

ANALYSIS

The Bostonians (1886)

Henry James

(1843-1916)

“*The Bostonians* (1886)...deals with a group of American oddities somewhat stridently set on improving the status of women. Henry James himself belonged with the school of those who hold, in a phrase which he would have given up his position rather than use, that woman’s place is in the home. He brought to his narrative the tory inclination to satire, and filled the book with sharp caustic portraits and an unprecedented amount of caricature. His Bostonians recall that angular army of Transcendentalists whom Lowell’s essay on Thoreau hung up once for all in its laughable alcove of New England history. James regards them only too obviously from without, choosing as the consciousness through which they are to be represented a young reactionary from Mississippi, Basil Ransom, who invades this fussy henyard and carries away its prized heroine, Verena Tarrant, on the very eve of her great popular success as a lecturer in behalf of her oppressed but rising sex. By such a scheme James was naturally committed to making his elder Feminists all out as unpleasant persons, preying on Verena’s youth and charm and enthusiasm, and bound to keep her for their campaign no matter what it might cost her in the way of love and marriage.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(1921; Macmillan 1968) 174-75

“Miss Birdseye is believed to represent Elizabeth Peabody. Basil Ransom, a Mississippi lawyer, comes to Boston to seek his fortune, and becomes acquainted with his cousins, the flirtatious widow, Mrs. Luna, and her neurotic sister, Olive Chancellor. He is taken by Olive, a radical feminist, to a suffragette meeting, where he meets Miss Birdseye, an aged, altruistic worker for lost causes. They hear an address by beautiful young Verena Tarrant, whose gift of persuasion interests Olive as an instrument for her own use. Olive removes the girl to her own luxurious home, converts her to the feminist cause, and even urges her to vow that she will never marry. Fleeing the attentions of Mrs. Luna, Ransom attempts to win Verena to his belief that her proper sphere is a home and a drawing room, not a career as lecturer for a preposterous political movement, and there is open hostility between Ransom and the jealous Olive. Their struggle reaches a climax when Verena is about to begin her lectures, for she loses confidence, especially after the death of Miss Birdseye. Completely unnerved by Ransom’s presence at her initial appearance, she consents to marry him, and Olive, who must announce her protégé’s defection, is left desolate.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature
(Oxford 1941-83)

“Neither *The Bostonians* nor *The Princess Casamassima* is one of James’ complete successes, but treated together they could show his curious excursion into the Dickens kind of social novel, and could reveal also the strange mixture of perception and blindness in his grasp of political issues.... *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) had been moderately successful, but his next two novels, *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*, for both of which he had cherished high hopes, had almost served, as he wrote to Howells, to reduce the demand for his productions to zero....

He declared, while working on *The Bostonians*, ‘A mighty will, there is nothing but that! The integrity of one’s will, purpose, faith!’... When, in *The Bostonians*, he wanted to make a study of Olive Chancellor’s violent possessiveness over Verena Tarrant, he could do it out of his knowledge ‘of those friendships between women which are so common in New England.’ But though he could understand Lesbianism without having to give it a name, just as he could understand the corruption of children in *The Turn of the Screw*, he was elsewhere oblivious to sexual distortions which would seem an almost inevitable concomitant of the situations he posits. Take, for instance, ‘The Pupil,’ where, in contrast with Mann’s *Death in Venice*, there is no basis in homosexual attraction, and a consequent vagueness, as the story is

handled, in accounting for why the tutor's attachment to his charge is so strong as to make him destroy his prospects on the boy's account... What bothers Gide most in James' characters is the excessive functioning of their analytical powers, whereas 'all the weight of the flesh is absent'."

F. O. Matthiessen
Henry James: The Major Phase
(Oxford 1944-63) xiv, 1, 6, 93

"Henry James' *The Bostonians* (1886)...has a Southerner for a hero. Basil Ransom of Mississippi succeeds in rescuing the heroine Verena Tarrant from the 'mediums, and spirit-rappers, and roaring radicals' who are the heirs of the New England tradition of social reform. The conservative Southerner's freedom from shallow fads masquerading as philanthropy is held up as a saving principle of health. The reformers of the second generation are, by implication, either frauds or neurotics."

