ominous overtures, insisting that her absolute devotion to the world of art and beauty ruled over by Aspern placed her far beyond the vulgar world from which he had just emerged:

“It’s many years since I’ve been in one of the *gondole*”. She uttered these words as if they designed a curious far-away craft known to her.

(*Aspern*, 62)

Juliana had renounced the world for beauty, love, and poetry, taking on herself the “Venetian measure” of Aspern’s imperial character (*Aspern*, 63). As Savoy observes, the novel aligns

Juliana Bordereau with the paper archive as historical residue – from the narrator’s perspective. She is a “terrible relic”... who holds the “sacred relics”... in her grasp. (Savoy 2010: 64)

Accordingly, Juliana is the abbess-like representative of Aspern’s aesthetic ideal, the emblem of its sequestration from the world of exchange, silently upholding the poet’s phallocratic rule, such that:

Misses Bordereau formed altogether a new type of the American absentee. Indeed it was clear the American name had ceased to have any application to them.

(*Aspern*, 75)

The lodger wants to buy or steal the papers to repatriate them into the cultural commerce of America. Over time, Juliana and Tina, stranded in the dilemma of their lost identity, have

unlearned all native marks and notes. There was nothing in them one recognized or fitted, and, putting the question of speech aside, they might have been Norwegians or Spaniards. Miss Bordereau, after all had been in Europe nearly three-quarters of a century.

(*Aspern*, 76)

Juliana’s historic disappearance and submergence in to the “vastness” of the “Venetian World” is meant to thwart just such an “invasion” as the “cupidity” that the lodger intends (*Aspern*, 79, 85, 86). The narrator hears a “hard complacency” in her obdurate exclamation, “Oh I like the past”.

The tenor of the lodger and Juliana’s argument about the value and use of Aspern’s papers appears in the following passage, in which the lodger asserts a right to see and assess them superior to her right as their trustee. Juliana places an extortionately high value on them:

“We’re terribly in the dark, I know”, I admitted; “but if we give up trying what becomes of all the fine things? What becomes of the work I just mentioned, that of the great philosophers and poets? It’s all vain words if there’s nothing to measure it by”. “You talk as if you were a tailor”, said Miss Bordereau whimsically; and then she added quickly and in a different manner: “This house is very fine; the proportions are magnificent. To-day I wanted to look at this part again. I made them bring me out here... I wanted to judge what I’m letting you have. This sala is very grand”, she pursued like an auctioneer, moving a little, as I guessed, her invisible eyes.

(*Aspern*, 106)

Juliana plays auctioneer to the lodger as a bidder beggared by the value of what he covets. With a mastery of the “pecuniary dealings” that she has long forsworn, Juliana asks the lodger to consider the “antiquities, the old gimcracks that people pay so much for to-day. Do you know the kind of price they bring?” (*Aspern*, 107).

George Monteiro maintains that Juliana

is merely the possessor of some of *Aspern*’s papers. She is not the keeper of *Aspern*’s flame; if there is one, it is the publishing scoundrel. Juliana has herself become a *bordereau* – a list of documents and other things associated with a long-dead poet, things much sought after but unable to transcend their object status.

(Monteiro 2009: 34)

But Monteiro reveals his own bias and prejudice as he extenuates the lodger’s self-interest and duplicity, through which Juliana can certainly see, as his avarice and “intensity of clutch” obviously increase (*Aspern*, 108) as he mentally pillages the palazzo’s recesses:

I was guilty of the indiscretion of lingering; it held me there to feel myself so close to the objects I coveted... there were neither dusky nooks nor curtained corners, neither massive cabinets nor chests with iron bands... it was perhaps even likely, that the old lady had consigned her relics to her bedroom, to some battered box that was shoved under the bed, to the drawer of some lame dressing-table, where they would be in the range of vision by the dim night-lamp.

(*Aspern*, 112)

In this context, the lodger’s fancies about rifling through Juliana’s drawers and forcing open her locked cabinets and hidden chests hardly testify to his masculine prowess and acuity. Like a looter, the lodger tries to price everything shown to him as well as everything hidden from him:

I turned an eye on every article of furniture, on every conceivable cover for a hoard... drawers... a tall old secretary with brass ornaments of the style of the Empire – a receptacle... capable of keeping rare secrets... I stared at it so hard that

Miss Tina noticed me and changed colour. Her doing this made me think I was right and that...the Aspern papers at that moment languished behind the peevish little lock of the secretary.

(*Aspern*, 112)

The “secretary... in the style of Empire” clearly suggests an imperial history of conquest, colonization, and exploitation. As Perosa argues:

the accumulated treasures of Venice – an art museum... are perceived as based on social and economic exploitation, on ruthless acquisition... The monuments and treasures of art, the great palaces and properties, the conquests of learning and taste, the general fabric of civilization as we know it, [are] based... upon all the despotisms, the cruelties, the exclusions, the monopolies and the rapacities of the past.

