James is famed for his sensitive and complex portraits of ladies. But whilst his exploration of the cultural associations between women and objects of art has been thoroughly documented, considerably less attention has been given to the instances in which he replaces the picture frame with the more modern display contexts of advertising. These representations, which become increasingly frequent in his work, not only blur the boundaries between women and commodities, but often destabilise the opposition between commercial and artistic culture that they initially appear to enforce. I begin my investigation with James’s first female figure in a shop window, the eponymous wax heroine of ‘Rose-Agathe’, whose career is analysed in the context of James’s ambivalent attitude towards the sparkling, showy Paris of the late 1870s. A variety of literary and cultural allusions serve to expose and interrogate dominant objectifying attitudes towards women, and the real commercial details form part of the imaginative basis for James’s abundant figurative use of advertising symbols in his later portrayals of women. This transition from actual to metaphorical evocation is part of the evolution in James’s writing that Jean-Christophe Agnew identifies, whereby the ‘thickness of Jamesian description grows . . . at the same time as the proportion of direct reference to material life declines’ (84). The discussion of works from the 1890s and early 1900s explores the way in which the Jamesian discourse of representation increasingly incorporates elements of advertising discourse, focusing particularly on the concept of ‘the real thing’ and the performative aspects of social identity. By the time he wrote The Wings of the Dove (1902), James’s engagement with this discourse had reached a level of extreme sophistication and subtlety. In examining the characterisation of Kate Croy, I hope to demonstrate the aptness of modern advertising theory as a tool for illuminating James’s complex exploration of the significations of the self and the gendered politics of vision. It is no coincidence that each of the main works examined in this chapter is intensely self-reflexive, allowing James to dissect
the ways in which literary texts participate in these dominant representational strategies.

‘A city of shop-fronts, a great fancy bazaar’: Paris and ‘Rose-Agathe’

Standing on his balcony and enjoying the hustle and bustle of the Parisian street and the fragrant spring air, a man watches another man gazing longingly into a hairdresser’s shop window. Thus begins James’s 1878 tale, ‘Théodolinde’, later renamed ‘Rose-Agathe’.

The man on the balcony is James’s anonymous American narrator, and the figure he is watching is his friend Sanguinetti, an Italian-American antique collector and an ‘authority on pretty things’ (CT 4: 127). The narrator assumes that the object of his friend’s admiration is the hairdresser’s beautiful wife, and over the coming weeks he observes with amusement Sanguinetti’s determined and mercenary approach towards ‘making her [his] own’ (129). It is not until Sanguinetti achieves this end and invites his friend home to admire his new acquisition that the narrator realises his mistake. Instead of finding a lovely woman, he sees the blonde-haired wax dummy that had previously been placed in the coiffeur’s shop window as an advertisement.

‘Rose-Agathe’ is the last in a series of early tales in which James explores the confluence of women and art pieces as idealised objects of male desire. Its most direct predecessor is ‘The Last of the Valerii’ (1874), in which an Italian count falls obsessively in love with an ancient Greek statue, imperilling his relationship with his new American bride. What distinguishes ‘Rose-Agathe’ from this and other earlier tales, such as ‘The Madonna of the Future’ (1873) and ‘Adina’ (1874), is that the desired object no longer belongs to the sanctified domain of fine art and high culture, but to the superficial world of fashion and commodity culture, a departure which the few critical readings of the tale have not remarked. The consciousness of this change inscribes itself into the tale, as one of the reasons for the narrator’s failure to guess the true identity of Sanguinetti’s beloved is that it appears to disagree with his knowledge of the collector’s aesthetic tastes:

[H]e cared for nothing that was not a hundred years old, and the pretty things in the hairdresser’s window all bore the stamp of the latest Parisian manufacture – were part and parcel of that modern rubbish which he so cordially despised. (CT 4: 122)

Unlike the unique, precious items in Sanguinetti’s collection, this disposable ‘modern rubbish’ with its endlessly reproducible ‘stamp’ is almost certainly the product of the increasingly ubiquitous methods of mass
production. In contrast with the hand-chiselled marble Juno in ‘The Last of the Valerii’, Rose-Agathe would have taken her shape from a reusable mould. The Parisian provenance of Rose-Agathe and the other attractive commodities on display offers an important clue to James’s new approach to depicting the objectified woman.

In terms of the internal logic of the story, according to which each circumstance is paired with the narrator’s mistaken conception of it, the change in Sanguinetti’s aesthetic tastes that leads him to appreciate Parisian ‘modern rubbish’ becomes associated with the detrimental moral influence that the narrator imputes to ‘the brilliant city’ (119). The stereotype is familiar, as James’s disdainful allusions to its staleness and simplicity in the 1907 and 1909 New York Edition prefaces to *The American* (1877) and *The Ambassadors* (1903) indicate. In both instances he attempts to distance his work from the generalisation, but with questionable success. In the preface to the later novel, James refers to ‘the dreadful little old tradition, one of the platitudes of the human comedy, that people’s moral scheme does break down in Paris’, but defensively insists that ‘[a]nother surrounding scene would have done as well for our show’. This assertion is undermined to some extent by his subsequent concession that Paris is nevertheless the ‘likely’ setting for his drama, and thereby the one that involves least ‘preparations’ (*LC* 2: 1312). Whether or not Paris is just a ‘likely’ backdrop for *The Ambassadors*, it is certainly the only possible medium from which ‘Rose-Agathe’ could have sprung. Like *The American*, this tale was one of the fruits of James’s year-long sojourn in ‘glittering Paris’ (*HJL* 2: 5) from 1875 to 1876. The divided and self-interrogating narrative structure reflects his complex, sometimes conflicting responses to the city and its culture, but also conveys his equally ambivalent attitude towards American stereotypes of the city. Before turning to the tale itself, it is helpful to examine these views as expressed in James’s non-fictional writing – particularly his letters and journalism during this period.

James frequently defines Paris against London, an opposition which he characterises in terms of brilliant surface contrasted with murky but rich depths. Upon his arrival in Paris in the winter of 1875, he described it to his father as ‘a city of shop-fronts, a great fancy bazaar’, adding that he ‘would give fifty of it for that great interesting old London’ (*HJL* 2: 6–7). When he returned to London almost exactly a year later, his opinion was essentially unchanged, although the emphasis had shifted slightly. To his sister Alice he wrote that ‘after that charming city London seems – superficially – almost horrible; with its darkness, dirt, poverty and general unaesthetic cachet’ (*HJL* 2: 82), but wrote soon afterwards to Thomas Sergeant Perry that the
English capital was ‘much more interesting & inspiring, though much less agreeable’ (Horne, *Life in Letters* 76). James’s outlook during his Parisian year had fluctuated from despondency to delight, but he never quite shook off the sense of being an outsider.3 The shining shell of the city remained impenetrable to him. In his descriptions he repeatedly returns to the ‘picturesquely irresistible’ Parisian shop-fronts, which come to represent the city’s superficial, calculated charm (*SK* 4). Decades later, in *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), he looks back to a time when the Parisian show struck him as immeasurably enchanting and suggestive – a time when ‘low-browed vitrine[s]’ (*SBO* 266) appeared to speak to him of the nature of art – but he also alludes to his more cynical adult perspective:

The ‘amusement’, the aesthetic and human appeal, of Paris had in those days less the air of a great shining conspiracy to please, the machinery in movement confessed less to its huge purpose. (263)

The shift in James’s attitude may be partly accounted for by the process of growing up, but he also refers to real changes in the French capital. Though the contrast he draws here is between the Paris of 1856 and that of more than five decades later (he visited Paris for the last time in 1908), the Paris of his 1870s visits already displayed many of the most important elements of this transformation.

In ‘Paris Revisited’ (1878), James condemns the Haussmannization of the city, a process which he and many others perceived as synonymous with homogenisation. He describes the new ‘great thoroughfare’, the avenue de l’Opéra, as belonging to ‘that order of benefits which during the twenty years of the empire gradually deprived the streets of Paris of nine-tenths of their ancient individuality’, and bemoans the ‘deadly monotony of the Paris that M. Haussmann called into being’ (*PR* 7).4 When James had lived in the city as a child, Baron Haussmann’s mighty urban redevelopment project was still in its infancy. In *A Small Boy*, James records that although the city was ‘not by the common measure then so beautiful as now’, its ‘connections with the past … still hung thickly on; its majesties and symmetries, comparatively vague and general, were subject to the happy accident, the charming lapse and the odd extrusion, a bonhomie of chance composition and colour’ (*SBO* 260). By the time of his visits of the 1870s, many of these chance elements had been ironed out, and Paris had been transformed into the sparkling centre of fashion that James would call ‘the most brilliant city in the world’ (*PR* 6). The darkness and dirt which still pervaded the London atmosphere had been banished from many areas by the construction of the famous straight and spacious boulevards, and a substantial proportion of the
city’s poor, still so conspicuous in the English capital, had been shunted out into the suburbs, where many found employment in the rapidly expanding industrial sector. As T. J. Clark has commented, spectacle was one of the key elements of Haussmann’s new Paris. Describing the way in which Parisians were affected by the changes, he argues that the city belonged to them now simply as an image, something occasionally and casually consumed in spaces expressly designed for the purpose – promenades, panoramas, outings on Sundays, great exhibitions, and official parades . . . it was no longer part of those patterns of action and appropriation which made up the spectators’ everyday lives. (36)

This suggests that it was not only foreigners like James who felt that their experience of the city was largely confined to its brilliant but carefully composed surface.