Henry Nash Smith
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 615

"Olive Chancellor, the Princess Casamassima, and in a different way Lady Dormer and Julia Dallow, are all wonderful studies of women in whom the will to power has supplanted the wisdom, as James conceived it, of suffering and understanding. 'I wished,' he noted of *The Bostonians* (1886), '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.'

He once said of George Sand that a woman could become a man but never a gentleman; and on the surface of *The Bostonians* feminism is treated in something of this farcical spirit, while deeper down it is treated strangely and subtly. The plot, of which there is a good deal, turns on a struggle for possession of the beautiful Verena Tarrant. She has a curious talent which is meant, one supposes, to represent the feminine virtue of passive receptivity: by a laying-on of hands her father can inspire her to improvise affecting speeches on the woman question. The implacably sunny Verena with her queer gift, the wonder of Boston, is a wraith out of Hawthorne...and not interesting. The two principal contestants for her are very interesting. They are the arch-feminist Olive Chancellor who proposes to save Verena for the cause of women's rights, and Basil Ransom who wants her for his wife.

Ransom's fight for Verena supplies the novel with a heavily inscribed line of action and suspense; but the girl herself is so nearly blank that their relations lack internal complication. Ransom, however, is an admirable portrait: a Southerner who remembers the War, a traditionalist, proud yet easy-going, a little indolent, fatalistic, humorous, given to fits of magniloquence, fond of beer and variety actresses. As opposed to the Bostonians he is not so much worldly as old worldly; but he is trying to make his way in New York, and it is his sophisticated New York acquaintances who provide the counterfoil to New England highmindedness. Yet their value in the picture, and even Ransom's, is overshadowed by the grotesque comedy of the Boston reformers with Olive Chancellor at their head. Save for Olive's prim parlors, Boston is seen as uniformly drab and seedy....

The people themselves are a kind of emanation from this rubbishy and insubstantial landscape. One recalls Van Wyck Brooks's phrase for the reformers of the '40s: 'a queer miasmatical group of lunar phenomena'; yet James is not dealing with the original group of abolitionists and Brook Farmers, his father's generation, but with the epigone of the '70s. A survivor of the heyday, the musty, indistinct Miss Birdseye, busy forever in an infinity of causes, is as representative as she is amusing. 'The whole moral history of Boston was reflected in her displaced spectacles'--that and more: Miss Birdseye is the bookshop reformer done for all time. And she is not the less devastating because James had a tenderness for her and distinguished her from her latter-day companions. She is really disinterested, the real thing; but as for the rest, the postwar disillusionment [is]...upon them; and they crudely exploit a taste for causes and curiosities which has not become public property.

Verena Tarrant has 'queer bad lecture-blood in her veins,' her parents being old troupers of the lyceum and the free-love colony. While her mother slyly aspires to gentility, her father practices mesmeric

healing.... If we must track him down, Selah Tarrant is 'a moralist without moral sense'; and so in her more complex, refined, and terrible way is Verena's friend Olive Chancellor. We read in the notebook [of James] that 'the relation between the two girls should be a study of one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England.' But on Olive's part it is more than a friendship; she is pretty distinctly a case of perverse sexuality; and whether or not James knew what he was doing, he had certainly observed curiously some real instance of Olive's derangement. To William he apologized for including in the novel so much 'descriptive psychology'; and Olive is a rare case in James of a character transfixed in its symptoms. It should be added that a candid naturalism broods over the entire narrative, which is strewn with pointed physical detail: gestures, mannerisms, the shape of hands, the color of hair, the look of garments.

Olive's New York sister Mrs. Luna (the *female*, as distinguished from Olive the feminist and Verena the feminine) is openly on the make for Ransom. And Olive herself, with her dark hair and sharp pale face and white hands, her shaky composure and blurted speech, her habit of broadcasting tremors of suffering as a stove does waves of heat, her sympathy with the strange and exotic—"It was the usual things of life that filled her with silent rage"--is the proud Puritan spirit turned into wretched body. She stares at the gold buttons on Verena's bodice. She seizes the girl and wraps her 'in the fold of a cloak that hung ample upon her own meagre person,' while an irreverent intruder remarks, 'You ladies better look out, or you'll freeze together.' Strange though she is, poor Olive (we pity her all the more because James pities her so little) has her place in the Jamesian genealogy....

