

Displaced Women in the American Imagination:  
James's *The Bostonians*

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AN APOLOGIA

This year our College celebrates the centennial of its foundation. Since its foundation in 1875 Kobe College has fostered women of independent mind. Also, the year 1975 happens to be International Women's Year, which, however, sounds to us almost as a slur, as if women as a class still need special attention—for a serious discussion or for ridicule. I realize, at the same time, that there *are* problems which need our serious consideration. Such speculation has led me to read, for the fourth time, a much neglected novel by Henry James. James's *The Bostonians* treats the nineteenth century feminist movement in New England. The following article, "Displaced Women in the American Imagination: James's *The Bostonians*," is the result of my investigation. It is by no means a comprehensive study of the feminist movement in the 1880's; rather it is a re-assessment of James's novel.

The paper was read at the 14th Annual Meeting of the American Literary Society, which was held in Kagoshima on October 25th and 26th, 1975. Here with a few revisions I commit the same article to inclusion in the special number of *Kobe College Studies*, because *The Bostonians* presents interesting issues for *our* consideration.

*The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*, both published in 1886, are considered as a pair of novels unique in the James canon in that both novels deal with social issues of his time. Also they were written when James was under the influence of the French naturalist movement. In these novels he had left the private world of one's "crowded consciousness" and plunged into the public experience, that

is, one's apprehension of what happens to one as a social creature.<sup>1</sup> Here we are concerned only with *The Bostonians*, which James intended to be a "Balzacian" novel, a "truly American tale" characteristic of its social condition. James found the social condition characteristic of his day in "the situation of women" and in "the decline of the sentiment of sex"—which constitute both sides of the same coin. He wrote in his notebook entry of April 8, 1883: "The subject is strong and good, with a large rich interest."<sup>2</sup> However, despite such ambition on James's part, the novel was received unfavorably in his native land. The book was a critical failure, and James excluded it from the New York Edition. Yet, later he regretted his decision, saying, "I should have liked to review it for the Edition—it would have come out a much truer and more curious thing."<sup>3</sup> I am one of those readers who "should have liked" to see what James made of the novel some twenty years after he wrote the story.

Reading *The Bostonians* today, we become aware of its startling contemporaneity. For surprisingly enough, James has a close relationship to feminist questions in his time and in ours. He was consistently sympathetic to the basic claims of the woman's rights movement—many of James's heroines experience a sense of "blighted hope and wounded pride" simply *because* they are women—though he might be horrified with *our* militant feminists as he had been with those "roaring radicals" of the 1880's.

James deplored that *The Bostonians* "never received any sort of justice."<sup>4</sup> Since then, the novel has found such perceptive readers as Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, and more recently Charles Thomas Samuels. They commend James's intention to write a novel of social manners, rich in dry humor and satire. They contend that James is a *skeptical* Utopian writer, if he is one.<sup>5</sup> I am not adverse to these assessments, but my present concern is not so much with the interesting subject of the novel as with the presentation of that subject in the book. To be sure, these cannot be separated from each other,

because often the subject matter determines the mode in which the story is narrated. To me *The Bostonians* is another example of that American genre William Van O'Connor discusses in his title essay in *The Grotesque* (1962). He quotes Thomas Mann on the question of the grotesque that in modern literature there is no clear distinction between tragedy and comedy. The thesis O'Connor proposes in the article is that modern literature, especially American literature, delights in the grotesque:

...As citizens we [Americans] seem satisfied to be children of the Enlightenment and of the Romantic movement. Yet our literature is filled with the grotesque, more so probably than any other Western literature. It is a new genre, merging tragedy and comedy, and seeking, seemingly in perverse ways, the sublime. ...

The grotesque, as a genre or a form of modern literature, simultaneously confronts the antipoetic and the ugly and present them, when viewed out of the side of the eye, as the closest we can come to the sublime. The grotesque affronts our sense of established order and satisfies, or partly satisfies, our need for at least a tentative, a more flexible ordering.<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, O'Connor does not mention James's book in his essay. Yet when we realize that the grotesque mode coincides with the emergence of realism or the naturalist movement as in Frank Norris and Stephen Crane, to whom O'Connor refers in his book, my contention that *The Bostonians* belongs to the genre is not so wide of the mark, because, as noted already, James was under the influence of the French naturalists when he wrote the novel. With the grotesquery of Olive Chancellor, as Samuels aptly says, *The Bostonians* makes its nearest approach to greatness.<sup>7</sup>

