

The final version appears in *How One City's Cultural Tradition Shaped American Identity in the Nineteenth Century: Essays on Henry James's The Bostonians* (1886). Lewiston, NY, and Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008. 39-56.

***The Bostonians, or, Life among the Bourgeoisie:
From Uncle Tom's Cabin to Olive Chancellor's Townhouse***

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Several months before *The Bostonians* made its appearance in serial form in *Century Magazine* in February 1885, James published "A New England Winter," a short story about an aspiring American artist who lives in Paris but goes home to Boston to visit his mother. This tale clearly marks the beginning of James's experiment with literary naturalism, a movement that was closely aligned with French impressionist painting, or the new realism as some preferred to call it. James's protagonist, Florimond Daintry, is one such painter and his impressions of Boston provide some remarkable insight into James's view of Boston. Upon observing his former home town, it occurs to Florimond

that it was a fortunate thing the impressionist was not exclusively preoccupied with the beautiful. He became familiar with the slushy streets, crowded with thronging pedestrians and obstructed horse-carts, bordered with strange, promiscuous shops, which seemed at once violent and indifferent, overhung with snowbanks from the housetops; the avalanche that detached itself at intervals, fell with an enormous thud amid the dense procession of women, made for a moment a clear space, splashed with whiter snow, on the pavement, and contributed to the gaiety of the Puritan capital. (111)

Having "forgotten the details of American publicity" (112), what struck Florimond as he strolled down Washington Street was not only the marked increase in commercial activity, but the predominance of women, both inside and outside the myriad shops lining the street. In addition to "the sisterhood of 'shoppers,' laden with satchels and parcels" (111), behind the gleaming plate-glass windows,

in the hot interiors, behind the counters, were pale, familiar, delicate, tired faces of women.... But the women that passed through the streets were the main spectacle. Florimond had forgotten their extraordinary numerosity, and the impression that they were perfectly at home on the road; they had an air of possession, of perpetual equipment, a look, in the eyes, of always meeting the gaze of crowds, always seeing people pass, noting things in shop windows, and being on the watch at crossings; many of them evidently passed most of their time in these conditions, and Florimond wondered what sort of *intérieurs* they could have. He felt at moments that he was in a city of women, in a country of women.... The talk, the social life, were so completely in the hands of the ladies, the masculine note was so subordinate, that on certain occasions he could have believed himself (putting the brightness aside) in a country, or in a seaport half depopulated by the absence of its vessels. (112-13)

Although the narrator does not refer to it, the glaring absence of men was, at least in apart, a consequence of the Civil War, which clearly places the story in the same period with which *The Bostonians* is concerned.

We know from his transcription of the letter to his original publisher, J.R. Osgood, that in James's conception of the novel, he wanted to focus on "the most salient and peculiar point" of American social life, leading him to consider "the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf" (*Notebooks* 20). As "A New England Winter" suggests, James was deeply struck by the public rise of women, a phenomenon due to New England's famous female reformers, including those abolitionists who had taken up the mantle of the women's movement, the central subject of *The Bostonians*. "The characters," James writes in his letter, "are for the most part persons of the radical reforming type, who are especially interested in the emancipation of women, giving them the suffrage, releasing them from bondage, co-educating them with men, etc. They regard this as the great question of the day—the most urgent and sacred reform" (18). Besides the well-known reformers usually taken into account such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Anna Dickinson, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Victoria Woodhull, there is another native New England reformer who achieved international fame as an abolitionist writer who is frequently overlooked in discussions of James's *The Bostonians*, namely Harriet Beecher Stowe. It is my contention that in his conception of the novel, James was

much more deeply engaged with Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* than previously recognized.ⁱ