The taste of *The Bostonians* is sharp and dry... The style is consciously bare, epigrammatic rather than allusive. The novel is the most considerable product of the social historian in James. It has the effect of not quite filling out its panoramic dimensions; it is intense only in spots, but these are unforgettable. If it had not been so badly received in America, *The Bostonians* might have become one of a series of *scenes de la vie de province*."

F. W. Dupee
Henry James
(1951; Morrow 1974) 129-32

"Another type of recent Jamesian commentator who never would be missed is the one who goes about smelling out homosexual characters in James. This has not been established in any case. Olive Chancellor, of *The Bostonians*, is the most likely candidate, but in view of what James says about her, it is not possible to prove that he had Lesbianism in mind."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 160

"Though entirely nonpolitical in the ordinary sense, James had been a warm partisan of the North during the Civil War... *The Bostonians* [displays] marvelously dry wit in satirizing New England society.... *The Bostonians* wounded the self-regard of earnest middle-class readers, for it took a dim view of the New England reforming tradition which, by then, had been comfortably aligned with the national appetite for self-congratulation.... The public failure of *The Bostonians*...hurt and bewildered James.... To some extent this disappointment may have hastened his turn from the social novel, which meant, as he knew, to forego his earlier ambition to become the American Balzac...

The Blithedale Romance, a novel that is in many ways a forerunner of *The Bostonians*... James[']s reformers no longer have the capacity for a large irregular experience, they have declined into eccentric chatter.... James finds a distinct pleasure...in swooping down on the frauds and quacks of Boston.... *The Bostonians* is infused with skepticism not only in regard to New England reformers but also to the claims and pretensions of American society as a whole. The idea of social reform is treated less with hostility--for it isn't ideas as such that form his main target--than with cool and ironic misgivings. This may be offensive to our liberal or radical pieties... He was even bolder in supposing that the ideological obsessions which form so constant a peril for public life will leave their mark, not merely on social behavior, but also on the most intimate areas of private experience [Feminists in the late 20th century were to insist that even "the

personal is political”]... James anticipated one of the great insights of psychological theory: that the price of a complex civilization is often the complex diminution of pleasure...

Even Basil Ransom, the one character ready to invoke the pleasure principle, does not and cannot really live by it.... All the major characters in *The Bostonians*--Olive Chancellor, through her need to reject both the masculine and feminine modes of life, Verena Tarrant, through her need to believe in the wisdom of those who make demands on her, Basil Ransom, through his need to proclaim his masculinity as if it were a manifesto--are victims not only of each other but also of themselves.... *The Bostonians*, said James, was to be concerned with ‘the decline in the sentiment of sex’--a phrase that can be read in at least two ways. One of them would point to the problematic status of women in modern society, the other to the equally problematic relation between pleasure and civilization. Not one of the people in *The Bostonians* has a secure sense...of what his culture expects from him in his sexual role. All of them are displaced persons, floating vaguely in the large social spaces of America....

While Basil Ransom is ready to talk about the proper place of women, who are for him the solacing and decorative sex, James is far too much of a Realist to suggest that they can or ever will again assume this place: even Ransom’s lady relatives in Mississippi, deprived of their darkies, have been reduced to hard work. If Ransom is expressing James’ views at all, it is in a style so deliberately inflated as to carry the heaviest ironic stress. In the hidden depths of the novel there may be some notion of what a harmonious relationship between the sexes should be, but it is not the relationship Ransom advocates and, except for vague intimations of a comely conservatism, it is not a relationship James could easily have specified....

Part of the humor of *The Bostonians*--at times, it must be admitted, a rather hard-spirited humor--comes from James’ quickness at seizing upon those large glaring elements of the ridiculous that were inherent in the Feminist movement and, for that matter, in the whole feminine effort to find new modes of social conduct. Yet James is fair enough to grant that Feminism cannot be understood as if it were a mere sport of the New England mind. That such a movement could hardly avoid neurotic and morbid contaminations seems obvious enough: no social movement can. But this fact would hardly be very interesting if James did not also see Feminism as inseparable from the conditions of American culture, as emblematic of a social and moral malaise.... Far from indulging any notions about ‘eternal’ wars between the sexes--Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom can hardly be said to represent the sexes!--James established his drama in the actualities of late nineteenth-century American life....