The novel is divided geographically into three parts: Boston, where the relationship between Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant is established at Miss Birdseye's party; New York, where the turning point in their relation takes place in Central Park; and an excursion to the

decaying, idyllic Cape Cod, where Miss Birdseye peacefully passes away. The scene of the novel goes back to Boston and the novel ends in climax with Basil Ransom carrying Verena away, leaving Olive alone with her “blighted hope and wounded pride.”<sup>8</sup>

*The Bostonians* is unique; it is distinctly of Boston. The book could never be called *The New Yorkers* though the events in the story take place in New York as well as in Boston, and there are several New Yorkers in the novel. The feminists and reformers in James’s book are distinctly of Boston, just as E. E. Cummings’s “Cambridge ladies” are of that culture.

James’s concern with the problem of “the decline of the sentiment of sex”—a deplorable sign of social progress as Basil Ransom deems it—is superbly expressed in the panting and raving feminists insisting their rights. If the emergence of socially-awakened women was an inevitable social phenomenon, what attitude would an “intense conservative” like Basil Ransom take toward such a phenomenon? A satiric and sneering attitude seems to be a spontaneous reaction. *The Bostonians* is written, as some critics have already pointed out, with a superb irony and satire, its effect being that of a bitter farce. We hear the feminists *mostly* through Basil Ransom, who observes: “[Verena’s speech], in itself, had about the value of a pretty essay, committed to memory and delivered by a bright girl at an ‘academy’;... From any serious point of view it was neither worth answering nor worth considering.”<sup>9</sup> At the same time the audience too is the target of Basil’s criticism as he reflects on “the crazy character of the age” in which such a performance as Verena’s speech is treated as “an intellectual effort, a contribution to a question.”<sup>10</sup>

James offers accurate caricatures of the feminists. The examples of his scathing kind of satire are numerous. To mention only a few. Miss Birdseye is a “formless old woman, who had no more outline than a bundle of hay.”<sup>11</sup> She is *heroic*, she is *sublime*: “the whole moral history of Boston was reflected in her displaced spectacles.”<sup>12</sup> Or Mrs. Farrinder, the “lioness,” is held “to have a very fine manner, and to

embody the domestic virtues and the graces of the drawing room; to be a shining proof, in short, that the forum, for ladies, is not necessarily hostile to the fireside. She had a husband, and his name was Amariah.”<sup>13</sup> Amariah for that ghost of a husband! To Basil, Mary Prance is a “little medical lady,” a perfect example of the Yankee female produced by “the New England school system, the Puritan code, the ungenial climate, the absence of chivalry”:

Spare, dry, hard, without a curve, an inflection or a grace, she seemed to ask no odds in the battle of life and to be prepared to give none. ...She looked like a boy, and not even like a good boy. ...It was true that if she had been a boy she would have borne some relation to a girl, whereas Doctor Prance appeared to bear none whatever.<sup>14</sup>

Olive Chancellor, Basil’s New England cousin, strikes him as “a signal old maid.”

That was her quality, her destiny; nothing could be more distinctly written. There are women who are unmarried by accident, and others who are unmarried by option; but Olive Chancellor was unmarried by every implication of her being. She was a spinster as Shelley was a lyric poet, or as the month of August is sultry.<sup>15</sup>

Whatever the circumstances that have led Olive, Mary Prance, or Miss Birdseye to spinsterhood, they are all deplorable manifestations of “the decline of the sentiment of sex.” They are displaced women, because the then existing “remarkable social system—as Verena describes it—provides no place for women except by man’s side, that is, in marriage.

Of these feminists I would like to concentrate my discussion, for the present purpose, on Olive Chancellor, because *The Bostonians* is predominantly *her* story; it is about her intense suffering which strikes us as painful and mysterious, but, above all, ludicrous.

James presents Olive Chancellor through Basil Ransom and also

through Mrs. Luna, who constitute the polarities to Olive. Unlike her sister, Mrs. Luna is a sexually aggressive woman, and we first encounter Olive Chancellor through Mrs. Luna, who introduces Olive as one who never exposes herself to telling a fib. Immediately we are on our guard against such a recommendation. And soon enough we learn Olive is the biggest liar, who closes her eyes to her personal needs, and who tries to disguise her passion in the feminist cause. She tries to ignore her sexuality, and her public activities are the result of her displaced sexual energy.