At the time of Haussmann’s renovations, the city’s retail trade was undergoing a parallel transformation – one that also involved expansion, standardisation and an increased emphasis on spectacle and display. In 1869, the cornerstone was laid for what was arguably the world’s first modern department store, the new Bon Marché – the principal model for Zola’s glittering, all-consuming great shop in Au Bonheur des Dames (1883). James’s description of the new avenue de l’Opéra points to the link between these two types of change:

Presently there will be a long succession of milliners’ and chocolate-makers’ shops in the basements of this harmonious row, and the pretty bonnets and bonbônières in the shining windows will have their ribbons knotted with a chic that you must come to Paris to see. (PR 7)

The boredom and scorn of James’s tone is a far cry from his childhood enchantment with Parisian shop windows. It has more in common with the complaints of the thoroughly American Mr Cockerel in ‘The Point of View’ (1882), who, in a letter to his sister, describes the experience of sitting in a Paris café and observing the Boulevard, ‘with its eternal grimace and the deadly sameness of the article de Paris, which pretends to be so various – the shop-windows a wilderness of rubbish and the passers-by a procession of manikins’ (CT 4: 511). Like the narrator in ‘Rose-Agathe’, both James and Cockerel seem to allude to the new methods of mass production governing the supremely fashionable Parisian commodity. The ‘manikin’ image requires some explanation. At this time the English word does not appear to have had the meaning of shop dummy that it later acquired. However, in view of the Parisian context and the mention of shop windows, it is very likely that Cockerel’s comment implies the French word ‘mannequin’,

...
which tellingly denoted both human and non-human shop models, and would soon come into English use. Interpretated thus, Cockerel’s metaphor extends the idea of stylish uniformity to the human products of the city, connecting the window displays with the forms of self-exhibition to which these brightly lit thoroughfares were so well-suited. The image is strongly reminiscent of an observation made by one of the characters in Zola’s 1872 novel, *La Curée*, and indeed, James would later praise the French author’s ability to evoke crowds (*LC* 2: 877). Looking down at the boulevard des Italiens from the window of the Café Riche, Renée perceives the anonymous crowd as ‘an endless procession of little mechanical dolls’ (126). Some of the most conspicuous members of Zola’s procession are the prostitutes, and this other form of commercial display also seems to be implied in Cockerel’s comment that ‘it wouldn’t do’ (511) to tell his sister what he saw on the boulevard. Both authors vividly convey the constant circulation that Haussmann’s urban planning encouraged – a form of perpetual motion that was actually enforced by the law in the case of prostitutes. The interesting difference between the two descriptions is that whilst Zola evokes modern urban anonymity through an industrial image, that of mechanisation, James appears to convey the same idea ten years later through a symbol of commodity display. However, it is typical of James’s ambivalent attitude towards the Parisian spectacle that although Cockerel voices some of his author’s misgivings about the city, his extreme patriotism means that he is also an instrument through which James exposes these objections as biased generalisations.

Although the scale of the changes that occurred in Paris during the Second Empire was immense, it is important not to exaggerate their suddenness, and to recognise that some of the most spectacular characteristics of the ‘new’ Paris were discernible long before Haussmann set to work. In 1844, Balzac described ‘the poems in display, destroyed each evening and reconstructed each morning’ and ‘in more recent times, the recesses, the immense spaces and Babylonian luxury of the passages where the merchants bring together their specialities’, all of which is not enough to satisfy that most ‘greedy and blasé organ . . . the eye of the Parisian’, which ‘sees by fifteen thousand francs’ worth of gas every evening’. The ‘passages’ that he refers to are the bright arcades famously described by Walter Benjamin, those glass and iron ‘temples of commodity capital’, built mainly in the 1820s and 1830s, which seemed to anticipate department stores (*Arcades Project* 37). It should also be noted that the shift in James’s perspective was neither as absolute nor as negative as it may appear from his disparaging comments in ‘Paris Revisited’. Just the year before, in one of his Parisian letters to the *New York Tribune*, he includes an
enthusiastic description of the enchanting and inspiring aspect of the Christmas displays on the boulevards:

[T]he regular shops present their glittering portals, decorated for the occasion with the latest refinements of the trade. The confectioners in particular are amazing; the rows of marvelous bonbonnières look like precious sixteenth-century caskets and reliquaries, chiseled by Florentine artists, in the glass cases of great museums. The bonbonnière, in its elaborate and impertinent uselessness, is certainly the consummate flower of material luxury; it seems to bloom, with its petals of satin and its pistils of gold, upon the very apex of the tree of civilization. (SK 40–41)

In contrast with the two previous boulevard descriptions, the modern commodity is elevated to the level of a rare and precious art object, and the shop window is conflated with the museum showcase. But whereas in one instance the object is carefully preserved for centuries, in the other it is consumed within a matter of minutes. James’s ironic recognition of this extravagance does not preclude genuine enjoyment and admiration. He could still feel the fascination of Paris, but was more aware (and wary) of the conscious art, and even science, that went into producing this allure. He was also alert to the opportunities that it provided for extravagant and artful verbal displays.

In ‘Rose-Agathe’, the narrator’s hyperbolic opening description of the ‘entertaining spectacle’ (CT 4: 119) of Parisian street life observed from his position of visual privilege – his balcony – offers just such a rhetorical display. If Sanguinetti’s exaggerated romanticism leads him to make a place in his collection of artefacts for an object that reeks of the modern marketplace, and to describe its mechanical revolutions as ‘the poetry of motion’ and its attitude in the shop window as ‘the poetry of chic’, the narrator’s romantic view of his Parisian surroundings leads him to elevate and poetise sites of trade in a similar manner (128–29). There is an almost obsessive concentration on sensory detail. Initially, the reader is guided through the vibrant scene by the narrator’s sensitive nose which pauses briefly to enjoy ‘the delightful aroma of the chocolate-shop’, the ‘poetry’ of ‘the warm, succulent exhalations of the opposite restaurant’ and the ‘luscious perfumes hovering about the brilliantly-polished window of the hairdresser’s establishment’ (119). The olfactory ‘titillation’ (120) caused by the latter is only exceeded by the abundant visual stimulation it affords. Catching sight of the coiffeur’s wife, whose hair is ‘dressed with consummate art’, the narrator proclaims her ‘a Madonna who should have been coiffée by M. Anatole’ (120). The comparison has the strange effect of simultaneously elevating the
ordinary woman to saintly status and reducing her – and through her the blessed Virgin – to her advertising potential. The Madonna image is again subverted when Sanguinetti makes the same comparison in relation to the shop mannequin, but in this case the description holds an additional cultural significance, as models of the Virgin Mary and other religious figures were – and still are – often made of wax. Both comparisons are in tune with contemporary cultural discourse, in which the worship of the commodity was often likened to religious worship. Marx draws an analogy between ‘the misty realm of religion’, in which ‘the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race’, and ‘the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities’ (165). The advertising potential perceived by the narrator is immediately realised, as not only does he decide that he needs his whiskers trimmed, but his eyes are led by the hairdresser’s wife’s gaze to her husband’s official advertisement – his shop window.

The street scene itself is not a particularly modern one. In many ways it is representative of the sort of diversity and small-scale commercial activity that many people missed in Haussmann’s ‘nouveau Paris’. It seems, indeed, to owe much to the ‘vivid exhibition’ (SBO 265) of the bustling little Parisian street that James remembers living on briefly as a child. However, the advertising symbol and the mass-produced items that the narrator’s eye eventually rests on, as well as the exaggerated showmanship of the description itself, speak of more recent influences. To a certain extent, the narrator’s seemingly undiscriminating flow of sensory impressions and material detail can be seen to reflect James’s observation that Americans ‘wander about Europe on a sensuous and esthetic basis’, abandoning the ‘moral and spiritual affairs’ that occupy them in their own country (SK 5). More significant, however, is the way in which the abundant descriptive style recalls that of a variety of French authors such as Balzac, Gautier and Zola. At this time, James was thoroughly steeped both in French literature and Parisian literary culture. During his year in Paris, he attended several of Flaubert’s Sunday-afternoon gatherings, where he met Edmond de Goncourt, Zola, Alphonse Daudet and Maupassant. Although he was undoubtedly stimulated by the colourful conversation of this circle, he complained in his letters that they were ‘extremely narrow’, and that he did not ‘like their wares’ (HJL 2: 20; 52). When his brother William remarked that he had picked up certain ‘French tricks’ in his letter-writing style, he wrote back defensively that this was ‘odd’ considering his ‘long-encroaching weariness and satiety with the French mind and its utterance’, and concluded: ‘I have got nothing important out of Paris nor am likely to’
James would come to realise that this was far from true, but as Leon Edel suggests, the unfavourable impressions that James sent home to his American friends and family were perhaps to some extent ‘complaints . . . to his own puritan side as well as that of Cambridge’ (Life 1: 447).