(Perosa 2008: 156)

The lodger confesses that the papers, tokens of the beauty of poetry, “held me there to feel myself so close to the objects I coveted” in a “prodigious house” (*Aspern*, 112) so much like the imperialist museum that for Oltean compels participation in the “game of seduction, appropriation, and interpretation” in “a situation spelling out the misreading and inversions inherent in the colonial scenario” (Oltean 2003: 271, 272). The lodger sees the poet’s manuscripts as art objects that need to be freed from the prison of their private origins, passing off his own highly personal interest in them as scholarly disinterest. Tina’s trailing of his gaze almost makes him realize his culpability:

I turned my eyes once more all over the room, rummaging with them the closets, the chests of drawers, the tables. Miss Tina at once noted their direction and read, I think, what was in them; but she didn’t answer it, turning away restlessly, anxiously, so that I felt rebuked,... for an appetite well-nigh indecent in the presence of our dying companion... endeavouring to pick out mentally the receptacle... The place was a dire confusion; it looked like the dressing-room of an old actress. There were clothes... odd-looking shabby bundle... [and] pasteboard boxes piled together, battered, bulging and discoloured, which might have been fifty years old. Miss Tina after a moment noticed the direction of my eyes again, and, as if she guessed how I judged such appearances.

(*Aspern*, 116)

Repeatedly sensing that Tina “at once noted”, and “after a moment noticed” where and why he was looking at Juliana’s paraphernalia, his foray into Juliana’s private chamber evinces the avarice and thievery of colonial exploitation. She appears both to deplore and to encourage his rapacity by insisting that

“She likes it this way; we can’t move things. There are old bandboxes she has had most of her life”...“Those things were *there*”. And she pointed to a small low trunk which stood under a sofa that just allowed room for it... It evidently had travelled with Juliana in the olden time – in the days of adventures.

(*Aspern*, 116)

The lodger even supposes that their mutual understanding “was a regular plot – a kind of conspiracy” between them (*Aspern*, 120). He muses that from what “my desire to possess myself of Jeffrey Aspern’s papers had made me capable I needn’t shrink, it seems to me, from confessing this last indiscretion. I regard it as the worst thing I did, yet there were extenuating circumstances” (*Aspern*, 123).

The lodger is “confronted” with another aesthetic and ethical quandary when he enters Juliana’s room and clandestinely examines its contents (*Aspern*, 123):

I stopped in front of the secretary, gazing at it vainly and no doubt grotesquely... In the first place it was locked, and in the second it almost surely contained nothing in which I was interested. Ten to one the papers had been destroyed, and even if they hadn’t the keen old woman wouldn’t have put them in such a place... The secretary was more conspicuous, more exposed in a room... I saw this as I played my lamp over it. I did something more, for the climax of my crisis; I caught a glimpse of the possibility that Miss Tina wished me really to understand.

(*Aspern*, 124)

The lodger’s examination brings him face to face with a world of things marooned in Venetian obscurity and evokes in him a sense of his own imprisonment in his interests that eclipses his sense of the papers’ sequestration, so that he must escape from the moated fortress of Venice to *terra firma* to free himself from his own moral defilement. According to Vanderlaan, the lodger stops just short of “ravaging the ordered museum world...a self-contained colony of moral and aesthetic purity” (Vanderlaan 2011: 50), and according to Ann-Marie L. Dunbar, “the tale seems at first like a peculiar crime or conspiracy story, narrated by its ‘criminal’ mastermind” who is finally uncertain about whether he has committed the crime he intended (Dunbar 2008: 175).

The lodger’s “return to Venice” and his final assault on Tina’s virtue determine the true object of her “fidelity” (*Aspern*, 127), whether it is Aspern’s legacy, the lodger’s vocation, or her own autonomy, among which she must choose in an “unprejudiced... broad-minded... consistent” way (*Aspern*, 132), performing her “duty” as an aesthetic and ethical judge by freely awarding her “favor” (Kant 2000 [1790, rev. 1793]: 176, 95). I disagree with Merritt Moseley’s contention that James’s novel depicts Tina as a

spinster brought to life by the advent of a mysterious bachelor in the denuded palace she shares with her antediluvian aunt, and then abandoned, returned to a dim old age.

(Moseley 2005: 304)

Spinsterhood defines chastity as an asset or liability whose value depends on others’ interest in it, whereas Tina finally discovers that chastity is an inalienable aesthetic and ethical resilience, incompatible with Maya Higashi Wakana’s view



that Tina pursues a “materialistic, social kind of morality” (Wakana 2009: 157). The lodger senses as a “particular obstacle” Tina’s “dreadful sense of duty” (Aspern, 132), telling her that

you regard the interdiction that rests on you as quite insurmountable. In this case it must seem to you that to part with them [the papers] would be an impiety of the worst kind, a simple sacrilege!