Before turning to James's novel, I would like to briefly consider what has often been regarded as the first great American novel.ⁱⁱ Initially, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared in the abolitionist newspaper the *National Era* in forty-one installments from 2 June 1851 through to 1 April 1852 and proved to be a stunning success (Belasco 30). When John P. Jewett contracted to publish the novel in March, Stowe was well on her way to becoming the most popular writer of the day. Stowe's most recent biographer, Joan D. Hedrick, reports that "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold 10,000 copies within the first week and 300,000 by the end of the first year" (223). In Great Britain, sales of the novel more than tripled "the already phenomenal figures of the United States, reaching a million and a half in the first year" (233). From its publication on 20 March 1852 through to the end of the nineteenth century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remained a bestseller, outsold only by the Bible (Robbins 99). In addition, towards the end of 1852, Stowe's novel was adapted for the stage and opened in Troy, New York, where it was also a huge success; it then went on to tour the country for the next thirty-five years (Belasco 34).

Thus it is no surprise that Leon Edel should note that the young James saw Barnum's production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at his Broadway Museum in 1853 (1:101). "This was an abridged version with a happy ending," Edel remarks. "Later Henry saw the full version in six long acts at the National—eight tableaux and thirty scenes—an evening particularly remembered because it happened to be the occasion of his first theatre party" (1:102). In his autobiography, James comments on these two viewings, kindly reserving his "ironic detachment" for his second experience of the play and thereby allowing himself to recapture the initial cultural excitement *Uncle Tom* generated: "We lived and moved at that time, with great intensity, in Mrs. Stowe's novel," James writes, adding that it also had been his first experience of "grown-up fiction" (92). Commenting on the novel's remarkable effect, James concedes that

nothing in the guise of a written book, therefore, a book printed, published, sold, bought and ‘noticed,’ probably ever reached its mark, the mark of exciting interest.... If the amount of life represented in such a work is measurable by the ease with which representation is taken up and carried further, carried even violently furthest, the fate of Mrs. Stowe’s picture was conclusive: it simply sat down wherever it lighted and made itself, so to speak, at home[.] (92)

When he conceived of his own “very *American* tale,”ⁱⁱⁱ James must have been acutely aware that he was competing with Stowe’s world-famous novel, thereby necessitating a response to that work. In fact, it is generally accepted that in order to claim a masculine ground for the novel,^{iv} James’s experiment with literary realism was an attempt to counter the distinctly feminine sentimentalism exemplified by Stowe.

In *Black & White Strangers*, Kenneth W. Warren deftly sums up the argument when he points out that realism’s quarrel with Stowe enabled the identification of sentimentalism with the figure of the New England reformer. More specifically, he draws attention to the link between Verena Tarrant and Stowe, observing that Verena’s “success is readily identified with Stowe’s through Miss Birdseye’s exclamation that ‘I have seen nothing like it since I last listened to Eliza P. Moseley’” (94). James soon clarifies the connection between Eliza P. Moseley and Stowe in Basil Ransom’s brief commentary on the cause of the devastating civil war: “The Abolitionists brought it on, and were not the Abolitionists principally women? Who was that celebrity that was mentioned last night?—Eliza P. Moseley. I regard Eliza as the cause of the biggest war of which history preserves the record” (*The Bostonians* 72). As Warren notes, Basil is paraphrasing the famous statement Lincoln supposedly made in 1863 when he was introduced to Stowe: “So this is the little lady who made this big war.” James further underscores the association with Stowe by giving his fictional abolitionist “the name of the runaway slave, Eliza,” in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Warren 94).

Perhaps the most intriguing and productive connection between Stowe and Verena is James’s making the latter an inspirational speaker whose power comes from a source outside her self, that is, from a higher authority. “‘It’s not *me*, mother,’” Verena insists before speaking at Miss Birdseye’s gathering. Selah

Tarrant, her father, a mesmeric healer, corroborates: “It was some power outside – it seemed to flow through her” (44). In order to help calm Verena and prepare her “to let the spirit come” (47), she would close her eyes and her father would then place his hands on her head, as if magically opening a channel. Soon she would begin to speak, incoherently at first, as if in a trance and straining to hear a far off voice, but gradually she would go on with “considerable eloquence” (44). For Verena, we are informed,

had long followed with sympathy the movement for the liberation of her sex from every sort of bondage; it had been her principal interest even as a child (... at the age of nine she had christened her favourite doll Eliza P. Moseley, in memory of a great precursor whom they all revered), and now the inspiration ... seemed just to flow in that channel. The voice that spoke from her lips seemed to want to take that form. It didn't seem as if it could take any other. She let it come out just as it would – she didn't pretend to have control. (44-45)