The form, the tone, the quality of Feminism in *The Bostonians* is not to be imagined as existing anywhere and at any time but those specified by James--which is to say that it is part of a vast uprooting of American life which begins after the Civil War and has not yet come to an end.... *The Bostonians* is concerned with dramatizing a parallel disarrangement of social and sexual life... James writes from a conservative skepticism that is more readily understood as a cultural value than as an explicit politics.... James is also registering an uneasy contempt for the very idea of ‘public life,’ which for him would always be at odds with private values.... One of the few times that James relaxes his hostility to Olive Chancellor is the moment she draws back from the feminists because they offend, not her moral sense, but her fastidious sensibility....

In the mass industrial society that was coming into existence toward the end of the nineteenth century, the role of the sexes with regard to one another was no longer clear, the centers of authority and affection had become blurred, the continuity of family culture was threatened, but most important of all: the idea of what it meant to be human had come into question.... Basil Ransom, the recalcitrant Southerner, was a convenient device for marshaling the possibilities of opposition to things as they were... [James] is presenting a singularly unattractive group of women; but his acute and witty apprehension of their sexlessness or their sexual distortions would be quite impossible if he did not have in reserve a sense of the possibilities of human sexuality.... 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.... [Mrs. Luna] is at least as far as any woman in the novel from the norm of womanliness James seems to have intended, for her sexuality has turned rancid, it has been corrupted into a strategy for social acquisition....

For all the moral and psychological differences between them, Mrs. Luna and Olive Chancellor occupy symmetrical points of distance from their society: it is hardly an accident that James imagined them as sisters who despise one another. Olive Chancellor regards the sexual impulse as an enemy of her purpose, Mrs. Luna employs it as a conscience of her ego. In Olive the sexual impulse had been starved by her radical fanaticism, in Mrs. Luna it has been debased by her conservative parasitism. Olive feels nothing but aggression toward society, Mrs. Luna wishes merely to appropriate its comforts. Nonetheless, Olive's rejection of the feminine role and Mrs. Luna's exploitation of it have many elements in common. Both are self-betrayed in their life as women, the one through the grandeur of ideology and the other through the paltriness of vanity. Neither really 'belongs' anywhere, Olive keeping a finicky distance from the reformers with whose cause she identifies, Mrs. Luna being unable to break into the elegant social circles to which she aspires. And in both women the waste of sexual power is paralleled by a social malaise that seeps into their very souls, leaving one of them embittered and the other petulant.

Except for the still impressionable Verena, all the women in the novel seem, by intent, off-center and abnormal, lacking in womanliness or femininity. Dr. Prance, for example, represents an extreme possibility of Feminism: she is a comic grotesque, rather likable for her blunt common sense but also frightening in her disciplined incapacity for emotion. She is a reduction, though hardly *ad absurdum*, of Feminism, a warning of what it could become if driven to its extreme. For she has done what Olive Chancellor would like to do but cannot quite manage: she has totally denied her life as a woman. This, James seems to be saying, is how you may yet prance, dear ladies--like the good and terrible Mary Prance.

But James was too shrewd an observer, and too skilled a novelist, to set off against this grim specter of Feminism an ideal or idealized figure of feminine loveliness. Verena Tarrant has little but her promise, and her promise consists of little but her malleability.... No matter how much her outer, social being had been tarnished by the quackery of Boston there remains a pure feminine center, available to none but Basil Ransom.... But if she is intended mainly as a charming creature over whose imperiled innocence a violent battle of ideologies is being fought, he brilliantly succeeded. For seen in this way Verena...need only be more attractive and receptive than the other women--which, in the circumstances, is not very difficult.... It is through Olive Chancellor that James registers the full and terrible price that is paid by a first-rate intelligence as it is ravaged by social disorder and psychological obsession....

Conceiving of herself as a St. Theresa of Beacon Hill, Olive is afflicted with a yearning for martyrdom that can find no satisfactory release.... Her rejection of femininity goes far beyond a distaste for the traditional status of women: it is part of her fundamental impatience with the elementary conditions of human life. ('It was the usual things of life that filled her with silent rage.') She rejects the idea of 'the natural'... Olive's lesbianism becomes both a cause and emblem of her social incapacity. Though James hardly presents heterosexual relations in any ideal light, he implies that they at least make possible sustained and regular communication between human beings, thereby becoming one of the tacit means by which society is knit together.... The idea that passive femininity can subdue male energy as aggressive Feminism cannot is another link between *The Blithedale Romance* and *The Bostonians*....