The mixture of admiration and disapproval that James felt for French literary culture at this time is more thoroughly and perhaps more objectively documented in the numerous essays and reviews that he wrote on French authors for American periodicals throughout the 1870s, many of which were collected in French Poets and Novelist, published the same year as ‘Rose-Agathe’. His objections were both moral and aesthetic, and can, to some extent, be perceived as parallel to his reservations about the French capital. In his analyses of the works of Balzac, Gautier and Baudelaire in this volume, and in his 1882 essay on Daudet, he stresses a lively capacity for superficial, sensual observation, but suggests a sort of inverse relationship between this ability and the authors’ moral consciousnesses, and in some cases their depth of analysis. Balzac was a ‘genius’ with a ‘mighty passion for things’, but he ‘had no natural sense of morality, and this’ – James adds sententiously – ‘we cannot help thinking a serious fault in a novelist’ (LC 2: 47–48). Gautier’s ‘genius’ is pictorial, but he is ‘a very Philistine of Philistines’ with regard to ‘moral expression’, so that even his ‘aesthetic principles are held with a good-humoured laxity’ (LC 2: 358–59). Like James’s narrator and Sanguinetti, Gautier was able to find ‘poetry’ in ‘vulgarly obvious things’, and it is also worth noting that the irreverent evocations of the Madonna in ‘Rose-Agathe’ would have been quite worthy of him, as he ‘had evidently no associations with divine images that it cost him a moment’s hesitation to violate’ (366; 374). But it is James’s description of his portrayal of people that provides a real clue to the significance of the relationship between this author and the tale of the hairdresser’s dummy:

[H]e cared for nothing and knew nothing in men and women but the epidermis. With this, indeed, he was marvellously acquainted, and he organized in its service a phraseology as puzzlingly various as the array of pots and brushes of a coiffeur. His attitude towards the human creature is, in a sublimated degree, that of a barber or tailor. (366)

Given that words can be instruments of cosmetic enhancement, Gautier can be seen to practice the same art as both James’s narrator and the hairdresser he describes – that of beautifying and promoting the exterior. These general coincidences in style and attitude are joined by more specific resonances. Jean Perrot has cited Gautier’s novel Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835) as a
possible source for ‘Rose-Agathe’, pointing out that James’s initial title, ‘Théodolinde’, can be read as a combination of Théodore, the name that Gautier’s eponymous heroine adopts whilst she is disguised as a man, and Shakespeare’s cross-dressing Rosalind, the part that she plays in the production of As You Like It within the novel (187). Gautier’s novel blurs not only the boundaries between the genders, but also those between the real and the ideal, and life and art. The male narrator displays an obsessive preoccupation with surface beauty and repeatedly compares women to statues and other inanimate, purchasable objects, whilst the eponymous heroine protests that women are expected ‘to outdo stuffed dummies and marionettes in our stiffness and our immobility’. 16 Whereas in Mademoiselle de Maupin these issues are explored in the privileged setting of an aristocratic country estate, in ‘Rose-Agathe’ they are brought into focus by that supremely public and urban commercial symbol, the shop window.

Unlike the busy street, in which ‘even the humblest of one’s senses is the medium of poetic impressions’ (CT 4: 119), the shop window promotes the visual to the exclusion of the other senses, or rather, it arouses other sensual desires only to render their fulfilment impossible. Impatient for his dinner, the narrator watches as the newly lighted window lamps endow the ‘coloured cosmetics’ with ‘an almost appetising radiance’ (123). Later Sanguinetti indicates the window’s function of preventing physical contact when he observes that ‘That sheet of plate-glass is a great vexation’ (128). On the other hand, looking becomes akin to an act of physical penetration, a sense that is emphasised by James’s addition to the 1883 text of the narrator’s voyeuristic and almost scientific description of the ‘unobstructed space behind the window’ as a ‘point of visual access’ (123). The sexual implications of the shop window are most evident in the narrator’s description of its two wax inhabitants:

[T]he window was most artistically arranged. Its principal glory was conferred by two waxen heads of lovely ladies, such as are usually seen in hairdressers’ windows; and these wig-wearing puppets, which maintained a constant rotary movement, seemed to be a triumph of the modeller’s art. One of the revolving ladies was dark, and the other fair, and each tossed back her head and thrust out her waxen bosom and parted her rosy lips in the most stylish manner conceivable. Several persons, passing by, had stopped to admire them. (121)

The doll’s appearance and gyrations are evidently cheaply and explicitly provocative, and yet once again the narrator elevates his subject, praising the ‘art’ of both the modeller and the window dresser. But though these wax
advertisements may seem out of place in Sanguinetti’s antique collection, they do have a literary history. In his 1857 novel Madame Bovary, Flaubert describes a wig-maker’s shop in the provincial Tostes, with ‘a wax bust of a woman, which had yellow hair’ (51) in the window. This aspirational attempt at decoration fails to lure customers, and later becomes associated with Emma Bovary, who – after her unsuccessful elopement – is compared in her prostration to ‘an image made of wax’ (168). More significantly, in Champfleury’s 1852 tale ‘L’Homme aux figures de cire’ – another story in which a man falls in love with a wax doll – the narrator blames the decline of waxwork exhibitions on the alluring wax women in the windows of dentists and hairdresser’s shops throughout Paris, ‘who would rotate every day in superb garbs for an idle public’.17 Like James, Champfleury emphasises the sexuality of the mannequins. Their charms include ‘a revealing bodice, prominent hips, vibrating figures’ and their ‘swimming eyes are full of promise’.18 He even gives a detailed description of the hairdresser’s nightly undressing of his ‘wax fiancée’, and tells of a subset of admirers whose obsession leads them to ‘look out for the rise of these wax figurines’, which occurs at seven in the morning.19

The combination of commerce and sexuality embodied in the shop mannequin links it with another female figure who advertises with her body – the prostitute.20 In Zola’s opening description of the department store windows in Au Bonheur des Dames – published five years after ‘Rose-Agathe’ – it is not only the clothes but also the seductive female bodies on which they are displayed that appear to be for sale:

The dummies’ round bosoms swelled out the material, their wide hips exaggerated the narrow waists, and their missing heads were replaced by large price tags with pins stuck through them into the red bunting round the collars, while mirrors on either side of the windows had been skilfully arranged to reflect the dummies, multiplying them endlessly, seeming to fill the street with these beautiful women for sale with huge price tags where their heads should have been. (Ladies’ Paradise 6)21

The multiplying effect of the mirrors suggests the way in which fashion and commodity culture can be seen to eliminate diversity in people, as well as in the mass-produced clothes they wear. The projection of the priced female images onto the street, a means of multiplying their publicity, strengthens the association with public or streetwalking women. Like James, Zola also implies a link between these dummies and the well-presented saleswomen, who, in the buzzing promiscuous environment of the great store, are perceived by some as just as much ‘for sale’ as ‘their goods’ (312).22 Later
on, prostitute, mannequin and shopgirl are conflated when the angry Baudu refers to a shopgirl who has seduced his prospective son-in-law as ‘one of those mannequins who flaunt themselves in the windows of houses of ill repute’ (363). What is also interesting about Zola’s initial description of the dummies is the way in which he emphasises the grotesque effect of their fragmentation. Without even the illusion of individuality that an artificial head would create, the object status of their bodies is intensified. Because they are only significant in the context of the particular commodity they are advertising, only the body parts corresponding to that item are included. Thus, a display of corsets consists of ‘an army of mannequins without heads or legs, nothing but torsos lined up’, which creates an effect reminiscent of ‘the disturbing lewdness of the disabled’ (409). Similarly, the wig-modelling Rose-Agathe is possessed of a particularly fine waxen head, but exists ‘only from the waist upward’. This, however, does not diminish the satisfaction that Sanguinetti takes in her – he is only sorry that her pedestal ‘creaks’ (CT 4: 140).

For James’s little collector is a man of modest hopes, but also modest desires – a circumstance that is amusingly reflected in his diminutive name, which recalls both the English ‘sanguine’ and the Italian ‘sangue’, or blood. His lack of the ‘red-blooded’ male instinct is repeatedly suggested by the narrator, who refers to him more than once as ‘little’ and reports that others think him ‘tremendously “affected”’ (127). More importantly, he implies that his friend has had no experience with ‘real’ women, declaring that ‘to my almost certain knowledge his affections had no object save the faded crockery and the angular chairs I have mentioned’ (122). This association of collecting and demasculinisation corresponds with Leora Auslander’s observation that in nineteenth-century France, collecting was only ‘conceptualized as a properly masculine activity if it did not emotionally replace the family’ (85).

The most obvious model for Sanguinetti’s passion for Rose-Agathe is the Pygmalion myth, which enjoyed considerable popularity during the second half of the nineteenth century. Notable similarities include details such as the fact that Sanguinetti buys jewellery for his model woman – though significantly, unlike most versions of the Pygmalion character, James’s antique collector is sensitive to the inconsistency of buying real jewels for a fake woman, and so decides upon ‘artificial gems’ (CT 4: 138) for her parure. This discrimination relates to the most notable difference between James’s love story and Ovid’s: unlike Pygmalion, Sanguinetti has no desire that his ideal woman should become real. The only transformation that takes place is in the mind of the narrator, and possibly that of the reader if they have not yet picked up on James’s trick. Perhaps Sanguinetti shares the cynical but also...
strangely idealistic view of the male protagonist in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, who reflects that ‘there is something fine and noble about being in love with a statue; because you are totally uninvolved you don’t have to worry that you will be surfeited or disgusted when you have made your conquest’. By confining his passion to surface, Sanguinetti avoids the complexities, compromise and disappointment involved in human relationships. As Donatella Izzo has commented, the art collector’s preference for the doll is a classic example of Freudian fetishism ‘in which the normal sexual object is replaced by another which bears some relation to it, but is entirely unsuited to serve the normal sexual aim’. Izzo also points out that fetishism is ‘finally an expression of fear, a maneuver exorcising that threatening alterity, women’s difference’ (83). On either side of the transparent but also slightly reflective plate glass of the shop window, this obliteration of difference manifests itself in surprising ways.

