Henry James's The Bostonians: The Bond of Sisterhood and Gender Issues in the Post-Civil War Era

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Henry James's *The Bostonians*:
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Noriko Sunagawa

Introduction

Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886), as well as *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), typifies the style of the writer's middle years, but both were serious failures with the public when published.[1] In this period, James tried to go beyond his earlier work and move in a new direction by adopting French naturalistic method. Like Alfonso Daudet or Émile Zola, what preoccupied James was how to register and depict the people and events of his time, and this ambition induced him to embark on more topical subjects—the feminist cause in America in *The Bostonians* and the anarchist underground movement in England in *The Princess Casamassima*. Thus he put aside his favored theme, the America-Europe dichotomy as in "Daisy Miller" (1878) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881).

Despite its early failure, *The Bostonians* has in fact produced as many readings and interpretations as other major works by James. At the core of the critical controversy surrounding this novel lies a difficult set of questions: Does Basil Ransom finally rescue Verena Tarrant from Olive Chancellor, a "morbid" spinster? Is the friendship or union between Olive and Verena lesbian in nature? Or, as hinted in the last passage of the novel (". . . she [Verena] was in tears. It is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these were not the last she was

destined to shed"[2]), does the male triumph over female principle by forcibly suppressing women's voice? Briefly, it boils down to a question of gender and politics of sexuality.

Organizing the framework of this novel around complex forms of defiance, James reflected on the differences and oppositions between the masculine and feminine. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, it became rather difficult to clarify or define what masculinity or femininity essentially entailed, for the common perception of women's role accepted or largely approved of before then had lost its validity, due to a larger number of women in the workplace, the greater variety of professions open to them, and the rise of the new feminist movement. Social and political change brought about the awakening of women's consciousness, but simultaneously, it provoked a backlash against the trend, as it became increasingly difficult to draw the line between male and female spheres.

In addressing these tangled issues, we will probe further into the sexual politics informing *The Bostonians*. First, we will summarize attempts made by critics to demonstrate the norm of sexuality which prevailed at the time and consider the blindness of mainstream interpretations of the text to their sexual biases. Second, we will be concerned with the issue of romantic friendship between women—what was called a "Boston Marriage." We will reconsider and view the relationship between Olive and Verena in a specifically pre-Freudian context. Third, we will examine the significance of the feminist cause and the outraged rebellion against it, seeking to reveal some of the social and historical background out of which there emerged a generation of female public speakers. In addition, we will analyze the parallels and contrasts between the treatment of sexual politics in the text and the prevalent discourses

on the subject in American society at the time. Our aim is to analyze how invisible the fear of masculinazation of women and feminization of the nation were by examining changing perceptions of female same-sex unions, for they run parallel with and reinforce each other.

I

The union between Olive and Verena has been the subject of much controversy. James proficiently employs a love triangle plot, but in *The Bostonians,* he shifts from "the classic rivalry plot, involving a struggle between two men for a woman" into a battle where the "two rivals are a woman and man" (Stevens 90). Olive, who is from the upper class in Boston, is completely absorbed in the feminist cause, and displays a strong hatred for men: "She [Olive] considered men in general as so much in the debt of the opposite sex that any individual woman had an unlimited credit with them; . . . " (153). This fierce hostility towards men has her seek to push the cause forward. It is Verena who Olive sets up as the very medium for propagating her man-detesting theory. Verena is the daughter of a mesmeric healer. Her father is a sort of charlatan obsessed with fame and the mother is very snobbish, treating Verena as just a stepping-stone by which to enter high society. Verena is one of the typical innocent young protégée characters in James's fiction, who are victimized and under the control of greedy parents. Olive sees through their wicked motives—both of them are using and exploiting the innocent Verena—and when she meets them, she decides to take charge of Verena (Olive, by implication, pays a considerable sum of money for Verena). Olive's deliverance of Verena from her parents admits of two interpretations; Olive "saves" Verena from her greedy parents or she virtually "redeems" her from them for her own egoistic purposes. Ransom takes it for the latter. Ransom, who is a kind of

refugee from the miseries of the South after the Civil War, plays a conservative and reactionary role. He sees women as "essentially inferior to men, and infinitely tiresome when they declined to accept the lot which men had made for them" (202). In this sense, Olive's hatred for men and his contempt for women, "the opposite sex," are equivalent, but he falls in love with Verena.[3] Not permitting her to speak in public, he tries to make her give up her career as a public speaker, and "ransom" her from Olive.