While the Tarrants encourage the belief that Verena's “inspiration” comes from a source outside herself, that belief is belied when Mr. Tarrant informs Miss Birdseye's guests that his daughter is well versed in the history of women's oppression. To support this claim, Tarrant makes the first of a number of references to the celebrated Eliza P. Moseley, a surname which, to add a further twist to an already conflicted stance, bears a resemblance to Moses, who not only led his people out of captivity, but reintroduces the notion of godly authority.

The allusion to divine authority is reinforced when Verena first visits Olive, who wants to know where a woman as young as Verena “had got her ‘intense realization’ of the suffering of women” (67). Verena suggests her source was the same as that of Joan of Arc. Stowe, Warren reminds us, also “disclaimed responsibility for her novel, attributing the composition of the book to the supernatural agency of God” (100). Alfred Kazin, in his introduction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, comments on this view, intimating that for Stowe, the very conception of the novel was a result of divine inspiration:

the beating to death of Uncle Tom came to her as if in a vision. Against the background of slavery's ultimately unfathomable cruelty, the symbolic crucifixion of Uncle Tom is a replication of the passion of Christ.... Stowe so vividly felt the scriptural tie to her own vision of slavery that she once

told a friend that she did not write Uncle Tom. ‘I only put down what I saw.’ She is even supposed to have said that ‘God wrote it.’ (ix-x) In her biography, Hedrick suggests that this pious position was urged upon Stowe. For instance, the morning after her arrival in Liverpool in 1853, a breakfast that included over forty guests was arranged in honor of the American abolitionist who was introduced by the Rev. Dr. McNeile, whom Stowe “described as one of the most celebrated clergymen of the established church in Liverpool” (qtd. in Hedrick 237). Rev. Dr. McNeile “prayed that ‘in the midst of the most flattering commendations’ she would say and feel ‘Not unto me, O Lord, not unto me, but unto thy name be the praise...’” (237). In any case, Stowe was an evangelical, the daughter, wife and sister of ministers, so she may well have felt that she had been guided by a higher power, as her letter to Lord Denman, written before her voyage, clearly attests:

... I can only see that when a Higher Being has purposes to be accomplished, he can make even ‘a grain of mustard seed’ the means—
I wrote what I did because as a woman, as a mother I was oppressed & broken-hearted, with the sorrows & injustices I saw, because as a Christian I felt the dishonor to Christianity—because as a lover of my country I trembled at the coming day of wrath.—(237)

Quite simply, Stowe felt deeply that slavery was immoral – a moral outrage Christians should not tolerate.

In commenting on the powerful “moral passion” Stowe “brought to her indictment of slavery” (viii), Kazin succinctly sums up her message: “slavery and Christianity cannot exist together” (x). Aside from the merciless physical abuse, what makes them incompatible is that slavery is a violation of holy matrimony and Christian family values. As Kazin notes, “Though slaves were nominally expected to be ‘Christians,’ and were sometimes even married in the church, such marriages were not legally binding” (x). In other words, slave marriages, though encouraged, were not honored; for it was not unusual for married slaves to be separated by their owners, and even the children of slaves, who were also regarded as the owner’s property (whether he fathered them or not), were callously taken away from their mothers and sold.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe vividly illustrates her argument by providing us with several heart-rending accounts of the tearing apart of families. As Hedrick points out, there are two slave narratives that run through the novel: one of bondage and one of freedom (212). At the beginning of the novel, we learn that the "good" slave-owner Mr. Selby is in debt, so he must sell his most valued slave, Uncle Tom. Not only is Tom removed from what is supposed to be his cabin, he is taken from his wife and children, thereby losing his home and family. Being deeply religious and obedient, Tom accepts his fate. Fortunately, he is bought by the kindly Southern aristocrat Augustine St. Clare, who intends to free Tom. But when St. Clare suddenly dies, Tom is auctioned off to the wicked Simon Legree, who, by the end of the novel, brutally beats Tom to death. This was the vision of a bleeding slave being whipped that came to Stowe and inspired her to write the novel (Hedrick 155). In contrast to Tom's tragic end, the fate of another of Mr. Selby's slaves provides a happy ending.^v Unlike Tom, when Eliza Harris learns that her owner also intends to sell her son Harry, she takes him and runs away to Ohio, where she receives help from Mrs. Bird.^{vi} With the aid of a small community of Quakers, Eliza is eventually reunited with her husband George, the father of her child, and the three manage to escape to Canada, where they can live happily together in freedom. Stowe, in showing how slavery violates the sanctity of marriage, does more than uphold that institution; she exalts it. For George Harris, being with his family means everything:

O Eliza! if these people only knew what a blessing it is for a man to feel that his wife and child belong to *him*! I've often wondered to see men that could call their wives and children *their own* fretting and worrying about anything else. Why, I feel rich and strong, though we have nothing but our bare hands. I feel as if I could scarcely ask God for any more. (185)

Drawing on the underlying assumption that women (and children) are their husband's property, James, in distinct contrast to Stowe, provides a scathing critique of marriage in *The Bostonians*.

In this novel, James presents marriage as a form of slavery, whether a so-called Boston marriage or a heterosexual arrangement, as both relationships are structured on the unequal distribution of power based on the master/slave

dichotomy.^{vii} For in traditional marriages, the male dominates the female, yet paradoxically, the male is made dependent on the subordination of the female in order to sustain his sense of masculine power, thus making it necessary for him to secure the woman as his possession, which is precisely why Basil must claim Verena as his bride. Boston marriages, although a union of two women, often produce a similar power dynamic based on mutual dependency and possession. By calling his novel *The Bostonians*, James undoubtedly had in mind this New England phenomenon; in his notebook entry dated 8 April 1883, he remarks that the novel would present “a study of one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England” (19). Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the novel is a study of James’s initial scepticism about such passionate friendships. Chapter 32 of the novel is especially revealing: Mrs. Burrage has summoned Olive to her New York home to press Olive on her son’s behalf, as he wants to marry Verena. As their discussion proceeds, Olive feels she must defend her attachment to Verena and, taking a “superior tone,” becomes hostile toward Mrs. Burrage.

‘You do believe – though you pretend you don’t – that I control her actions, and as far as possible her desires, and that I am jealous of any other relations she may possibly form. I can imagine that we may perhaps have that air, though it only proves how little such an association as ours is understood, and how superficial is still ... the interpretation of many of the elements in the activity of women, how much the public conscience with regard to them needs to be educated.’ (242).

Ironically, what Olive accuses Mrs. Burrage of believing quite accurately reflects Olive’s relationship with Verena, even though Olive denies the truth of these claims; quite possibly, they may also have reflected James’s view of such “friendships” at the time.

In *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Lillian Faderman comments on James’s novel, remarking that “James had no prejudices against same-sex love” (195). James may not have had any such prejudices, but when he wrote *The Bostonians*, he had some reservations about his sister Alice’s relationship with the Bostonian, Katherine Loring. A year or two after suffering a nervous breakdown, Faderman reports, “Alice met Katherine, who was active in Boston charities and betterment