The point at which the narrator’s wandering gaze intersects Sanguinetti’s entranced gaze into the shop window is the point when the misapprehension that drives the narrative is born. But it is also the juncture at which various other types of identity dislocations occur. The stationary man watching the mechanically rotating wax woman is watched by another man who thinks he is watching a real woman, and compares him to another stationary woman, ‘the warrior’s widow in Tennyson’s song’ who ‘neither spake nor moved’ (122). The allusion is to one of the lyric interludes in Tennyson’s narrative poem, *The Princess*, in which a woman shows no signs of either motion or emotion when her husband’s dead body is brought to her. She is only recalled from this trancelike state when her child is set upon her knee, at which point her tears flow ‘Like summer tempest’, and she cries, ‘Sweet my child, I live for thee’ (V ^ VI.15–16). In Tennyson’s male-narrated story of failed feminism, these interludes are the only input that the women in the frame narrative are permitted, and their serious tone and down-to-earth subjects are often conspicuously at odds with the mock-heroic, sometimes fantastical male account of woman and her position in society. This contrast is reproduced in ‘Rose-Agathe’, through the light-hearted, jocular context in which Tennyson’s tragic lyric appears. The resulting disharmony is one indication that there are more serious issues at stake than the tone of the story would suggest. In a tale in which masculine control over the narrative is intensified by the unusual heroine’s lack of consciousness, the introduction of a feminine perspective – however indirect – is in itself noteworthy.

More immediately, the narrator’s incongruous reference to Tennyson’s depiction of profound human emotion and suffering acts as an ironic comment on the superficial and ridiculous nature of the fastidious little
art collector’s passion. The fact that the widow is moved by the living rather than the lifeless body also contrasts with Sanguinetti’s apparent inability to love a flesh-and-blood woman. In his fixed attitude, Sanguinetti mirrors the insensible female mannequin on the other side of the glass: he moves ‘no more than if he himself had been a barber’s block’ (123). James had also used this simile to describe the creeping ineffectual Parisian Monsieur Nioche in *The American*, who wears a ‘glossy wig’ that leaves his ‘little meek, white, vacant face’ looking ‘hardly more expressive than the unfeatured block upon which these articles are displayed in the barber’s window’ (*AM* 40). Both descriptions have emasculating and dehumanising implications, but in ‘Rose-Agathe’, the comparison has the striking effect of depriving Sanguinetti of even the semblance of humanity which the female wax doll with its painted-on features possesses.²⁹ The mirroring effect also recalls the mannequin’s primary commercial function of engendering mimetic desires in the women who look upon her. As Sanguinetti explains later, she sets ‘the fashion for all Paris’ with her ‘successive coiffures’ (136).

Sanguinetti’s captivation before the shop window blurs the boundaries between male and female, and human and non-human, but it also temporarily obliterates class divisions. This may be related, not only to the public nature of the spectacle, but to what Jean Baudrillard calls advertising’s ‘presumption of a collective desire’ (*System* 179). In revising the tale for the 1885 collection, James changed the narrator’s initial description of his genteel art collector’s attitude before the shop window from ‘rapt in contemplation’ (*THJ* 3: 140) to the more vivid ‘gaping like a rustic at a fair’ (*CT* 4: 122), a phrase loaded with significance. The description, which matches Tennyson’s blank verse metrically,³⁰ provides another link to *The Princess*, the frame narrative of which takes place at a sort of science and technology fair held on a grand country estate which has been opened to local people for the day. James had also used the simile in his 1873 essay on Gautier, where he remarks with reference to his travel writing that he has ‘the broad-eyed, universal, almost innocent gaze at things of a rustic at a fair’ (*LC* 2: 363). The phrase conveys Gautier’s unjaded but also perhaps superficial enjoyment and admiration of much of what is placed before him, and James’s reuse of it is another strand in the web of associations between the French author and this Parisian tale. Lastly, the comparison has historical relevance: citing Wordsworth’s allusion to ‘wax-work’ and ‘clock-work’ in the Bartholomew Fair section of *The Prelude*, Pamela Pilbeam points out that wax models were displayed at fairs from the seventeenth century onwards (8). James’s reference to this established form of popular entertainment underlines the idea of the shop window as a new species of democratic urban spectacle.
In the silent exchange that occurs through the plate glass, it appears to be Sanguinetti who takes on the qualities of the rigid speechless model. But it soon becomes clear that it is she who will reflect the fantasies and attributes that he projects onto her. This reflective quality is the crucial point at which the paths of the ideal commodity and the idealised, objectified woman cross. For this purpose, neither should possess definite qualities of their own. Sanguinetti will later invent her thoughts and emotions, imagining that she has ‘the most delicious little pensive look’, and that ‘[a]t bottom she’s sad. She’s weary of her position there, it’s so public. – Yesterday she was very pale’ (CT 4: 135). His projections serve the dual purpose of moulding her personality to suit his fantasy and affirming his desired self-image as her saviour from the crude commercial glare. Ironically, however, he will also place her in a window when he gets her home. The fact that she is made of wax, the material through which Ovid expresses Galatea’s physical malleability when her ivory body turns to flesh, is an appropriate representation of this conceptual pliability. But though Sanguinetti’s behaviour can be seen to represent destructive male attitudes towards women, his viewpoint is undermined by the fact that he is portrayed as slightly ridiculous, and repeatedly acknowledges his own folly. Rose-Agathe is, after all, just a ‘wig-wearing’ puppet (121), and so ultimately there is no harm done. What is more important is that whilst Sanguinetti is standing at the shop window, a more authoritative pair of eyes are watching him, eyes that ostensibly guide the reader’s viewpoint and believe him to be gazing at a real woman.

Throughout the tale, the tone of James’s narrator is affable and good-humoured. He expresses amusement, surprise and sometimes disapproval with regard to Sanguinetti’s passion and his plans for purchasing his beloved; but it is worth examining the grounds of his dissent. When, for example, Sanguinetti describes Rose-Agathe as ‘the most beautiful object I ever beheld’ (125), the narrator protests, not because of the objectification implied, but because he feels that his friend may be exaggerating her aesthetic merits. Later, when Sanguinetti justifies his purchase by saying that the hairdresser can ‘get on very well with the other’ – which the narrator takes to refer to the other young woman in the shop – far from being shocked at this apparent disregard for human feelings, he is only surprised because she ‘is not nearly so pretty’ (134).

Even when the narrator does object on moral grounds, it is important to pay attention to his reasons. At one point, he is ‘scandalised’ that, in wishing to possess Rose-Agathe, Sanguinetti consults his ‘taste’ rather than his ‘morality’ (129): ‘Paris’, he reflects, ‘had got the better of [Sanguinetti’s] inveterate propriety’ (129). It becomes increasingly clear that he does not
condemn his friend’s intentions from a human point of view, but rather
does so according to a specifically American idea of what is ‘proper’. In
answer to Sanguinetti’s concern that he will be thought ‘a great donkey . . .
for taking that – that creature so seriously’, he proudly declares, ‘I was
always taught, in our country, that it is one’s duty to take things seriously!’
(130).31 At another point, the narrator wonders at ‘the business-like tone in
which Sanguinetti discussed this unscrupulous project of becoming the
“possessor” of another man’s wife, reflecting that ‘this was doubtless the
Parisian tone’, but once again, his objection is on the grounds of ‘propriety’,
and his concern appears to be more for the husband’s loss of his rightful
property than for the fact that a woman is being treated as a disposable
possession in the first place (134–35). Indeed, it is he who first suggests the
idea that women can be bought, when he comments that his friend looks at
shops because he has ‘a taste for picking up pretty faces’ (124).

The narrator’s attraction to the hairdresser’s wife is presented as an example
of ‘normal’ male sexuality in contrast with Sanguinetti’s fetishism. But the
terms of this admiration give further indications of his objectifying attitude.
Viewing Madame Anatole through the shop window, where she is positioned
directly behind the revolving wax dummies, he observes that ‘She was still
smiling – she seemed always to be smiling – but she gave no sign of seeing me,
and I felt that if there had been a dozen men standing there she would have
worn that same sweetly unconscious mask’ (131). James’s judgement upon the
attitude of his narrator could be summed up in the striking juxtaposition of
the last three words of his sentence. The idea that an unhuman, ‘unconscious
mask’ could be considered ‘sweet’ is quite as perverse and unnatural as that of
a man falling in love with a wax model, if not more so. The narrator’s way
of looking epitomises the objectifying male gaze, which denies the possibility
of female sexuality that might be expressed by the gaze being returned. It
comes as no surprise that one of the things that pleases the narrator most
about the hairdresser’s wife is her ‘modesty’ (136). The fixed, sightless image
of the mask creates an association between the two shop window beauties – real
and artificial – an association that has already been suggested through the
narrator’s initial evaluation of the hairdresser’s wife as an effective means of
promoting her husband’s business.