Major critical assessments have characterized Olive as "odious," "perverse," "abnormal," "unnatural," and therefore, automatically, Ransom is regarded as a "heroic" figure, rescuing innocent Verena from the "neurotic" old maid. The renunciation of Olive and prompt approval of Ransom were—still are—viewed as positive developments in the critical reception of the text.[4] The first scholar to give much attention to this bias was Judith Fetterley. She created a stir, not only analyzing the text itself but also unmasking the bias of male—or what she called phallic—criticism:

> *The Bostonians* is of particular interest to the feminist critic because the critical commentary on it provides irrefutable documentation of the fact that literary criticism is a political act—that it derives from and depends on a set of values, usually unarticulated and unexamined, in the mind of the critic and that it functions to propagate those values. (101)

To sum up, what she reveals is the potential misogynistic tendency and phobic reaction against women on the part of male critics. There are two reasons why male critics reject Olive and her relationship to Verena. One is that their interpretations are very

much in accordance with the bias of James's own narrative. In a typical passage, Olive is described as unappealing:

> But this *pale* girl [Olive], with her light-green eyes, her pointed features and *nervous* manner, was visibly *morbid*; it was as plain as day that she was morbid. Poor Ransom announced this fact to himself as if he had made a great discovery . . . Why was she *morbid*, and why was her *morbidness* typical? Ransom might have exulted if he had gone back far enough to explain that mystery. (41, emphases are mine)

These are passages which seem to portray Olive, or more precisely, how she appears in Ransom's eyes. 'Hysteric,' 'nervous,' or 'morbid' were the terms or clichés used to describe rebellious women engaged in the women's rights movement:

> During an era when patriarchal culture felt itself to be under attack by its rebellious daughters, one obvious defense was to label women campaigning for access to the universities, the professions, and the vote as mentally disturbed, and of all the nervous disorders of the *fin de siécle*, hysteria was the most strongly identified with the feminist cause. (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 145)

James often excercises the privilege of the authorial, intrusive omniscient narrator, but in this text, the narrator occupies a more doubtful position, and it is difficult for us to decide whether he is against or for Ransom; elsewhere in the text, Ransom is mocked or ridiculed as being "very provincial," especially when Ransom's view of

women is presented: "If they would only be private and passive, and have no feeling but for that, and leave publicity to the sex of tougher hide! Ransom was pleased with the vision of that remedy" (42). Focusing on the features of the narration in reading off the whole text, we cannot help finding the overall tone satirical of Ransom and the narrator's point of view not wholly in line with Ransom's belief. James's authorial attitude is rather neutral and we cannot determine on which side his sympathy lies.

Consequently, male literary criticism must internalize—not to say to identify with—Ransom's "doctrines" saturated as they are with sexual biases, which, even in James's time, were "about three hundred years behind the age; doubtless some magazine of the sixteenth century would have been very happy to print them" (198). Or, their denunciation of Olive must derive from their phobia against the oddly intimate relationship between her and Verena. To cite Hugh Stevens, "*The Bostonians*, more than any other Jamesian text, has incited a huge outpouring of homophobic literary criticism" (92).

Most critics ferret out the non-heterosexual or "lesbian"—which was not a word in use in the nineteenth century—plot of the text:

> Yet, to a greater or lesser degree, such unexamined thinking obtains in all the criticism. For, as McMurray demonstrates, it is in the imputation of lesbianism, with all its assumed connotations, that the phallic critic feels he has irrefutable evidence for his reading of the book. To associate Olive with lesbianism is, in the critics' eye, to define her as odious, perverse, abnormal, unnatural—in a word, evil. . . First, the support for their final positions resides inevitably in an appeal to values which exist (or, better, are assumed to exist) outside the framework of the

novel. (Fetterley 109-110)

In other words, their analyses are performed in a post-Freudian framework where a very intimate or romantic relationship between women of the same sex is regarded as unnatural, and their denunciation of Olive attributes something perverse to Olive's woman-oriented tendency, which appears indeed dubious now.