Olive Chancellor is a nervous wreck, the eccentric feminist whose inner life and happiness are warped and lost in misled enthusiasm. Olive's tragedy lies in the "pursuit of publicity via the route of moral reform,"<sup>16</sup> which involves a total disregard for the personal needs of life: passion, love, and family feeling. Her case is an illustration of the disorder which results from such an attempt. One has no quarrel with her ideals; they are worthy causes. And she is truly devoted to her public cause until she personally becomes involved with Verena Tarrant. As long as Olive keeps her public life clear of private concerns, there is no complication, and no tragedy. However, for the furtherance of her ideas, Olive sacrifices her personal feelings and happiness; as Verena justly observes, what Olive does is not doing "justice" to women, but taking "revenge" on men as a class. And paradoxically, Olive deprives Verena of her right to love and to be loved, the most vital of all the rights any woman or man should enjoy.

Olive has been accused of tampering with another human being, but she is different from Gilbert Osmond, though perhaps she is closer to the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*. Olive's interest in Verena is "personal" as well as "public." And their friendship is a "curious thing." In *The Bostonians* James touches the controversial problem of "one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England."<sup>17</sup> Margaret Fuller, the editor of *The Dial* and an acquaintance of Henry's father, confides in her journal that she had a latent homosexuality, testifying that it is the only emotional gratification the

nineteenth century women—especially unmarried women—had. Only the relation is, Fuller writes, “purely intellectual and spiritual, unprofaned by any mixture of lower instincts, undisturbed by any need of consulting temporal interests; its law is the desire of the spirit to realize a whole, which makes it seek in another being that which it finds not in itself.”<sup>18</sup>

Olive falls in love with Verena, and her fierce possessiveness should be judged on the same ground as Basil Ransom’s egotistic claim on Verena. Olive is afraid of sexuality and is against marriage, demanding the same course of action from Verena: “... [Olive] looked at her all over in a manner that caused the girl to rejoice at having put on the jacket with the gilt buttons. It was this glance that was the beginning; it was with this quick survey, omitting nothing, that Olive took possession of her.”<sup>19</sup> Verena is immediately under the charm, gives herself up, shutting her eyes a little, “as we do whenever a person in whom we have perfect confidence proposes, with our assent, to subject us to some sensation.”<sup>20</sup> Olive finds in Verena a friend of her own sex, a companion she has been looking for, and with whom she desires “a union of soul.” And with her natural art—desire to please—Verena cares for the woman’s cause; at the same time she enjoys the material comforts which Olive’s money provides for her.

In this relation is entangled Basil Ransom, a strongly convinced conservative from the South, who regards woman as “the toy of man,” though Basil claims that she is “the joy” of man. Though primarily conceived by James to satirize the reformers and feminists, Basil Ransom is not only a “point-of-view” character through whose eyes we see the drama and through whose ears we hear the speeches made by Verena and other feminist leaders. Basil comes to be involved in the story when he falls in love with Verena. Hence, he is not a disinterested observer. Besides, he has his own axe to grind; his interest is in his own sex—to save it from the most damnable feminization.

The whole generation is womanized; the masculine tone is

passing out of the world; it's a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been. The masculine character, the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not fear reality, to look the world in the face and take it for what it is—a very queer and partly very base mixture—that is what I want to preserve, or rather, as I may say, to recover; and I must tell you that I don't in the least care what becomes of you ladies while I make the attempt!<sup>21</sup>

Thus, Basil's protest against "the decline of the sentiment of sex" is as fierce as Olive's claim on woman's rights. He, too, becomes a grotesque, according to Sherwood Anderson's definition of the grotesque in *Winesburg, Ohio*. He demands that Verena should stay home twenty-four hours for *his* pleasure. He almost shrieks out: "Why for an hour, when it's all false and damnable? An hour is as bad as ten years! She's mine or she isn't, and if she's mine, she's all mine."<sup>22</sup> Here Basil sound as fanatical and hysterical as his cousin.

Convinced that the proper place of woman is found only at home Basil tries to save Verena from Olive and from the "raving rabble." Though less unnatural, what Basil demands of Verena is not much different from Olive's desire to monopolize Verena. To be sure, Olive is a worse sinner, because she exploits Verena for publicity as well as for her emotional gratification. On the other hand, Basil's interest in Verena is purely "personal," which, however, is as hideous an offence as that of Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady*, who forbids Isabel to have her own mind.