James’s recognition of the significance of advertising and its codes in the
conception and representation of the self – in particular the feminine self – is
evident in his increasingly frequent association between women and
images of commodity display in his novels and tales of the 1890s and early
1900s. But it is in the seldom-read 1878 tale that James first explicitly
delineated these patterns of representation and began to explore their
implications. If the shining commercialised Paris created by the Second Empire provided James with the inspiration and material basis for this initial exploration, the way in which the anonymous American’s self-reflexive narrative develops indicates more wide-ranging concerns.

This narrative gestures towards pathology and perversion, but ultimately the emphasis is placed on the illusions and dislocations created by language. James’s narrator would not have mistaken Rose-Agathe’s identity if it were not linguistically and socially permissible to use the same terms and ideas to discuss both women and objects. As in numerous other instances, James makes use of a misunderstanding between characters to explore the various possible facets and implications of a question. What is different here is that the misapprehension is the basis of the entire story, forcing the reader to be unusually attentive to the duplicity of common, everyday language and the possibly misleading qualities of narrative. Whether this attentiveness occurs retrospectively or in the course of reading depends on the point at which the reader picks up on the game James is playing. This, in turn, depends on the extent to which the reader trusts the narrator and shares his objectifying perspective.

Nevertheless, there is a point – just before the narrator’s final realisation – at which clever verbal play gives way to something altogether more uncanny. For when the narrator is lead into Rose-Agathe’s presence, he sees ‘a lady’, ‘half hidden by the curtain’, who, as she slowly turns, reveals ‘a beautiful brilliant face and large quiet eyes’ (140) which return his admiring gaze. There, in Sanguinetti’s ‘perfect little museum’ (140), in the presence of his latest acquisition, the age-old themes of the relation between life and art and the capacity of art to beguile are transposed into a distinctly modern key, a shift that raises questions about what becomes of both the work of art and the human individual in an age of advertising and mechanical reproduction.

Class Acts and Real Things

Whilst the 1878 tale uses a wax advertisement to dissect the objectifying tendencies of the male gaze, in ‘The Real Thing’ (1892), James puts the idea of commodity display to a more figurative use in exploring the relationship between constructions of class identity and artistic representation. When the genteel but impoverished Monarchs advertise themselves to James’s artist narrator as ‘the real thing’ in the hope that he might use them as models for aristocratic figures, he soon realises that this air of authenticity better fits them for the commercial world:
It would have paid any club in process of formation and in want of a stamp to engage [Major Monarch] at a salary to stand in the principal window. What struck me immediately was that in coming to me they had rather missed their vocation; they could surely have been turned to better account for advertising purposes . . . There was something in them for a waistcoat-maker, an hotel-keeper or a soap-vendor. I could imagine ‘We always use it’ pinned on their bosoms with the greatest effect. (CT 8: 233)

Various educational claims were made for advertising in this period. One ‘expert’ declared in 1903 that it had ‘done more than is realized towards introducing to the people right methods of living’ (Fowler 642). Like an advertisement, Major Monarch could be used to ‘teach’ people ‘how to live’ (CT 8: 243); however, the Monarchs’ guaranteed social polish also means that, from the narrator’s artistic perspective, they are too ‘stiff’ and unchanging to inspire anything but the most narrowly mimetic reproductions on the basis of one particular class ‘type’ (244). His drawings of Mrs Monarch resemble her photographs that are ‘to be got in the shops’ (235). On the other hand, the ‘value’ of the narrator’s professional model, Miss Churm – who, like Millicent Henning in The Princess Casamassima (1886), is a beer-drinking cockney with ‘a love of the theatre . . . and not an ounce of respect’ (240) – resides in the fact that she has ‘no positive stamp’ (245) and can ‘represent everything, from a fine lady to a shepherdess’ (239). In drawing from her, the narrator is able to leave behind photographic realism and exercise the ‘alchemy of art’ (241).

The opposition the narrator posits between ‘representation’ and ‘the real thing’ and the preference he expresses for the former have traditionally been read as a reflection of James’s own artistic philosophy; but as some recent critics have recognised, this dichotomy is neither stable nor straightforward.32 The Monarchs’ ‘reality’, far from being natural or innate as the word implies, is just as much a matter of appearance and performance as Miss Churm’s representations, which, for their part, are said to spring from an arbitrary natural ‘faculty’ (239). The difference is that whilst the latter’s performances are infinitely various, the former have perfected and solidified one particular performance through years of repetition and keeping ‘themselves up’ (236). In both cases, costume is ‘half the business’ (238). The narrator repeatedly alludes to the Monarchs’ apparel as proof of their authenticity, and the theatrical elements of Mrs Monarch’s behaviour are directly acknowledged when, in displaying her ‘irreproachably ’ good’ figure to the narrator, she reminds him first of an actress going ‘through her paces’, and then prompts him to reflect that ‘[s]he ought to have tried on jackets at a big shop’ (234). This chain of associations recalls the showy Millicent Henning, but it also has a precedent in The Tragic Muse (1890), in
which Basil Dashwood scathingly compares the posture of the actress Mademoiselle Voisin, who has been trained to be ‘ladylike’, to that of a ‘demoiselle de magasin trying on a jacket’ (2: 82). Here too the distinction between the actress’s performance and other types of social appearances is broken down, as a linked simile in the same novel compares the smartly dressed socialite, Mrs Gresham, to ‘a young woman in a shop’ (1: 242). As these examples suggest, the destabilisation of the antithesis between real and represented entails the interrogation of another of the narrator’s oppositions – that between commerce and art.

If the Monarchs’ authentic class stamp fits them – as the narrator contemptuously imagines – for advertisements that will make ‘someone’s fortune’ (CT 8: 233), this same class identity also leads him to assume that they are ‘sitters’ (229) for portraits – a ‘branch of art’ more ‘interesting’ than illustration, through which he hopes to ‘perpetuate [his] fame’ and ‘make [his] fortune’ (231). The first clues that present themselves are Mr Monarch’s moustache and his ‘admirably fitted’ walking-coat, both of which the narrator notes ‘professionally’. His hasty disclaimer that this professional discernment is not that of ‘a barber or yet . . . a tailor’ (229) immediately raises the possibility of comparisons between these supposedly different schools of observation and evaluation, and recalls James’s characterisation of Gautier’s superficial attitude towards his human subjects as ‘that of a barber or tailor’ (LC 2: 366). What is more, his conception of the supposedly superior art of portrait painting proves to be just as dependent on readily available stereotypes as the advertisements he scorns: ‘I had immediately seen them. I had seized their type – I had already settled what I would do with it’ (CT 8: 231). This seems to contradict his later declaration that he ‘adored variety and range . . . cherished human accidents’ and ‘wanted to characterise closely’, and his great fear of ‘being ridden by a type’ (244). Adam Sonstegard examines the ironies of James’s portrayal of the illustrator in the context of the original magazine publication, arguing that the author ‘ensures that the narrator deserves to appear exactly where readers actually encounter him: in a cheaply illustrated, primarily commercial venue’ (189).

However, the artist narrator in this tale is not alone in his reliance on a system of ‘types’. On the contrary, it is a scheme of categorisation that is invoked in most of James’s painter tales, and carries a variety of complex implications. Its relevance in this context may be elucidated by one of James’s observations in his 1893 volume, Picture and Text. In relation to George Du Maurier – his artist friend whose anecdote about receiving ‘a call from a strange and striking couple desirous to propose themselves as artist’s
models for his weekly “social” illustrations to *Punch* (LC 2: 1283) inspired ‘The Real Thing’ – he observes:

Mr Du Maurier’s work ... is not so much a thing we see as one of the conditions of seeing. He has interpreted for us for so many years the social life of England that the interpretation has become the text itself. We have accepted his types, his categories, his conclusions, his sympathies and his ironies. (*Picture and Text* 33–34)

James identifies a seemingly paradoxical situation in which the representation actually dictates ‘the real thing’ – a situation that is in fact one of the fundamental conditions of advertising. Like an advertisement, Du Maurier's work prescribes what is fashionable through its own particular idealised vision ‘of tall, pleasant, beautiful people, placed in becoming attitudes, in charming gardens, in luxurious rooms’ (34). (The way in which Mrs Monarch ‘always ... came out too tall’ (*CT* 8: 244) in the narrator’s depictions is almost certainly a reference to these consistently statuesque figures.) Du Maurier’s intentions might be ironic, but the aesthetic appeal of his illustrations means that James finds he can ‘scarcely tell which is the more definite, the impression satiric or the impression plastic’ (*Picture and Text* 34).