Olive's lesbianism, however--partly because it is antipathetic to society, partly because it is suppressed--cuts her off from everyone, except for a time Verena, and renders her incapable of genuine communication in either public or private life.... Seen from this point of view, Olive is a descendant of Hawthorne's villains--but with this crucial difference, that James realizes she commits the great sin of manipulating human beings... Actually, she is the most vulnerable figure in the book and toward the end James allows not merely an awareness of how painful her defeat is (for she is never even granted a confrontation, she is simply run away from) but also a sense that in defeat she achieves a gloomy sort of magnificence. Her symptoms are presented with a remarkable directness: persistent hysteria, a will to power that is inseparable from...an unqualified aggression toward men.... Yet, as James keeps insisting, she is a woman of attainment and rectitude--were she not at least the intellectual equal of Basil Ransom, her defeat would hardly matter. Her fanaticism is a function of a gnarled and impoverished psyche; her destructive will, the means by which ideology is transformed into hysteria.... It is sometimes asked whether James 'really knew' how thoroughly he had drawn a lesbian type. The question is relevant only if we suppose that because people of an earlier age did not use our vocabulary they necessarily understood less than we....

From the moment we see him, Basil Ransom--an opinionated provincial...is treated by James with a cool and detached irony... [Ransom] can lay claim to none but personal powers; his cultural tradition is smashed and no one knows this better than he. It is true that he is free from the small shabbiness of the New England mind in its decline... And while he lays claim to a disenchanting realism, he reveals more than a touch, as James meant he should, of the sentimental and callow. He considered that women 'were essentially inferior to men and infinitely tiresome when they refused to accept the lot which men had made for them'--an example, no doubt, of the 'civilized principles' upon which he can fall back....

Ransom's 'scruples were doubtless begotten of a false pride, a sentiment in which there was a thread of moral tinsel, as there was in the Southern idea of chivalry.' But most remarkable of all is the incident in which Ransom solemnly declares himself ready for both marriage and the future on the extraordinary ground that one of his essays has finally been accepted by *The Rational Review*, a journal of which the title sufficiently suggests both its circulation and influence. If nothing else, this would be enough to convince us that Ransom is as naively and thoroughly, if not as unattractively, the victim of a fanatical obsession as Olive Chancellor--this characteristic delusion of the ideologue (the pathos of which is one of the few things that makes poor Ransom endearing) that if only his precious words once appear in print, the world will embrace his wisdom and all will be well. Were Ransom an 'ideal intelligence,' the novel would be hopelessly unbalanced. For what possible drama or significance could there be in a clash between so exalted a figure as he would then be and so wretched an antagonist as Olive Chancellor? The truth, I would suggest, is that in his way, Ransom is as deeply entangled with his ideology as Olive with hers, and that the clash between styles of culture which is supposed to be reflected in their struggle is actually a rather harsh comedy in which both sides, even if to unequal degrees, are scored off by James....

This, indeed, is the great stroke of *The Bostonians*: that everything, even aspects of private experience supposedly inviolable, is shown to be infected with ideology.... Everything is touched by it, from politics to sex, from music to love.... The first 150 pages of the novel present directly a world of contention and decline; there follows a somewhat hesitant section, set mainly in New York--and then the struggle is resumed, more bitterly, more fiercely, more poisonously, on the face of it a struggle of love but in its depths a struggle of politics.... Ransom is no poor shabby gentleman watching life glide away; he is a man of energy and will, as hard as Olive and less frenetic.

And as for James, always a little uneasy before the more direct forms of masculine energy, there is a fascination in seeing this energy exert itself. But the logic of the book demands that Ransom win. For if the struggle between Ransom and Olive over Verena is a struggle between competing ideologies over a passive agent of the natural and the human, then it is a struggle between ideologies that are not equally in opposition to the natural and the human. When she is finally driven to her choice, Verena chooses in accordance with those rhythms of life which Olive bluntly violates but Ransom merely exploits. In a dazzling final sentence James writes that...'these tears were not the last she was destined to shed.' What James thought of Ransom's pretensions, what he made of the whole affair, how thoroughly he maintained the critical and ironic tone throughout the book, is suggested in this hint that Ransom and Verena, married at last, would live unhappily ever after."