II

In the preceding section, we pointed out that the union between Olive and Verena, or Olive's desire for Verena, has acquired a label as lesbian (and/or immoral) in mainstream criticism. But can James, a genteel writer who is regarded as having been particularly sensitive to the reading public's response, have had the intention to publish a book whose effect on readers he could not have predicted, at the risk of being regarded as being sexually undesirable? He gives a detailed account of the novel's genesis and the secret of its creation in *The Notebooks*. He spells out his intentions as follows:

> I wished to write a very American tale, a tale very characteristic of our social conditions, and I asked myself what was the most salient and peculiar point in our social life. The answer was: the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf. (20)

One of the notable features of James's writing in his middle years is the naturalistic rendering of society, and in this respect, he is like the French naturalists, who collected materials and data to grasp the minute details of their time out of ambitious and rather journalistic motives. James's intension in writing *The Bostonians*

was to illustrate the social conditions of a certain society in its historical and geographical setting, and to argue that "the situation of women" is just "the most salient and peculiar point" in America. James continues, "The relation of the two girls should be a study of one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England" (*Notebooks* 19). He doesn't reach a judgment concerning this same-sex union.[5]

Let us now look back at "the situation of women" in a historical context. Lillian Faderman positivistically follows out the transition in viewing love and friendship between women, based on a number of historical records and materials, including letters, diaries, and literary works. As she says "they [men] also did not suspect—any more than the women themselves did—that such an emotional and even physical closeness was 'lesbian,' at least in a twentieth-century definition. They did not treat it as an abnormality because it was common enough to be a norm" (*Surpassing the Love of Men* 157). The monogamous and longtime relationship between unmarried women—which was called a "Boston Marriage" in New England—was not uncommon in the late nineteenth century and not regarded as suspicious.[6] Primarily, upper- or middle-class white women were believed to be passionless or desireless in terms of the Victrorian concept of women's sexuality. It would be almost impossible to point out spiritual or physical perversity in same-sex love in a nineteenth-century sense, for example, as in the conversation of the following kind between Olive and Verena: " 'I'm not angry—I am anxious. I am so afraid I shall lose you. Verena, don't fail me!—don't fail me!' Olive spoke low, with a kind of passion" (148).

According to Faderman's analysis, women were even believed to have had and enjoyed the friendship with other woman, for women were associated with the spiritual and the moral, in contrast to the

rationality and intellect of men, and women who failed to acquire an intimate, altruistic relationship with other women were reproached for their lack of sensibility and female sensitiveness.[7] Furthermore, since women were considered to be "asexual" under the pressure of rigid Victorian attitudes, people didn't see sexual deviation in that friendship.[8] If they were moral, respectable white Christian women, they were all the more credible. In the novel, some people look at Verena, not Olive, with suspicion, because she can make her inspired speeches when her mesmeric father puts his hand on her head and his daughter goes into a trance. It was shameful for women to speak in public in the nineteenth century, so her conduct was likely to provoke suspicion among people.[9] Ransom sees Verena on the podium as disgraceful or slanderous, so he tries to persuade her to be more domestic, "the dining-table itself shall be our platform, and you shall mount on top of that" (379).

For women who devoted themselves to their profession or their cause, not domestic duties, it was more desirable and convenient for them to preserve a close union with other women. There was a definite separation between men and women; the former belong to the public sphere and the latter to the private or domestic sphere in the nineteenth century, as can be seen in the following comment by Ransom: " [women are inferior] For public, civic use, absolutely—perfectly weak and second rate. . . But privately, personally, it's another affair. In the realm of family life and the domestic affections —" (332). It must have been rather difficult for men to share women's inner life. Compared with men, women had more things in a domestic or private space to share with other women than with men, so it sounds natural that Olive says to Verena, "I thought it was our plan to divide everything" (296). Commenting on the union between "achievement-oriented women," Faderman says "Their long term

partners were other women; they divided duties not on the basis of sex-role stereotypes but on the basis of natural talents or inclination or time; . . . their marriages fostered rather than hampered their pioneering activities toward worldly success . . . " (*Surpassing the Love of Men* 187). In this respect, Ransom's application of masculine force to compel Verena to relinquish her professional career as an orator totally contrasts with Olive's attempts to encourage Verena: "he [Ransom] only wanted to smother her [Verena], to crush her, to kill her—as she would infallibly see that he would if she listened to him. It was because he knew that her voice had magic in it, and from the moment he caught its first note he had determined to destroy it" (369).