At the end of ‘The Real Thing’, James’s narrator offers two lessons: firstly, ‘that, in the deceptive atmosphere of art, even the highest respectability may fail of being plastic’ (*CT* 8: 256), and secondly, that ‘the real thing could be so much less precious than the unreal’ (258). What he does not mention is the far more fundamental lesson that James’s ‘real thing’ is itself a highly unstable fiction. This is confirmed by even the most cursory examination of the numerous different contexts in which the phrase occurs. The narrator’s preference for ‘things that appeared’ over things that ‘were’ (237) echoes Peter Sherringham’s preference for ‘the representation of life’ – meaning, in this case, theatre – over ‘the real thing’ in *The Tragic Muse*. But within that novel, the phrase is also used twice for the apparently contradictory purpose of defining ‘real’ art (1: 75; 2: 171; 3: 212). Similarly, in ‘Broken Wings’ (1900), the showy country house, Mundham, is described as ‘theatrically, the real thing’ (*CT* 11: 226). In ‘The Story in It’ (1902), Maud Blessingbourne reverses the link between the Monarchs’ propriety and their status as ‘the real thing’, using the phrase to characterise the supposedly improper subject matter of French novels (*CT* 11: 314).

But despite this perpetual shifting of context and significance, there is one recurring association that critics have generally ignored. If the ‘real thing’ cannot be securely tied to any constant truth value, it is almost
always – as in the 1892 story – more or less directly connected with a financial value. Thus, for example, Maud feels that her realistic French novels give her ‘more life for [her] money’ (314), and Maisie knows that the sheet music that Sir Claude has bought her is ‘the real thing’, not because of its artistic worth, but because ‘the price, five shillings, was marked on the cover’ (WMK 112). This logic reaches its extreme in James’s last completed novel, The Outcry (1911), in which the fantastically wealthy and unscrupulous American art collector Breckenbridge Bender is thought to be searching for the ‘ideally expensive thing’ (93). Bender’s approach, a form of self-promotion which takes little account of artistic merit and is all too familiar to the modern reader, is aptly explained by the fact that he is ‘a product of the world of advertisement, and advertisement is all he sees and aims at’ (103–04). The scheme of values that James indicates corresponds with Marx’s analysis of the commodity, which has become detached from its use value and exists only in terms of its exchange value. More importantly, the phrase’s lack of stable referents relates it to the free-floating claims that inflate and launch marketing balloons. In ‘The Art of the Adsmith’ (1902), William Dean Howells laments ‘the prodigious increase of advertising within the last twenty-five years’, speculating that if it keeps multiplying at this rate, ‘there will presently be no room in the world for things; it will be filled up with the advertisements of things’ (270). James’s ‘real thing’ can be seen as an advertisement for something that has no verifiable existence. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the phrase only began to appear in his work with any frequency from the 1890s onwards, a period in which his awareness and understanding of commodity culture was becoming increasingly acute.34

One of the favoured claims of advertising is that of ‘freshness’, the ‘period of newness’ constituting – as Baudrillard points out – ‘the sublime period of the object’ (Consumer Society 113).35 Thus, the Monarchs’ high commodity status is partly signalled by their ‘mysteriously permanent newness’ (251). However, just as a product’s freshness is maintained by sealing out the air, the possession of this attribute in James’s human commodities often indicates that they have been shut out from certain types of experience or perception. This is certainly the case with ‘Little Aggie’ in The Awkward Age (1899) and Jeanne de Vionnet in The Ambassadors, both of whom earn James’s deceptive seal of authenticity by virtue of their youth, purity and untouched innocence, attributes that have been actively cultivated (whilst others have been actively repressed) as part of their preparation for the marriage market. Nanda, whose chances in this market have been damaged by the extent of her knowledge, explains her description of Aggie as ‘the real
thing’ by saying she’s ‘the real young one’ (Awkward 242), and Little Bilham follows his reference to Jeanne as ‘the real thing’ with an image of an unopened flower (AMB 205). In the corrupt, mercenary London world of the earlier novel, little attempt is made to disguise the commercial value of Aggie’s constructed identity as ‘the real young one’, her ‘emphasised virginity’ (Awkward 71). Longdon’s observation that she has been ‘deliberately prepared for consumption’ (180) is amply confirmed when the Duchess declares: ‘My niece is a person I call fresh. It’s warranted, as they say in the shops’ (188). However, as Aggie’s shocking behaviour after her marriage demonstrates, some warranties only last until the goods have been brought home. In the later novel, it comes as no surprise that Jeanne’s marriage, the notion of which disturbs Strether ‘through something ancient and cold in it – what he would have called the real thing’ (AMB 308), has been arranged by that most modern advertising man, Chad Newsome.

A discussion of the linked themes of display and preservation in relation to James’s human commodities inevitably leads back to his use of the only material of his time that could perform both of these functions simultaneously: glass. When Trollope’s lyrical adman George Robinson eulogises ‘the most glorious product of the age’ (37) in the satirical novel, The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson (1862), he expresses widely held Victorian marketing convictions:

Of all our materials now in general use . . . glass is the most brilliant, and yet the cheapest; the most graceful and yet the strongest. Though transparent it is impervious to wet. The eye travels through it, but not the hailstorm. To the power of gas it affords no obstacle, but is as efficient a barrier against the casualties of the street as an iron shutter. To that which is ordinary it lends grace. . . . Like a good advertisement, it multiplies your stock tenfold. (37)

More than a century later, Baudrillard characterises the special qualities of glass in a comparable series of contrasts and seeming contradictions:

[I]t is at once proximity and distance, intimacy and the refusal of intimacy, communication and non-communication . . . glass is the basis of a transparency without transition: we see, but cannot touch. . . . A shop window is at once magical and frustrating – the strategy of advertising in epitome. (System 41–42)

To add to this list of paradoxical qualities, and to place them in relation to the discussion of ‘realness’, it is helpful to note Bowlby’s observation that the new glass technology used in department stores rendered the displayed commodities ‘unreal in that they were images set apart from everyday things, and real in that they were there to be bought and taken home’
James’s ambivalent and complex metaphors involving women in shop windows play on many of these seemingly opposing properties. But before moving on to these images, it is important – as with all of James’s images of commodity display – to acknowledge their counterpart in the world of art.

There are many images of women as displayed art objects in James’s oeuvre, but perhaps the most interesting consideration of the symbolic qualities of glass occurs in *The Europeans* (1878), when Felix compares his views of the supposedly natural, unmediated and unchanging New England girls he has come into contact with to his perceptions of more sophisticated European women:

> He had known, fortunately, many virtuous gentlewomen, but now it appeared to him that in his relations with them (especially when they were unmarried) he had been looking at pictures under glass. He perceived at present what a nuisance that glass had been – how it perverted and interfered, how it caught the reflection of other objects and kept you walking from side to side. He had no need to ask himself whether Charlotte and Gertrude, and Lizzie Acton, were in the right light; they were always in the right light. (46–47)

His sister Eugenia’s extravagant performances consign her to the former group – as Felix later observes, she is ‘a picture out of her setting’ (77) in New England. Felix’s analogy refers only to the obstructive, distorting qualities of glass. He does not acknowledge its positive function of protecting whilst enabling and indeed promoting certain sorts of relations. Nor does he recognise what Baudrillard calls ‘glass’s cardinal virtue, which is of a moral order: its purity, reliability and objectivity’ (*Consumer Society* 42). On the contrary, his distinction posits an essential natural self which is perverted by social conditioning or ‘polish’. In indicating the pane’s reflective property he conveys the way in which display and social performances presuppose the existence of a spectator and anticipate their responses. In his brilliant reading of this novel, Ian F. A. Bell identifies Felix’s purist attitude with the American ‘sentimental cult of sincerity’ of the 1830s and 1840s, which gave way to the ‘recognition during the latter part of the century of the necessity for performativeness in social manners and intercourse’ (149). He also points to the positive aspects of Eugenia’s creation of ‘effects’, arguing that they ‘involve a more sophisticated consideration of otherness’ and thus ‘a more flexible range of human understanding’ (168).

Felix’s objection to social artifice is associated with the puritanical Mr Wentworth’s moral preference for daguerreotypes over artists’ representations, on the grounds that man should not try to ‘make . . . over again’
Europeans 54) what God has created. Thus, ironically, it is the mechanical as opposed to human character of the image-capturing process that ultimately helps to promote the conception of the daguerreotype’s ‘naturalness’.36 This assumption that the daguerreotype or photograph constituted a ‘true’ reproduction of an object unmediated by human artifice was exploited by advertising experts.37

The notion of glass as an impediment to natural communication and relations is again expressed in two linked shop window images of the 1890s, which refer not to the relationship between men and women, but to the archetypal natural bond – that between mother and child. In ‘The Marriages’ (1891), Adela, who is convinced that the ‘vulgar’ Mrs Churchley wants to replace her dead mother, scornfully dismisses this lady’s attempts at ‘getting ... into touch’ with herself and the other children with the observation that ‘she was as undomestic as a shop-front’. The comparison suggests both her ‘impenetrable surface’ and her extravagant self-display – the ‘wonders of her apparel’ which enchant and bemuse the younger children (CT 8: 44). This set of associations reappears in a synthesised and intensified form six years later in What Maisie Knew (1897). When Maisie’s unscrupulous and uncaring mother Ida holds out her arms and speaks tenderly to her, the child is ‘thrilled with the first direct appeal ... she had ever had from lips that ... had always been sharp’, but she soon finds herself clasped to her mother’s breast, ‘where, amid a wilderness of trinkets, she felt as if she had suddenly been thrust into a jeweller’s shop-front, but only to be as suddenly ejected’ (120). The violent image, made more visceral in the New York Edition by the insertion of ‘with a smash of glass’ (NYE 11: 145), sensitively conveys the child’s pain and confusion at her parent’s careless treatment of her (she is repeatedly used as a bargaining tool) and, like the previous simile, suggests youthful wonder at the intricacies of feminine adornment. Shortly beforehand, Maisie anticipates her mother’s dramatic performance, imagining her as ‘an actress ... sweeping down to the footlights’ (118). As these two examples indicate, this form of display is shown to differ from that of art not only in terms of the more prominent commercial element, but in its more flagrant publicity. Adela worries that Mrs Churchley will ‘bring the streets into their lives’ (CT 8: 44), and Ida’s sexual allure and promiscuity is again suggested through the image of ‘her huge eyes, her red lips, the intense marks on her face’ forming ‘an illumination as distinct and public as a lamp set in a window’ (WMK 176).