Irving Howe
Introduction, *The Bostonians*
(Random House/Modern Library 1956) vi-xxviii

"Satirically, James portrays a strong-minded Boston woman, Olive Chancellor, representing a new generation of 'do-gooders,' who takes life hard and is interested above all in the emancipation of women. She finds or thinks she finds a kindred soul in a beautiful and impressionable girl, Verena Tarrant, and the plot turns on the domination of one woman by the other. The theme was suggested by Alphonse Daudet's *Evangeliste* (1883), but James intended it to be at the same time 'a tale very characteristic of our social conditions.' *Bostonians* attacked the novel angrily as a false portrayal of their city, and American critics in general (William Dean Howells was a notable exception) censured James for his lack of local feeling. It was in fact one of the first American novels to deal more or less explicitly with Lesbianism. James omitted it from the definitive New York edition of his novels."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature

(Crowell 1962)

“The phase when his genius functioned with freest and fullest vitality is represented by *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) together with *The Bostonians* (1886)...one of James’s acknowledged masterpieces... Pure James...as we find it in the description of Miss Birdseye, the un-Dickensian subtlety--the penetrating analysis... We are a long ways from Dickens here. And the subtlety is never absent. Nevertheless, it remains obviously right...to say that, in his rendering of the portentous efflorescences of American civilization, as represented by the publicists, the charlatans, the cranks, the new-religionists, the Feminists, and the newspaper-men, he gives us *Martin Chuzzlewit* redone by an enormously more intelligent and better educated mind. The comedy is rich and robust as well as subtle.

But when we come to Olive Chancellor, New England spinster and representative of the earnest refinement of Boston culture, we have something that bears no relation to anything Dickens could have done, though it bears an essential relation to this comedy. James understands the finer civilization of New England, and is the more effective as an ironic critic of it because he both knows it from inside and sees it from outside with the eye of a professional student of civilization who has had much experience of non-Puritan cultures.... The kind of knowledge...we expect of a great novelist--knowledge that doesn’t favor enthusiasm for such constructions as the religion of humanity. We are not to identify him with Ransom, but we don’t suspect him of enthusiasm for that religion, and it is made very plain that he shares Ransom’s ironical vision of the ‘reformers.’

In fact, *The Bostonians* has a distinct political interest. James deals with the Feminist movement with such dispassionate lightness and sureness, with an insight so utterly unaccompanied by animus, if not by irony, that Miss Rebecca West couldn’t forgive him (in her book on James she can find nothing to say in favour of *The Bostonians*). The political interest, it is true, is incidental; but to that it owes its provocative strength: James’s preoccupation is centered in the presentment of Miss Chancellor and of her relations with the red-haired and very Americanly vital and charming girl, Verena Tarrant, whom she is intent on saving from the common fate of women--love and marriage--and dedicating to the Cause. And James’s genius comes out in a very remarkable piece of psychological analysis...(and done, it is worth noting, decades before the impact of Freud had initiated a general knowingness about the unconscious and the subconscious).

The relation of Miss Chancellor to Verena is at bottom, and essentially, a very painful matter, but it provides some very fine psychological comedy.... On the relation of Feminism to the conscience James is very good--the New England conscience, of course, is for him a central theme. In Olive Chancellor he relates the conscience, the Feminism, the culture and the refinement. ‘Olive almost panted’ when she proposed to herself as the ideal happiness ‘winter evenings under the lamp with falling snow outside, and tea on a little table’... As for vulgarity: ‘Olive Chancellor despised vulgarity... Miss Chancellor would have been much happier if the movements she was interested in could have been carried on only by the people she liked, and if revolutions, somehow, didn’t always have to begin with one’s self--with internal convulsions, sacrifices, executions.’

It is her representative plight, of course, that she has to take the impact of vulgarity in its most fantastically gross forms....The unshunnable, invulnerable, and hardly conscious impudence of the American newspaper-man, servant of a ‘vigilant public opinion,’ is rendered with a force so much surpassing Dickens’s...because of the so much greater subtlety of James’s art and the significance drawn from the whole context. The cold, forbidding distinction of the well-born Boston spinster goes for nothing here.... This play of contrasts--thin refinement against confident vulgarity, fastidiousness against expansive publicity, restrictive scruple against charlatanry in tropical luxuriance--runs all through James’s rendering of the New England aspect of American civilization.