As James commented, *The Bostonians* is "meant to be curious from the first." The eternal triangle we see dramatized in the novel is a curious thing. The struggle goes on between Olive and Basil for the possession of Verena, and not between Olive and Verena for the possession of Basil Ransom. From the beginning, therefore, the odds are against Olive, who realizes that her life for the last two years rested

on an illusion: "The reality was simply that Verena had been more to her than she ever was to Verena, and that, with her exquisite natural art, the girl had cared for their cause only because, for the time, no interest, no fascination, was greater."<sup>23</sup> We have observed that Olive is a nervous wreck; she is ticklish, and is easily excited, and she has an instinctive fear of everything. These symptoms are never defined nor explained. And the author's neglect of etiology in Olive's case serves his satiric purpose.<sup>24</sup> As we do not really become intimate with the stresses that make Olive grotesque—even though she has her moments of calm and normalcy as the above-quoted passage shows—we do not feel much sympathy toward her. Instead we are only repelled by her intense suffering, her general fear of everything.

Olive's defeat at the end is twofold: she loses the sole object of her passion to Basil Ransom, and if Olive loses Verena, she also loses her public battle with her enemy, Mrs. Farrinder, the professional feminist leader. Before Olive met Verena she admired this lioness and contributed money for her cause, but after she took possession of Verena, Olive's veneration for Mrs. Farrinder changes into competition, and Olive Chancellor is not her equal. Besides, Olive is a victim of social customs she wants to reform—she is a bourgeoisie—and she has to depend on a certain Mr. Filer, an agent in lecture-business, to arrange for their campaign.

As noted already, we are given a distorted picture of Olive Chancellor through Basil and Mrs. Luna. And James as a narrator serves to neutralize the image by making Basil and Mrs. Luna, as ridiculous, if not more, as Olive herself and other displaced women in the novel. Mrs. Luna is a grotesque figure pulling on her gloves, which remind Basil of stockings. Basil Ransom represents the author's position as to "the decline of the sentiment of sex," but Ransom is not James, and as we have already seen, he becomes a grotesque, even though Ransom fares better than Matthias Pardon, the PR man, or Henry Burrage, the understanding feminist, a mother's boy, and, to borrow Basil's word, "womanized."

I have called Olive Chancellor and other feminists in *The Bostonians* displaced women. They are curious products of 19th century New England; they are the products of woman's emancipation. The grotesque mode in which they are presented in the novel is just how James saw such displaced women. The demand for equal rights in every vocation of life is just and fair, with which James had no quarrel. But after all, the most vital right is the right to love and to be loved. And the highly praised independence of the displaced women is only a slow process of stifling woman's nature, her love instinct.<sup>25</sup> As has been mentioned above, Olive's and Dr. Prance's error consist in their fear that love will rob them of their freedom and independence. Olive commits a greater sin in depriving Verena of that vital right to love and to be loved. Mary Prance seems to be quite healthy in thinking that "there is room for improvement in both sexes." She says: "We ought to *live* better, but the reformers all *talk* too much,"<sup>26</sup> which is a just criticism of the whole affair. All the same, her financial independence and astringent autonomy are gained at the expense of her natural inclination. She is a dry, hard, and spare woman, who hates to be reminded of the fact that she is a woman. Besides, society expects her to remain unmarried, since it is convenient, from the masculine perspective, that such woman as dare compete with the stronger sex—"the coarser sex," if you like—is neurotically disturbed.

In his introduction of the novel in the Modern Library Edition Irving Howe contends that "the disarrangements of society, as sometimes the obsessions of politics, are embodied in the often deformed and grotesque sexual lives of the characters, and particularly the women."<sup>27</sup> The "decline of the sentiment of sex" which James acutely felt in the 1880's produced such anomalies as Olive on one hand, and Basil on the other. Both are grotesque figures. The feminist movement will go on without touching millions of shop-girls, who care more for Charlie than for their ballot, and such wenches as Mrs. Luna who would rather be trampled by men than by women.