In these two examples, the image of the shop window implies sexual availability, but in ‘The Beldonald Holbein’ (1901), James emphasises the
prophylactic properties of the display glass. The artist narrator’s first assessment of Lady Beldonald is that ‘vanity’ had put her ‘years ago in a plate-glass case and clos[ed] up the receptacle against every breath of air’ (CT 11: 285). This encasement means that she has remained untouched by life, but also that her sense of self, and indeed her very consciousness, is confined to her status as an object of others’ vision. As a result, she is unable to recognise and appreciate the qualities of others – a circumstance that seemingly blinds her to the Holbein-like aspect of Louisa Brash. In ‘Glasses’ (1896), the physical myopia of the equally objectified Flora Saunt means that her eyes are ‘good for nothing but to roll about like sugar-balls . . . in a child’s mouth’ (CT 9: 323), and Lady Beldonald’s figurative failure of vision is conveyed through a similarly violent, grotesque image: ‘She looks naturally new, as if she took out every night her large, lovely, varnished eyes and put them in water’ (CT 11: 285).38 The italicised ‘naturally’, which means the opposite of what it says, recalls another common advertising claim.

James’s narrator decides that ‘The thing was to paint her . . . in the glass case – a most tempting, attaching feat; render to the full the shining, interposing plate and the general show-window effect’ (285). This, in effect, is what he has just done with words, and what all of James’s shop window images attempt to do. However, it is only when Lady Beldonald’s glazed surface displays the glimmer of a reflection, when she declares that she has finally seen that Mrs Brash ‘is a picture’ (303), that he shows genuine enthusiasm for the task. His interest is awakened, not by her sharpened perception of the other – this, the narrator believes, is a sham – but by her ‘reflective endeavour for virtue’ (303), the adaptation of her performance to accommodate the responses of others. This has a ‘visible’ effect on both the artist narrator’s ‘eyes’ and ‘the beauty of her face’ – a simultaneity through which James conveys the interdependence of one upon the other (304). The episode recalls the ‘heroic’ way in which Mrs Monarch in ‘The Real Thing’ accepts Miss Churm’s superiority as a model and adapts her behaviour accordingly, offering at one point to arrange her hair, and making the narrator feel for the first time that he would like to paint her (CT 8: 257). In the later story, however, the narrator’s goodwill turns sour when Lady Beldonald can no longer tolerate the competition and ships ‘the famous Holbein’ (CT 11: 304) back to America. He ends his narrative with the ominous declaration that ‘Since [Lady Beldonald] will have the real thing – well, hang it, she shall!’ (306). Several critics have interpreted this to mean that he will paint her ‘as she really is’;39 but once again, these readings fail to explore, or even acknowledge, the questions that James raises about ‘true’ identity, or the
ambiguity of what he calls ‘the real thing’. In his closing comment, it is not clear whether the narrator confirms his original intention of painting Lady Beldonald in her glass case or whether he alludes to his later, seemingly contradictory statement that ‘[a] box of sardines is only “old” after it has been opened’ (290), and that he means to ‘open’ Lady Beldonald. Whilst the first metaphor suggests an approach which is entirely confined to smooth surface, the second implies revealing an ugly ‘truth’ beneath this perfect exterior. The fact that the two can be presented as interchangeable is a good example of the way in which James subverts straightforward dichotomies between surface and depth, and exterior and interior. But these are not the only oppositions that the tale destabilises.

In the narrator’s evaluative scheme, Lady Beldonald’s appearance of newness fits her for the commercial ‘show-window’ (285), whilst the evidence in Mrs Brash’s face of ‘time and life’, those ‘artists who beat us all’ (297) fit her for her sixteenth-century ‘frame’, and the appreciation of the ‘superior, sophisticated’ (301) London art world. However, appreciation is also an economic process, and the distinction between these two display contexts is repeatedly questioned. The purpose of the proposed portrait of Lady Beldonald – as her sister-in-law Mrs Munden freely admits – is that its presence at ‘the Academy’ will help her to ‘get on’ socially, and thus act as a sort of advertisement (283–84). What is more, the recognition and promotion of Mrs Brash as ‘the greatest of all the great Holbeins’ (290) is discussed in terms of commodity exchange. The narrator’s first response to his friend Outreau’s discovery is surprise that he should ‘possess a Holbein, of any price, unawares’ (290), and later, Mrs Brash’s decline and eventual demise is attributed to the fact that her American city of origin was not ‘a market for Holbeins’ (306). Both women are irreparably damaged by the fact that their sense of self is entirely dictated by their respective markets.

As with ‘The Real Thing’, the illustrations for the original magazine publication of the tale provide the final ironic twist. Unlike James’s narrator, whose painting of Mrs Brash remains an ‘intention’ (306) supplemented only by his rapturous verbal depictions, the American illustrator Lucius Hitchcock does attempt to reproduce this idiosyncratic beauty. However, the smooth elegant head in his drawing suggests Lady Beldonald’s conventional good looks far more than either ‘the wonderful old tender, battered, blanched face’ (297) of the narrator’s descriptions or Holbein’s portrait of Lady Margaret Butts which is almost certainly the painting James had in mind.40 It is also noteworthy, in view of the tale’s emphasis on vision and life experience, that whilst Lady Butts’ frank gaze is
directed straight ahead of her, the eyes in Hitchcock’s drawing are modestly or perhaps pensively cast down (see Figures 4 and 5). As Amy Tucker shows, Hitchcock based his drawing on Holbein’s portrait of the twenty-one-year-old Elizabeth Dauncey (110) – an ironic interpretative slip given the importance placed on ‘knowing one’s Holbein’, both within the tale and in terms of what it asks of its readers. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that ignorance alone accounted for the illustrator’s choice. At a time when James’s complex stories were becoming ‘increasingly difficult to sell to the periodicals’ (Tucker 121), it seems probable that Hitchcock felt it necessary to depict a sort of beauty that the readers of Harper’s Monthly would recognise and accept, or ‘buy into’.

Figure 4. ‘Lady Butts’, c.1543 (oil on panel), Holbein the Younger, Hans (1497/8–1543). © Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA, USA. The Bridgeman Art Library.
In the preface to his 1902 novel *The Wings of the Dove*, James stresses the importance of ‘the whole preliminary presentation of Kate Croy’ (*LC* 2: 1294) as one of the building ‘blocks’ of his construction, a trope that matches Lionel Croy’s despicable notions about ‘building’ on his daughter (*WD* 19). Because Kate’s immoral ‘design’ (312) may fairly be described as authorial in the extent to which it directs the narrative, it is important that her circumstances and motivations should be fully and firmly established. James wastes no time,
vividly delineating in the novel’s first pages the depressing meanness and squalor of her family situation. Waiting for her dishonoured father amid his ‘shabby’ furniture and the ‘sallow prints on the walls’ (3), her own handsome reflection presents itself as the one thing there that is ‘agreeable to see’, and consequently as a possible means of ‘escape’ (4). Kate’s prolonged self-scrutiny culminates in her consideration of the most basic social marker of her identity – ‘the precious name she so liked’ (5). The word ‘croy’ has several meanings, each of which might be applied to an aspect of Kate’s role in the novel: a structure for channelling the flow of water, a trap for fish, and a compensation for slaughter.41 If she were a man, she would have fought to compensate for ‘the harm her wretched father had done’ to the family name, but, after all, ‘what could a penniless girl do with it but let it go?’ (5). As the example of her impoverished, ‘disappointed, demoralised’ (27) sister shows, if care is not taken, such a relinquishment can involve the loss of other signs of self. Mr Condrip’s widow is, for Kate, ‘quite a different thing from the mild Marian of the past’ – she is now merely ‘a plain, prosaic result of him’ (31).