The Bostonians is a wonderfully rich, intelligent and brilliant book. I said that it is an acknowledged masterpiece, but I don’t in fact think that it has anything like the reputation it deserves. It could have been written only by James, and it has an overt richness of life such as is not commonly associated with him. It is incomparably witty and completely serious, and it makes the imputed classical status of all but a few of

the admired works of Victorian fiction look silly. It is one of James's achieved major classics, and among the works that he devoted to American life it is supreme."

F. R. Leavis

The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad
(1937; NYU 1963) 127, 132-35, 137-38

"James' description of Miss Birdseye, an elderly veteran of several reform campaigns, was immediately recognized by his Aunt Kate, James Russell Lowell, and his brother William James, to be that of Elizabeth Peabody, Nathaniel Hawthorne's sister-in-law, a well-known figure in the Boston reform movements. They objected to his caricatured portrait of her, and James admitted that Miss Peabody had crossed his mind in his first musings on the character although he hadn't seen Miss Peabody for twenty years. In later installments of the originally serialized novel, James tried to give more 'dignity' to Miss Birdseye in response to these reactions, yet it must be seen that his opening portrait of Miss Birdseye is not so much an attack on Miss Peabody as on women who are politically dedicated.... James' reference to a struggle in the 'feminine camp' centering around two 'imperial women,' Olive Chancellor and Mrs. Farrinder, is probably a reference to a split in the women's movement, of which there were many....

James' description of Olive is only a reflection of the epithets that were thrown at Feminists at the time that James was writing.... The name Olive is probably meant to suggest a person who is drab and decidedly unsweet. As James draws her, Olive's white skin is pulled tightly across her prison-like face; her features are sharp and cold; her eyes are green ice; she has absolutely no figure; she is devoid of laughter. 'She was so essentially celibate that...she appeared old.' Besides seeing Olive as an archetypal 'castrating bitch,' James strongly implies that she is a latent lesbian who has hypnotized naive Verena for her own 'perverted' purposes. Leon Edel, however, claims that James was not consciously portraying a lesbian relationship, but, rather, that in James' time, Bostonian morality considered an intense non-homosexual relationship between two women to be improper. James' sister, Alice James, was at the time James wrote *The Bostonians* and for some years thereafter, having an intense relationship with Katherine Loring.

James seeks to discredit the women's movement by portraying a Feminist leader as an 'odd' woman. In other words, James attempts to brand the women's movement with the charge of 'lesbianism' or perhaps only 'intense relationshipism'--either way, obviously an effective tactic in puritanical nineteenth-century America. Despite James' own view of the matter we can still be moved by Olive's love for Verena when she begs Verena, 'Don't fail me, or I shall die.' Because we are not circumscribed by James' sense of Victorian propriety, we can legitimately respond to the relationship between Olive and Verena in a way that James never intended."

Nan Bauer Maglin

"Fictional Feminists in *The Bostonians* and *The Odd Woman*"
Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives
(Bowling Green U 1972) 221-222, 19-21
ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon

"The two influential groups who caused James to be canonized were the New Critics and the Partisan Reviewers. Because the influence and social conservatism of the former group seem obvious, I concentrate on the latter, particularly Philip Rahv and Lionel Trilling [both political liberals, as expressed in Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*] who were not always candid in revealing the bases of their literary allegiances. These two critics considered *The Bostonians* a great masterpiece of social Realism about an uprooted and invasive society, and they made the novel available in cheap modern editions. The reasons why they loved the book so much and put it back on the map was that it endorsed their own unacknowledged conservative commitments. Turning decisively away from the politics of the Left, increasingly devoted to the sacredness of the private self and suspicious of 'mass' society and all reform movements, Rahv and Trilling found in James's unsuccessful attempt [?] to write an American novel a distinguished version of their own basic fantasy--the fantasy that no decent man can find a place in American political life. At the heart of the James revival lies...highbrow depoliticization...