organizations, and whose energy and health, in startling contrast to Alice's own condition, immediately attracted Alice" (195). As their friendship blossomed, Alice's condition improved somewhat. While James was writing *The Bostonians*, he got to know Katherine well and "became more and more grateful for her relationship with Alice" (196). Of course James appreciated the assistance Katherine provided by taking care of his ailing sister; nevertheless, he also observed how his sister manipulated Katherine with her illness, as Alice's condition often deteriorated whenever Katherine had to go away. When this happened, James would anxiously send for Katherine, and when she "dashed to the rescue, Alice's symptoms would subside" (Edel 3:128). Alice would then insist "on remaining in bed as long as Miss Loring was available to care for her" (3:128). Soon Alice was living with Katherine on a permanent basis, although James, Edel writes, "was not convinced the relationship was a good one. There was something profoundly symbiotic in it. Alice was too dependent on Miss Loring, and took too much joy in being cared for by her friend" (3:135). Naturally, James handled the situation with his usual delicacy. "Not long after the publication of *The Bostonians*, James wrote to his aunt regarding Katherine's love for Alice that 'a devotion so perfect and generous (was) a gift of providence so rare and so little-to-be-looked-for in this hard world that to brush it aside would be almost an act of impiety'" (Faderman 196). James, it seems, worked out his objections to Boston marriages – or rather to the problems inherent to marriage – in his novel.

In addressing "the situation of women" and the passionate attachments they were beginning to form with other women, James not only situates his novel in Boston, but he has it take place in the late 1870s, after the Civil War and following the failure of Reconstruction, which is why Basil Ransom comes North. In *The Bostonians*, James has reconfigured the Civil War into the war of the sexes: The powerful after-effects of the war reverberate throughout the novel, only now the North has come to be represented by women reformers and the defeated South by men like Basil who feel emasculated and anxiously driven to reassert their masculinity in a desperate effort to reclaim the privileged position they enjoyed under patriarchy. For Basil, we are told, has resolved to "enter the game and here he

would win it” (12). As suffragists, Olive and Verena represent a new generation of reformers that contrast to the aging abolitionists exemplified by Miss Birdseye, who dies by the novel’s end, signalling the passing of an era. There is, moreover, a well-established overlap as many abolitionists, including Miss Birdseye, went on to champion the rights of women as well. Such was the case with Harriet Beecher Stowe.^{viii} Once again, James suggests a connection between Stowe and Verena during her New York lecture at Mrs. Burrage’s when Verena poses a rhetorical question that echoes Stowe’s abolitionist argument: “Do you think any state can come to good that is based upon an organized wrong?” (207). Of course, Verena is not referring to the institution of slavery; she is talking about “the situation of women,” especially married women, who were regarded as their husband’s property under the law. When Stowe finally converted from her idea of private, “domestic feminism” to the more overtly public women’s movement in mid 1869, she told readers of *Hearth and Home*, a magazine she co-edited, “the position of a married woman ... is, in many respects, precisely similar to that of the negro slave” (qtd. in Hedrick 360).

Yet, if we consider Verena’s position in relation to Olive’s, even though both are women, they are certainly not equals in terms of the economics of class, as Olive hails from the Boston “*bourgeoisie* – the oldest and best” (28), while Verena and her family are practically penniless, and in the eyes of Olive, appallingly “trashy” (90). When she visits the Tarrants at their shabby Cambridge home, it occurs to her that Verena’s father would probably renounce all claim to his daughter given the right price (89). Shortly thereafter, Olive effectively buys Verena, as her going to live with Olive is the result of a financial transaction: Olive “wrote Mr. Tarrant a cheque for a very considerable amount. ‘Leave us alone – entirely alone – for a year, and then I will write you another’” Olive informs him (128). As an object of exchange, Verena, like Uncle Tom, is reduced to a commodity or thing.^{ix} Of course, Olive does not want a slave *per se*, but she does want to control every aspect of Verena’s life, to possess her in body and mind. Indeed, Olive acts as a ventriloquist: Because she feels incapable of speaking in public, she wants the gifted Verena to be her mouthpiece. In short, Olive depends on Verena to complete herself, to realize her

desire. Thus, in submitting to Olive's will, Verena is reduced to a puppet, with no real self.