Kate’s alternative to the misery of Chirk Street and Chelsea is the luxurious but equally mercenary world of Lancaster Gate, represented by that ‘Britannia of the Market Place’ (25), her Aunt Maud. Kate is fully aware that in the latter quite as much as in the former connection her primary perceived value is as an exchangeable commodity, and she sums up Maud’s plans for her when she tells Milly: ‘I am ... on the counter, when I’m not in the shop-window; in and out of which I’m thus conveniently, commercially whisked’ (230). Accustomed to identifying herself with her image, Kate may be alluding in part to the contemporary practice, also mentioned in ‘The Real Thing’, of displaying photographs of society ladies, beauties and other celebrities in shops and shop windows. Some disliked the way in which this form of promotion placed respectable ladies alongside burlesque actresses and other dubious types, and novelist Marie Corelli had also objected in 1900 to the way such images broke women down into saleable parts: ‘so much per head, per face, per eyes, per hair’ (11).42 Kate’s figurative advertising space may be identified with the ‘lighted window at night’ to which Maud Lowder’s ‘face in speech’ (70) is compared, as she tells the impecunious Densher that she has been ‘saving ... up’ her niece’s ‘presence’: ‘I’ve been ... letting it, as you say of investments, appreciate, and you may judge’, she adds more pointedly, ‘whether, now it has begun to pay so, I’m likely to consent to treat for it with any but a high bidder’ (70). Densher will receive a more direct impression of the avidity with which Maud keeps her proprietary gaze on her investment – and the way in which she ensures that other eyes are similarly directed – upon Kate’s calculatedly
impressive entrance to the dinner party in Book Six. Stage is substituted for shop window as Densher sees himself ‘for the moment as in his purchased stall’ whilst ‘the watchful manager was in the depths of a box and the poor actress in the glare of the footlights’ with ‘her wig, her paint, her jewels, every mark of her expression impeccable’ (278). For both the actress and the priced commodity, setting is of the utmost importance, so that when Densher sees Kate in her sister’s dreary, distasteful home, he experiences a sense of painful incongruity.

The mirror through which Kate is introduced – itself reflected in a corresponding mirror image at the novel’s close as with *The Europeans*’ performative Eugenia – frames her primary asset. But it is also a supreme demonstration of the unbridgeable gap between sign and referent, appropriate to the degree of detachment and objectivity that she consistently maintains in appraising and manipulating her social image. This pragmatic approach, born of a superior understanding of the processes of signification, is directly opposed to Isabel Archer’s naïve and impracticable aim to ‘be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was’ (PL 53). What Kate ‘is’ is remarkably difficult to pinpoint, and often more attention is given to what she is not. Her attractiveness, for example, is largely constituted in negatives:

She was handsome, but the degree of it was not sustained by items and aids; a circumstance moreover playing its part at almost any time in the impression she produced. The impression was one that remained, but as regards the sources of it no sum in addition would have made up the total. She had stature without height, grace without motion, presence without mass. Slender and simple, frequently soundless, she was somehow always in the line of the eye – she counted singularly for its pleasure. (WD 5)

Kate’s visibility and the lasting impression she creates make her an advertiser’s dream. Like many advertised commodities, she is defined by unquantifiable attributes (stature, grace, presence) which have become divorced from their associated concrete qualities (height, motion, mass). She is countable only in terms of the ‘[h]igh . . . fixed’ exchange value that her ‘managerial’ aunt has attached to her (277; 278). Milly, on the other hand, is described in terms that are all too positive and quantifiable. She has

a face that, thanks, doubtless, to rather too much forehead, too much nose and too much mouth, together with too little mere conventional colour and conventional line, was expressive, irregular, exquisite, both for speech and for silence. (99)

To the many people who do not perceive Milly’s unusual ‘beauty’, her devoted Susan is reduced to describing her as ‘awfully full of things’ (99) – an
overcrowding that may be compared to the cluttered approach to commodity display (discussed in Chapter 1) that businesses were moving away from at this time. Nevertheless, because of her ‘thumping bank-account’ (291), Milly becomes an equally if not more sought-after commodity in Mrs Lowder’s social economy, and it is perhaps this common ground that makes her the most perceptive and subtle analyst of Kate’s constructed identity. In language that bears a marked resemblance to that of modern marketing theory, James describes how Milly attributes to her new friend ‘the extraordinary and attaching property of appearing at a given moment to show as a beautiful stranger, to cut her connections and lose her identity, letting the imagination for the time make what it would of them’ (175). Milly’s own imagination has been considerably occupied with her attempt to ‘place’ Kate, and initially she falls back on her only frame of reference with regard to London society, the stereotypes that she has acquired from literature and art. Kate is the ‘handsome English girl from the heavy English house . . . a figure in a picture stepping by magic out of its frame’ (142), the ‘wondrous London girl in person, by what she had conceived, from far back . . . from old porings over Punch and a liberal acquaintance with the fiction of the day’ (142–43). Here James refers again to the phenomenon he described in relation to Du Maurier, whereby an artist’s work may become ‘one of the conditions of seeing’, and dictate the ‘real’. By virtue of the same paradox, Milly, whilst superimposing these types onto her new acquaintance, rejoices in her contact with the ‘real’ rather than with ‘mere elegant representation’ (142).

The curiosity and speculation that Kate generates through her lack of identifiable qualities is in keeping with the abundance of powerful absences throughout the novel, such as the eternally unknowable contents of Milly’s last letter to Densher, the ‘possibilities’ of which ‘his imagination had extraordinarily filled out and refined’ (569). But it also corresponds with an important advertising strategy. In *Decoding Advertisements*, Judith Williamson devotes an entire section to ‘absence’, in which she explains that advertisements ‘function most effectively not by making their meaning immediately apparent, but by holding it up as the result, or prize, of a hermeneutic “interpretation”’ (77). Although this may give the illusion of interpretative freedom, the hermeneutic process is ‘restricted to the carefully defined channels provided by the ad for its own decipherment’ (72). Given that James’s two young women are most often defined and evaluated in comparison with one another – a circumstance that is consistent with Marx’s theory of the ‘value-relation’ (140) that exists between commodities – it is appropriate that Milly should first apprehend the power of this puzzle-like quality in Kate in relation to her own lack of it. During her first
conversation with the cynical Lord Mark, Milly recognises the connection between this gentleman’s manifest interest in Kate and his inability to ‘make her out’ at the same time as she observes his ‘failure . . . of curiosity . . . in respect to herself’ and its correspondence with his ‘certainties’ about her identity (137–38). The identity that she imagines him imposing upon her is that of ‘a mere little American, a cheap exotic, imported almost wholesale’ (138) – assumptions that make her want ‘to get away from him, or indeed, much rather, away from herself so far as she was present to him’ (135). Having observed the superior degree of control that Kate exercises over the social impressions she produces – the ‘talent for life’ that Densher repeatedly attributes to her, ‘which found in her a difference for the differing time’ (568) – Milly begins to take lessons from her. In attempting to understand her position in the self-seeking society represented by Lancaster Gate, for example, Milly finds it useful ‘to borrow from the handsome girl a sort of view of her state’ (145), and later decides to adopt the ‘dove’ identity that Kate suggests to her, assessing ‘the measure of the success she could have as a dove’, and then going about the more difficult business of deciding ‘how a dove would act’ (234).

But the episode with Lord Mark is also significant as the first of many occasions upon which Milly’s perception of Kate is mediated by that of a man. After learning that Kate and Densher are known to one another, Milly repeatedly catches herself viewing Kate as the ‘peculiar property of somebody else’s vision’ (213). Once again, Milly’s thoughts become sharply analytical, as she considers how she has begun to see Kate as ‘other and, as Milly knew the real critical mind would call it, more objective’ (175). It is Milly’s impulse to compensate her friend for this ‘perversity’ (187) of vision by attempting to establish a more subjective relationship with her that leads to her momentous decision to let Kate in on the secret of her physical condition.

One of the types of absence in advertising that Williamson discusses is the ‘Absent Man’, in relation to whom the depicted woman becomes just another clue. Citing Roland Barthes, Williamson argues that ‘Women (in media) are “entirely constituted by the gaze of the man . . . he is in all eternity the creative absence”’, and indeed, at one point it seems to Milly ‘as if the total of [Kate’s] identity had been that of the person known to [Densher]’ (WD 225). Similarly, Milly’s ‘strange sense of seeing through that distant person’s eyes’ (213) may be compared with the advertisement’s invitation to ‘constitute yourself in coincidence with an absent person’ (Williamson 81). Milly’s mediated visual experience of Kate is another version of the triangular relationship that recurs in James’s representations of objectified women. In considering these relationships, it is useful to note that
Bowlby posits ‘Not just looking, but looking at looking as the dominant mode of experience for artists and consumers alike’ (Just Looking 154). This insightful comment offers an important indication of why the forms of fashion and commodity display came to play such an integral role in James’s complex considerations of the politics of vision. Another clue may be detected in what James’s characters don’t see.

Despite Milly’s intense observation of her enigmatic friend and the fascinating insights that she develops as a result, she never grasps the thing about Kate that is most to her purpose – that she is in love with the man whom she herself loves. By a similar but more obstinate failure of vision, this man is fascinated by Kate’s ‘variety’ and enchanted by ‘the interest she supplied’, thinking of her as ‘a whole library of the unknown, the uncut’ to which he has ‘a subscription’ (300), but is unable to read the specific terms of the plot that she has involved him in. Advertisements, Williamson tells us, ‘present their “manifest” meaning to us as latent, thereby concealing the real “latent” meaning’ (73), and it is these different interpretative layers that make advertising strategy so relevant, not only to the depiction of Kate Croy, but also to the epistemological structure of the whole novel. For James’s characters, although constantly engaged in deciphering what seems to them the ‘latent’ significance behind what they see, often ignore the more simple ‘real “latent” meaning’.