However, love and friendship between women, which was spiritually uplifting, came to be regarded as being unnatural or abnormal because of the dissemination of the knowledge of sexology, mainly from Germany toward the end of the nineteenth century.[10] But why does Olive attract negative attention from Ransom and is the target of Ransom's harsh hostility? We will discuss this problem and the close relations of sisterhood bonds and the feminist cause, analyzing Olive and other secondary characters below.

III

We have pointed out how Olive was described in the preceding chapter. When Ransom is in the library, he describes one fellow member of the cause as "in the highest degree a New England type," considering her "fair ringlets and refined anxious expression" (244-245). Then, what is the phenomenon peculiar to New England (among women)? To get a better sense of the social and political background of the rise of feminism and emergence of the female public speaker like Verena and its significance, we will study the

notion of "masculine" ("public") and "feminine" ("private"), which is focused on in the text.

We will outline here only briefly the gradual changes in the social construction of femininity before turning to the relations of the bond of women to the feminist cause. In the nineteenth century, the ideal role of women was conceived as care of the husband, and nursing, raising and educating children. We have made it clear before that women were regarded as having more highly spiritual values, like conscience or morality, than men, but this implies that not only were they "Angels in the House" or "moral mothers" but also symbolized the virtues of Republicanism. The act of supporting husbands, giving birth, and nurturing sons was intended to ensure the reproduction of future citizens of the republic, so their role consequently took on a national and "public" color. However, what has to be noticed is that their involvement with the nation remained indirect and implicit, although they were incorporated into the political system in line with the prevailing ideology and had a national function. In this sense, women were, none the less excluded from active participation in the political life of the nation.

There is fairly broad agreement that it was in the early nineteenth century that the separation of the spheres of men and women was firmly established in American society. The development of industrialization and capitalism promoted the shift from production within to that outside the home, which led to the split between domestic and public spheres. Women's activities were domestic reproduction within the home and protection of a private life, in contrast to the functions assigned men: social and economic production in public life. Ransom says " [women are] essentially inferior to men, and infinitely tiresome when they declined to accept the lot which men made for them" (202). This firmly supports the

notion of the spheres of men and women and discrimination in terms of sexuality and role. It is precisely in these terms that Verena bewails women's "lot" and lambastes society: " It's a remarkable social system that has no place for *us*!" (328), in rebuttal to Ransom's statement that "No place in public. My plan is to keep you at home and have a better time with you there than ever" (328).

However, the development of industrialization and capitalism brought about the growth of the middle class and increased its power. It came to be prosperous enough to give daughters more opportunity to have a higher education than before. One explanation for the enthusiasm of parents for providing daughters a good education may have been that education was increasingly viewed as a requirement if mothers were to educate children themselves at home. But the more opportunities women had to receive a higher education, the more career-oriented they became. In particular, as women of the middle class became better off, they in fact had more freedom than women of the upper class, which was traditionally strict in its definition and regulation of gender roles.[11] Added to this, the Civil War, which took the lives of many men increased the number of unmarried woman.[12] As a result some women started to use their talent and educations to the full, and others were obliged to find a job out of sheer necessity.