Critics such as Alfred Habegger^x see Verena as an empty centre. While Verena proves to be a good student and readily absorbs all that Olive teaches her in preparation for her career as a solo speaker, it is worth recalling that Verena has already been primed as an inspirational speaker by her family. In fact, we are told that her maternal grandfather was Abraham Greenstreet, a famous (but fictitious) abolitionist who was also a gifted public speaker. Besides descending from a line of radical male reformers, as a female, Verena has also been taught how to be "feminine," that is, to submit to patriarchal authority, even if that authority happens to be advocating women's rights.^{xi} Grasping this treacherous irony helps us to understand why Basil finally triumphs in the war of wills he wages with Olive for possession of Verena. Even Olive fears she will lose Verena because she is "so divinely docile" (227). Olive has good reason to worry.

In Book Second, which takes place in New York, Basil convinces Verena to go with him to Central Park, where she is faced with his "contempt and brutality" and imagines "that something really bad had happened to him" (255). However, when his bitterness gave way, Verena felt "she wanted to forgive him" as

a strange feeling came over her, a perfect willingness not to keep insisting on her own side and a desire not to part from him with a mere accentuation of their differences. Strange I call the nature of her reflections, for they softly battled with each other as she listened ... to his deep, sweet, distinct voice, expressing monstrous opinions with exotic cadences and mild, familiar laughs, which, as he leaned towards her, almost tickled her cheek and ear. It seemed to her strangely harsh, almost cruel, to have brought her out only to say things to her which, after all, free as she was to contradict them and tolerant as she always tried to be, could only give her pain; yet there was a spell upon her as she listened; it was in her nature to be easily submissive, to like being overborne. She could be silent when people insisted, and silent without acrimony. Her whole relation to Olive was a kind of tacit, tender assent to passionate insistence, and if this had ended by being easy and agreeable to her (and indeed had never been anything else), it may be supposed that the struggle of yielding to a will which she felt to be stronger even than Olive's was not of long duration. (255)

In assuming her "feminine" identity, we can see that Verena has learnt her lessons well.

Early in the novel, when we are first introduced to Basil, we learn that something “bad” had indeed happened to him. As a young Mississippian, Basil had fought on the side of the south in the Civil War and

had lived to see bitter hours. His family was ruined; they had lost their slaves, their property, their friends and relations, their home; had tasted of all the cruelty of defeat. He had tried for a while to carry on the plantation himself, but he had a milestone of debt round his neck, and he longed for some work which would transport him to the haunts of men. The State of Mississippi had seemed to him the state of despair, so he surrendered his patrimony to his mother and sisters, and, at nearly thirty years of age, alighted for the first time in New York ... with fifty dollars in his pocket and a gnawing hunger in his heart. (12)

Ironically, the fact that Basil has been dispossessed of his home places him in a position similar to that of Uncle Tom, who also lost his lowly cabin and family. The linking of these two seemingly disparate characters is supported by the text: Not only does James describe Basil’s speech^{xiii} as “pervaded by something sultry and vast, something almost African in its rich, basking tone” (6), James also refers to Basil as having “brown” skin on two occasions. The first time is when Basil visits Verena at her home in Cambridge, and he sits “with his elbows on the arms of his chair,... and his thin *brown* hands interlocked in front of him” (emphasis mine 179). James does it again in a remarkable passage shortly after Basil arrives at the fashionable gathering at Mrs. Burrage’s New York home:

He became aware that people looked at him, as well as at each other, rather more, indeed, than at each other, and he wondered whether it were very visible in his appearance that his being there was a kind of exception. He didn’t know how much his head looked over the heads of others, or that his *brown complexion*, fuliginous eye, and straight black hair,... gave him that relief which, in the best society, has the great advantage of suggesting a topic. (194 emphasis mine)