In 1850 Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote in the conclusion of *The Scarlet*

*Letter:*

[Hester] assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness ... The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end!<sup>28</sup>

The above-quoted passage shows how Hawthorne perceived the problem of man and woman. He did not turn Hester into a Mrs. Farrinder—not to say an Olive Chancellor. For Hawthorne, Hester's transformation—that she became hard and dry—is a *sad* transformation. James's position is not far from his predecessor's, even though he is sympathetic to the basic claims of the woman's rights movement. However, James does not promise us "some brighter period." Nor is Verena the "angel and apostle of the coming revelation" Hester dreamed of. James concludes his book with another turn of the screw, as it were:

But though [Verena] was glad, [Basil] presently discovered that, beneath her hood, she was in tears. It is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, those were not the last she was destined to shed.<sup>29</sup>

Basil Ransom will shut up his bride altogether. In the meantime, if Verena is going to shed tears in the years to come, she won't shed tears for nothing—she will turn Basil Ransom into Henry Burrage. Basil will be pestered with Verena's nagging encouragement: "Why don't you write out your ideas?"<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the fear of feminization remains with James as well as with Basil Ransom. *The Bostonians* is an illustration of how James saw the

whole problem out of the side of his eye. The picture is lopsided. There is no political solution for the question of man and woman, which is purely a personal matter for an individual pair. And as we have observed, the idea of publicity is more often than not at odds with private values.

*The Bostonians* has very much to do with our age as it did with James's time. Lionel Trilling observed that the subject of James's novel is fit only for "a tale of mere eccentricity." It is susceptible only of comic treatment, and the comedy it seems to propose is not an attractive kind.<sup>31</sup> My purpose in the foregoing discussion has been to show that with Olive Chancellor, *The Bostonians* turns out to be more than a bitter farce. As he carries Verena from the Convention Hall, Basil sees Olive for the last time: "The expression of her face was a thing to remain with him forever; it was impossible to imagine a more vivid presentment of blighted hope and wounded pride. Dry, desperate, rigid, she yet wavered and seemed uncertain; her pale, glittering eyes straining forward, as if they were looking for death."<sup>32</sup> With that expression on her face Olive greets the impatient audience and the audience greet her with a respectful hush.

Psychological and emotional misfit as she is, Olive Chancellor assumes something of a heroine here. Behind the weirdly distorted image of Olive Chancellor, there lurks the sublime, the heroic, and the tragic, the effect William O'Connor expects from the grotesque. Verena does not yet see, as clearly as Olive does, "what she is doing." When she does realize what she has done, Verena will shed tears afresh.

#### NOTES

- 1 Henry James, "Preface" to *The Princess Casamassima*, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (New York: Scribner's, 1908), V, x.
- 2 Henry James, *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 47.
- 3 Henry James, *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock (1920; rpt. N. Y.: Octagon Books, 1970), II, p. 498.
- 4 *Notebooks*, p. 49.
- 5 For my present reading of *The Bostonians* I am indebted to the following

- authors: Irving Howe, "Introduction" to *The Bostonians* (New York: Modern Library, 1956); S. Gorley Putt, *A Reader's Guide to Henry James* (London: Cox & Wyman, 1966); Thomas Charles Samuels, *The Ambiguity of Henry James* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971); and Lionel Trilling, "The Bostonians" collected in *Henry James's Major Novels: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Lyall H. Powers (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1973).
- 6 William Van O'Connor, *The Grotesque: An American Genre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), pp.3-19.
  - 7 Samuels, *The Ambiguity of Henry James*, p.95.
  - 8 Henry James, *The Bostonians* (New York: Modern Library, 1956), p.462.
  - 9 *Ibid.*, p.274.
  - 10 *Ibid.*
  - 11 *Ibid.*, p.29.
  - 12 *Ibid.*, p.35.
  - 13 *Ibid.*, p.31.
  - 14 *Ibid.*, p.41.
  - 15 *Ibid.*, p.18.
  - 16 Samuels, *The Ambiguity of Henry James*, p.94.
  - 17 *Notebooks*, p.47.
  - 18 quoted in Rossi's Introductory Essay on Margaret Fuller, *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir*, ed. Alice S. Rossi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), pp.152-153.
  - 19 *The Bostonians*, p.80.
  - 20 *Ibid.*, p.79.
  - 21 *Ibid.*, p.343.
  - 22 *Ibid.*, p.457.
  - 23 *Ibid.*, p.422.
  - 24 Samuels, *The Ambiguity of Henry James*, p.96.
  - 25 Emma Goldman, "The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation," *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir*, p.511.
  - 26 *The Bostonians*, p.42.
  - 27 Irving Howe, "Introduction," p.xix.
  - 28 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Rinehart, 1965), pp.253-54.
  - 29 *The Bostonians*, p.464.
  - 30 *Ibid.*, p.341.
  - 31 Lionel Trilling, "The Bostonians," *Henry James's Major Novels: Essays in Criticism*, p.93.
  - 32 *The Bostonians*, p.462.

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