In 'Paul Blecker' Rebecca Harding Davis wrote, 'I chose a bilious, morbid woman to talk to you of, because American women are bilious and morbid.' Olive Chancellor, who is said by James in *The*

Bostonians to be typical (though he evades saying what she is typical of), is also bilious and morbid, 'a woman without laughter'... Basil Ransom's diatribe in *The Bostonians*, which takes place in the 1870s, thus applies not only to James and Howells, and their age, but to a large segment of American culture extending over at least two generations: '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'... James modeled [Ransom] this virile, aggressive Southerner after Mississippi's Senator Lamar, whom he barely knew.... James was never qualified to describe American men....

In 1945 [Rahv] brought out an edition of James's most ambitious and substantial novel about American life, *The Bostonians*. Rahv's was the first twentieth-century edition of this novel. He approved of its negative picture of 'the hysteria of Feminism'... Rahv saw Olive Chancellor as a brilliant, pre-Freudian study of lesbianism.... Although Basil Ransom forcibly deprives Verena of her own 'discriminations' and 'experience,' Rahv insisted on 'the author's apparent sympathy' with this Southern reactionary. And although Basil's ambitions lie wholly in the urban North, Rahv saw him as a precursor of the Southern agrarians. Even more weirdly, Rahv saw Basil as an early version of the most distinguished Modernist of all, T. S. Eliot. What Basil had in common with these gentlemen is that his 'criticism of modern civilization is rooted in traditionalist principles.' *The Bostonians* was a great novel because it sent up a large effort of radical social reform.... For Trilling, as for Rahv, impacted radicalism led directly to a proclamation of *The Bostonians* as a masterly representation of the deathly anomie of American social life....

Even more interesting is that Maxim [in Trilling's novel *The Middle of the Journey*] is in precisely the same position as Basil Ransom in *The Bostonians*. Both are threatened by the Left--by radical Feminist reform or by Marxist subversion--and both feel themselves in extreme jeopardy. Hence, when Trilling wrote his introduction to his 1953 edition of *The Bostonians*, he, like Rahv, was profoundly impressed by James's portrayal of Ransom. For Trilling, too, Feminism was a dead movement--an old, stuffy, unfunny, unimportant, and more than anything else, anti-sexual crusade. So stultifying was this crusade, in fact, that it even threatened James the artist as he tried to work out his one big novel on American life. James triumphed by seeing that the right way to make Feminism work in a novel was to focus on its repressive and anti-erotic side. In doing so James represented 'the bitter total war of the sexes' that would appear in Strindberg and D. H. Lawrence.

But although Trilling praised the novel for its rendering of the sexual war, what he was actually praising it for was that it supported Basil's version of male supremacy, and attacked Feminism.... Trilling clearly identified with the figure of the embattled conservative threatened by radicals so committed to their political causes that they deny the 'biological' and 'conditioned' aspect of human life.... Trilling, rather like Dostoyevsky in *The Possessed*, sees radicals as a kind of demon-ridden folk. There is clearly some truth in this view... He is surely on the mark in perceiving that [radicals]...occasionally...justify real tyranny and terror... But it is one thing to denounce absolutist politics, quite another to abandon liberal reform....

The first third of *The Bostonians* is brilliant if distorted social fiction; the remainder of the novel is a letdown... These critics not only exaggerated James's achievement in the novel but praised it for the wrong reasons. They distorted James's hostile expose of a social movement's tyrannical aspect into a denunciation of progressive reform. They were far too eager to identify with the aristocratic male lead... The reason they made these mistakes, giving their highest praise to *The Bostonians* and proclaiming James the great nineteenth-century Realist, was that the book authorized their escapist fantasies....balked former radicals." [This critic is a Marxist feminist, a politically correct revisionist who spent his career arguing that Howells is a greater novelist than James because he became a Socialist.]

Alfred Harbeger
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At the very end when Ransom is carrying off Verena from the crowd in the auditorium, she says, "'Ah, now I am glad!' But though she was glad, he 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, these were not the last she was destined to shed." The word "union" evokes the United States. The identification of the

North with Olive and Verena, and the South with Ransom has established a geo-political allegory, general rather than detailed as in Hawthorne. North and South are archetypes of vertical psychology: head over instinct. At the end of *The Bostonians*, Nature prevails over ideology. However, Ransom's triumph is richly ironic, since this union is "so far from brilliant." Given their differences and her tears, it may even lead to a marital Civil War--reminding us that in that conflict, eventually the North won.

Michael Hollister (2015)