In *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity*, Leland S. Person also draws attention to the racial implications of Basil’s dilemma. Person observes that in *The Bostonians*, “James supplements gender subordination with racial connotations—” encouraging “us to read race through the medium of gender, as if marking the shift ... from abolitionism to women’s rights and, for a Southerner like Ransom, the imaginative shift from fearing racial reversal to fearing gender

inversion” (106). What is at stake for Basil is nothing less than reclaiming the supremacy of the white male, for to have suffered defeat in the Civil War was to have undergone “a male role reversal in which the master experienced the abject position of the slave, liable to be beaten by another man” (107). In moving North, Basil not only carries the “taint” of his Southern roots, as the quoted passage from the novel brilliantly suggests; Basil is now liable to be beaten by a woman. Of course, Olive Chancellor, as her name suggests, is not just any woman. If Basil has been deprived of his inheritance as an aristocratic Southern plantation owner, in sharp contrast, as a Boston Brahmin, the equivalent of an American aristocrat, Olive has been able to lay claim to her powerful position at the forefront of the women’s movement as a result of her Northern inheritance: “after her father’s death . . . she bought the little house in Charles Street and began to live alone” (91).

As Basil makes perfectly clear to Verena in Central Park, he is not interested in saving women; he is interested in saving his own sex, from, as he puts it, “the most damnable feminisation! . . . The whole generation is womanised; the masculine tone is passing out of the world” (260). Basil’s mission is to “recover” the dominant male subject position and to do so requires a return to the separation of spheres. For Basil, a woman’s place is in the home, not in public. “My plan,” he informs Verena, “is to keep you at home and have a better time with you there than ever. . . . I have such a boundless appreciation of your sex in private life that I am perfectly ready to advocate a man’s having a half a dozen wives” (261). For Basil, women are “quite inferior” when it comes to “public, civic uses” because they are “weak and second-rate” (263). Although gifted, Verena’s eloquence, her “genius” for speaking, is to be reserved for him, only in private conversation can she be “the most charming woman in America” (304). Like Olive, Basil wants nothing less than to possess Verena; however, the idea of sharing her with the public is abhorrent to him.

When Basil follows Verena to Marmion on the Cape, he finds her practicing the great speech on “A Woman’s Reason” she is to give at the Boston Music Hall to launch her nation-wide tour. Of course, this is where Emerson read his “Boston Hymn” on New Year’s day, 1863, the precise day on which Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, thus suggesting just how momentous Verena’s lecture

is to be.^{xiii} James's narrator informs us that "Ransom's state of mind in regard to the affair at the Music Hall was simply this – that he was determined to circumvent it if he could. . . . He vowed to himself that she should never take that fresh start which would commit her irretrievably if she should succeed –" for he knows Verena will be a great success (306). To put an end to "her engagements, her campaigns, or all the expectancy of her friends," would mean success for Basil; "it would symbolize his victory" (306). And Basil does succeed in winning, for Verena falls in love with him. "She loved, she was in love – she felt it in every throb of her being" (299).

However, when Miss Birdseye dies blindly believing Verena has converted Basil to the cause, Verena is overwhelmed with guilt and resolves to proceed with her talk at the Music Hall, where the novel's grand finale is played out: Basil arrives to take possession of Verena. After finally making his way into her room backstage, he rushes her out of the theatre, throwing a cloak over her. This melodramatic image of escape is not without its irony: is Verena escaping from or being abducted into slavery? Whereas Verena found "Olive's grasp too clinching, too terrible" (301), the alternative, marrying Basil, promises to be even more forbidding. For Verena is in tears, which we are informed, are not to be her last. Perhaps all that Verena came to grasp abstractly about the suffering of women must now be learnt from personal experience. In other words, becoming Mrs. Ransom may be the price Verena must pay in order to find her own voice. Curiously, at the very beginning of the novel, when we are first introduced to Basil, Olive's sister sizes him up in terms of cost: "Mrs. Luna glanced at him from head to foot, and gave a little smiling sign, as if he had been a long sum in addition. And, indeed, he was very long" (5). This, of course, is not to suggest that Verena would necessarily have been happy with Olive. James's clever use of the cloak helps create a memorable visual impression, one that is used earlier in the narrative. When Olive leaves the Tarrant's home in Cambridge, she draws Verena close to her outside in the cold winter air, "flinging over her with one hand the fold of a cloak that hung ample upon her own meagre person, and holding her there with the other, while she looked at her, suppliant but half hesitating. 'Promise!' she repeated" (104). As Verena's parents approach, Olive blurts out, "Promise me not to marry!" For, as Verena comes to understand, Olive also wants to

possess her. Yet, even if Olive is left alone at the end of the novel, all is not lost, for Olive takes the stage and finally confronts her public. Unlike Verena, Olive had already found her voice, but was simply afraid to use it herself. Thus it seems Olive had to learn the Emersonian lesson of self-reliance and become autonomous^{xiv}