The larger number of women who had occupations—from servant positions to professional ones—signified the advance of women into the public or male sphere and the separation of male and female spheres came to lose its meaning. This eventually provoked some men to feelings of antipathy toward women. We will take two examples to illustrate this women-phobic reaction. Dr. Prance, an independent woman doctor, concentrates on her profession, and is indifferent to the movement for the rights of women, partly because

she thinks herself on equal footing with men. She says "Men and women are all the same to me" (67), which implies that she is almost free of any gender identity or transcends the sexual distinction. It seems to her that all human beings are neutral irrespective of sex: "She looked like a boy. . . It was evident that if she had been a boy, she would have 'cut' school, to try private experiments in mechanics or to make researches in natural history" (67). Ransom is somehow tolerant of her though she works in public, and does not make totally negative comments about her. He is convinced, however, that she is perversely masculinized, "spare, dry, hard, without an inflection or grace"(67), lacking female features which he insists all women ought to possess. However, her existence doesn't intimidate him, for her masculine tone is an isolated case; she is self-contained in her professional status, which was allowed in exceptional circumstances, and is never guided by a spirit of cooperation with other women or sisterhood.

Another example is Miss Birdseye, an old feminist pioneer who has dedicated her whole life to the movement. She is still a influential figure in Boston, but "she had a sad, soft, pale face, which (and it was the effect of her whole head) looked as if it had been soaked, blurred, and made vague by exposure to some slow dissolvent" (55). Her fruitless devotion in spite of her sincerity and lack of an orientation characterize her as incompetent. Both Dr. Prance and Miss Birdseye are, in different ways, desexualized, approaching a complete eradication of sexuality or, as James writes, figures who reflect "the decline of the sentiment of sex." Circumscribed by New England types of women, the cynical and aggressive tones are echoed in Ransom's voice. Consequently, the dissolution of the border of male and female spheres causes a misogynistic and phobic reaction against "New Women."

IV

Here, we will focus on women's political movements. Women's attributes were defined as fundamentally spiritual; for example, moral, and sensitive, as we have mentioned before. Many women—especially women of the upper and middle class—were involved with the movement for social reform out of moralistic motives. It is well known that the early feminist movement was closely linked with the movement of social reformation, abolition, and temperance. These activities were acceptable to society to the extent that they entailed moral guidance and elimination of social evils—slavery, drunkenness—and such actions seemed not to deviate from the role of womanhood. The following example suggests that acceptance on these terms was possible:

> There was a lithographic smoothness about her [Mrs Farrinder], and a mixture of the American matron and the public character. . . She was 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. (58, emphasis is mine)

Mrs Farrinder "lectured on temperance and the rights of women; the ends she laboured for were to give the ballot to every woman and take the flowing bowl from every man" (58), but she is not a powerful threat to society and she is acceptable to men, for she has a husband and still possesses female attributes, unlike Olive, in spite of her participation in the feminist cause.

The feminist movement was different from other social movements—reformation, temperance—in that it demanded equal

rights for women in every sense, and suffragettism entailed women's direct, explicit political action. This surpasses the role of woman, indirect participation in the nation as embodied in the concept of "Republican Motherhood." The anxiety that emerges when separation of masculine and feminine spheres begins to dissolve leads to a fear of the feminization of society, as women infringe on male privileges and become more independent. In a key passage, Ransom summarizes his thoughts on these issues:

> 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 solicitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and the most pretentious that has ever been. (327)

What the passage makes clear is male anger at the prevalence of social vice and male anxiety about American society and the situation of men. However, more noteworthy, Ransom's comment seems to suggest that an unwelcome, unpleasant phenomenon prevails in society, and such qualities are postulated as essentially feminine.

The fear of masculinization of women and that of feminization of men parallel with and reinforce each other. In reality, Ransom is a defeated man—he left the South which had been destroyed in the Civil War—and struggles to survive in the North, only to fail, as James cynically suggests. His denial and devaluation of women and femininity paradoxically reveal more of his own critical situation and how difficult and counter-productive the masculine identification has become. This indicates that his situation—politically, socially, and

financially deprived—possibly places him in a rather subordinate and marginalized position.