(Aspern, 134)

Although Barry Maine notes that Venice is known for anything but “celibacy” (Maine 2002: 138), Tina decides that celibacy alone can free her from the price that her possession of Aspern’s papers puts on her favours, and that the destruction of the papers will free not only her but the lodger and even the reputations of Aspern and her aunt. Her moral awakening and self-disciplining saves her from complying with an external demand. The lodger has to leave Venice without the papers, his quest ending in failure. But even though “Italian cities – Venice, for instance – were associated, for James, with the sense of an ending” (Giorcelli 2012: 218), the novel ends with Tina’s novel sense of freedom and the lodger’s novel pangs of conscience.

The lodger’s aesthetic sense is flawed because he is *biased* in favour of his own professional ends, and his moral sense vitiated by his exploitation of Tina’s affections. But Tina responds to his and her family’s exploitation of her by developing a disinterested appreciation of her autonomy and their lack of it, freeing herself and the lodger by deciding that Aspern’s “papers” must be “burnt” (Aspern, 142). Adeline R. Tintner claims that Tina “demands her price and, when she is refused, she destroys the papers. Those papers were important only to the narrator, and by destroying them she destroys him” (Tintner 1986: 72). But I argue that she burns the papers to release the lodger from the spell that his self-interest has cast over him, proving her aesthetic, sexual, and ethical freedom from *needs* and *interests*, be they social, political, or sexual. Although Victoria Coulson argues that “the burning of personal documents is a gesture of such self-conscious drama that it works rather to heighten the volatile relationship” (Coulson 2007: 187), I argue that it breaks the spell of possessiveness that possesses and imprisons everyone, confirming her attainment of *disinterestedness* and even portending the lodger’s eventual attainment of it. Savoy suggests that the “burning is sacrificial” (Savoy 2010: 63), but Tina sacrifices neither herself nor the lodger, only the pages of the paper prison that have entranced them. To explain the lodger’s predicament, Joseph Rosenberg notes that

the past, James tells us, is a thing “outlived and lost and gone”... *The Aspern Papers* ends with the narrator seated at just such a table, over which hangs a miniature portrait of Jeffrey Aspern: “When I look at it I can scarcely bear my loss”,

the narrator laments, with the urgent proviso, “I mean of the precious papers”  
 What lies at the end of this table is not a graspable past, but a memento of the desired  
 papers that have slipped from the narrator’s fingers.

(Rosenberg 2006: 258)

The lodger confesses he has failed to repatriate the Aspern papers from Venice, completely ignoring the city’s other aesthetic attractions, confirming Elzbieta Foeller-Pituch’s complaint that Americans in James’s fiction are “impervious to the influences native to the Old World” (Foeller-Pituch 2003: 293). Tina’s history confirms Schiller’s principle that

if man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice he will have to approach  
 it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man  
 makes his way to freedom.

(von Schiller 2010 [1794]: 484)

Tina solves “that problem” by achieving a Kantian and Saidian freedom from the interests and prejudices that Aspern, Juliana, and the lodger successively try to inculcate in her.

## 5. Conclusions

In sum, Tina realizes that her aesthetic and ethical autonomy is the true and inalienable form of her chastity, whose value cannot be augmented or diminished by others. She redeems Aspern’s patrimony and the lodger’s subjection to it by burning the papers as a *favour* to both of them, hoping the lodger may come to understand and emulate such chastening *disinterestedness*, transcending the insularity, inequity, and avarice that Venice embodies. Tina runs the gauntlet of interests that would strike her down, proving herself stronger than any phallocratic mandate wielded by a single person or a polity. Juliana dies unredeemed, but the lodger seems redeemable enough for Tina to hope he can learn the lesson she tries to teach him.

My reading of *The Aspern Papers* shows how James substantiates Kant’s idea of aesthetic and ethical *disinterestedness* through Tina’s transcendence of self-interest and her achievement of an aesthetic, sexual, and ethical autonomy that enables her to elude the obtuse, repugnant, and malevolent designs and *prejudices* that persuade her guardian and suitor to misjudge and misuse her beauty and that of the art objects of which Tina is the truest connoisseur. Said’s analysis of the dichotomous and antagonistic interests of the self and the other, the European and the Oriental, and the colonizer and the colonized echoes James’s analysis of the dichotomous and antagonistic interests of men and women, and Americans and Europeans, which works against the disinterested judgements of which Juliana

and the lodger are equally capable as Juliana and the lodger fight to control Tina. James goes beyond Kant in understanding that his heroine's sexual desire and sexual difference helps her realize that her chastity epitomizes her aesthetic and ethical autonomy and her ability to withstand the patriarchal regime that presumes it does and must rule her.

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