Notes

ⁱ For studies that consider this relationship, see Klimasmith 51- 89 and Warren, esp. 93-101.

ⁱⁱ In “Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Dream of the Great American Novel,” Lawrence Buell notes, “The first critical call on record for ‘the great American novel’ (by novelist John W. DeForest in 1868) names *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as the closest approximation yet” (190). Carla Rineer points out that as early as 1853, Stowe “was being heralded throughout Europe as America’s first great novelist” (188).

ⁱⁱⁱ In his notebook transcription James makes an explicit reference to Alphonse Daudet’s *Évangéliste* as a source of literary inspiration (20); however, that title suggests an underlying connection to Stowe’s novel, as “The Little Evangelist” (the title of Chapter 25) is the nickname of Little Eva.

^{iv} In particular, see Michael Davitt Bell.

^v This is none other than Eliza Harris, whose first name James assigned to Moseley.

^{vi} The surname Bird may have inspired James’s choice for Miss Birdseye.

^{vii} In *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Lillian Faderman provides a more sympathetic definition of Boston marriages, one in which the women “were generally financially independent of men, either through inheritance or because of a career. They were usually feminists, New Women, often pioneers in a profession” (190). In short, the women were equals socially and financially.

^{viii} At first, Stowe most decidedly upheld the separation of the public and private spheres, believing that, as the angel of the house, a woman’s role was to create a haven for her husband and children. However, by 1869, Stowe was seriously questioning woman and the limitations of her sphere. When she read the American edition of John Stuart Mill’s *On the Subjection of Women*, Stowe was fully converted to the women’s rights movement (Hedrick 359). Mill attacked “the orthodoxy of separate spheres,” arguing that “the private sphere of the family needed radical reconstruction before individual liberty could be guaranteed” (Hedrick 359-60). He viewed the patriarchal family as “a school of tyranny.”

^{ix} The original subtitle of Stowe’s novel was *The Man Who Was a Thing*; it subsequently became *or, Life Among the Lowly*.

^x See Habegger’s *Henry James and the “Woman Business,”* esp. 215-225.

^{xi} Stowe found herself in a similar position. In her *Chimney-Corner* papers for *The Atlantic Monthly*, she relied on a male narrator by the name of Christopher Cornfield even when she endorsed the women’s movement: “The question of Woman and her Sphere is now, perhaps, the greatest of the age” (qtd. in Hedrick 359).

^{xii} When the narrator says, “It is not in my power to reproduce by any combination of characters this charming dialect; but the initiated reader will have no difficulty in evoking the sound”(6), James may slyly be alluding to the extensive use of dialect Stowe makes in her novel. Indeed, the initiated reader might very well have recognized this at the time of the novel’s early appearance.

^{xiii} Ian F.A. Bell notes that “Emerson was powerfully in James’s mind during the composition of *The Bostonians*: 1883, the year of James’s first, and unusually substantial, Notebook entry on the novel, was also the year in which the new Riverside edition of Emerson’s works appeared and in which James reviewed a volume of the correspondence between Emerson and Carlyle” (329).

^{xiv} This position is exemplified by the queerly constituted character of Dr. Mary J. Prance, who is a professional, dedicated to her work. Dr. Prance doesn’t waste her time arguing about what a woman is capable of doing; she takes action. “It was certain that whatever might become of the movement at large, Doctor Prance’s own little revolution was a success” (39). As she tells Basil, she believes there is room for improvement in both the sexes.

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