That fact that Ransom is from the defeated South and in a culturally and politically disadvantaged position is in contrast to that of Olive who is protected by the vested interests of the upper class. The battle for Verena between Ransom and Olive wears a political color, because his oppressive power silences Verena's voice for liberation of women by weakening the bond of sisterhood. The battle between the South and North is repeated as a proxy war between men and women. His struggle for the recovery of lost territory is replaced by a backlash against women who are rising to power as, for Ransom, Olive is a Bostonian, and "Bostonians are women, and Boston is representative of that element of reform which had so much to do with bringing the forces behind the Civil War to a head" (Fetterley 119). His problematic identity is correlated to a broader social anxiety which increased, in proportion to the degree of women's advance and gains in public, and this could be expanded into the crisis of social and political identity of America.

We have pointed out how the increasing number of women with professions was a threat to a conservative society and provoked the social anxiety and how women's involvement in a broad range of social activities prompted fear of a woman's invasion of the public sphere. The feminist movement revealed the fear of feminization and latent phobic reaction against women:

> It is true enough that feminists gains had the potential of shaking the traditional family structure. . . But the desire for a home, the desire to share life with another human being, and loneliness, and the fear of living alone and dying alone—these might certainly draw a woman to marriage. However, if

> woman on a large scale now had no hindrance in their freedoms, they might find kindred spirits, other women, and provided homes and solve the problem of loneliness for each other. (Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* 238)

The feminist cause violated the border between the spheres of male and female, and made it possible for women to fully participate in public, and female associations came to be vulnerable to criticism. Verena, who has a beautiful voice but demands a public, not domestic role for women, symbolizes this change. The act by Ransom of ruining Verena's voice and depriving her of Olive's companionship signifies not only "the male pen cancels the female voice: his writing is to replace, destroy, her speaking. In its most extreme implications it means that his phallus will negate her voice, deny her utterance, that organ, that gift. . . " (Tanner 56), but also symbolizes the assault by men on women's power and the potential phobia against intimacy between two women. The union of women and Olive's desire for Verena are threatening to a social structure—Olive hates men as a "race" and is independent of them—and the source of the fear of feminization. Ransom recognizes that this long-standing power structure, which was sustained by women's passivity and the concept of spheres, was being shaken as fixed gender images became more fluid.

Conclusion

As we have seen, in mainstream criticism, the rivalry plot of Olive and Ransom for Verena has been substituted for the struggle between same-sex love and heterosexual, and many critics have viewed Olive's desire for Verena as too possessive and perverse. In contrast to their denunciation of Olive, they approve of Ransom's

robbing of Verena as a positive act. This interpretation implies that Verena's deep engagement with other women is finally corrected and she is sexually, and morally, converted and chooses Ransom.

However, we find another aspect to the union between women in the nineteenth-century context; same-sex love between women was encouraged, common, and not yet stigmatized sexually. But the change in the situation of women gradually transformed a relation common between women into something "queer." The increasing number of women with higher education and professions caused social anxiety, for they implied the advance of women into the public sphere, which resulted in de-stabilizing a long-standing social structure sustained by differential sexual values.

As women invaded the male sphere, another anxiety arose; the fear of masculinization of women intensified, as women gained and exercised the same rights as men. On the other hand, as reaction prevailed, the frustration with female attributes — which were undesirable to a society—spread, causing a fear of feminization of the nation, as Ransom laments: "The whole generation is womanized: the masculine tone is passing out of the world" (327). Therefore, sharp criticism was heaped on the feminist movement, which called for a voice and role in public, not merely domestic, realms; the movement was a target of male assault. Furthermore, the increasing number of unmarried women undermined the traditional family structure, as some women had trouble finding husbands in the wake of the Civil War.

The fear of masculinization of women and feminization of the nation were one and indivisible, as the border between male and female spheres was dissolved and long-fixed gender images became blurred. The situation of women changed more drastically than that of men:

> The note of deviancy and perversion is pervasive and touches nearly all the characters in different ways: it is as though no one is sure what constitutes his or her identity, what his or her place is in society, what exactly is each one's sexuality and what it entails. They are displaced, unplaced—products and victims and symptoms of the confused society—or non society—of post-Civil War America. (Tanner 53)

The description of Dr. Prance and Miss Birdseye gives a good account of the fear of desexualizaition of women, or as James calls it, "the decline of sentiment of sex." Against this trend, a male backlash against increasing female power sought to suppress the voice of women, as the last part of the novel illustrates.

Sisterhood and the unity between women had been encouraged by society and was important in organizing and systematizing the early feminist movement. However, it came to be regarded as suspicious, though the quality of the love and relationship did not change. The year 1886 when *The Bostonians* was published was at the end of a period when close friendship between two women was viewed as socially permissible. Five or ten years later, James could not have written so naively of Olive's desire for Verena, or would have had to suppress his intention to embark on writing about the strong bonds of sisterhood peculiar to America out of a sense of self-censorship. It was not until the late nineteenth century that European sexologists started to study female same-sex love as a new form of perversion or disease, and disseminate the view that an intimate relationship between women, which had been spiritually uplifting, was to be discouraged and regarded with suspicion. The view of same-sex unions changed, as women began to possess greater

social influence. It was not long before non-heterosexual love—like that of Olive and Verena—began to be considered morbid and was socially stigmatized.

Notes

1. James wrote to William Dean Howells, "I have entered upon evil days —but this is for your most private ear. It sounds portentous, but it only means that I am still staggering a good deal under the mysterious and (to me) inexplicable injury wrought—apparently—upon my situation by my two novels, the *Bostonians* and the *Princess*, from which I expected so much and derived so little. They have reduced the desire, and the demand, for my productions to zero—as I judge from the fact that though I have for a good while past been writing a number of good short things, I remain irremediably unpublished." Henry James, "To William Dean Howells," 2nd January 1888, *Henry James Letters Volume III 1883-1895*, ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980) 209.
2. Henry James, *The Bostonians* (1886; London: Penguin, 1988) 433. Subsequent references are to this edition and page numbers are cited parenthetically in the text.
3. It seems more reasonable to suppose that Ransom's desire for Verena results from his strong rivalry against Olive. Fetterley has pointed out, "Indeed, given both Ransom's attitudes toward women and his essential sadism, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that his interest in Verena is the product of Olive's and that, were Verena not the object of Olive's desire, she would not be the object of his. Less love for Verena than the desire to exhibit his power and annihilate Olive is Ransom's motive, making him single Verena out from a class which he otherwise finds damnable"(146-147).
4. For further details of the listing of problematic critical assessments,

see Fetterley, 102-107.

5. James himself was familiar with a close relationship between women. His sister, Alice, had a long-time companion, Catharine Loring. She supported his neurotic, invalid sister and remained loyal until her death. James appreciated her devotion and she inherited one-fourth of Alice's property. See Leon Edel, *The Middle Years: 1882-1895* (1962; New York: Avon Books, 1978) 299-305.

6. The close relationship between women had been overlooked or tolerated until almost the mid-1880s: "Between marriage and celibacy, however, there were few sexual alternatives for respectable women. Heterosexual affairs were the realm of the prostitute; lesbianism was not recognized in public or medical discourse. By 1884, only four cases of lesbian homosexuality had been reported in European and American medical literature, and all were transvestites. . . Nevertheless, close long-term attachments between women, whether the 'romantic friendship' or the 'Boston Marriage,' both acknowledged and accepted. And although lesbianism had relatively little official place in medical discourse, it was a topic in literature and art, obviously well understood by a general audience" (Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* 23).

7. See, in particular, Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 157-158. For useful information on the history of the concept of female body and female natures or attributions, see also Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1999) 21-56.

8. For further details of the "asexual women," see Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 147-156.

9. For a discussion of trance speakers or female orators, see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989) 82-116.

10. See Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* 239-253. See also, Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1991) 37-61. Since Freud reduced all desire to a form of sexual desire and found libido even in women, "female desire drew the attention of advertisers, physicians, and social scientists alike. These groups agreed that female desire was healthy as long as it was narrowed and directed toward consumption and heterosexual expression within marriage. This lauding of heterosexuality helped to create a new physical intimacy between husbands and wives. It also led to attacks on the women's association that had been the source of women's political power. An emphasis on heterosexual expression led to the stigmatization of all women who were perceived as withdrawing sexually from men, including single career women, lesbians, and wives who devoted themselves primarily to their children rather than to their husbands." (Satter, 224)
11. See Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* 178-189.
12. See, in particular, Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* 183-184.

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