Joan of Arc in Late 19th Century America:
Women’s Voices, Women’s Bodies,
and the Spiritual Dimension in *The Bostonians*

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Introduction

*The Bostonians* (1886) is one of the major works in Henry James’s middle years when his interests shifted from the "international theme" to American domestic issues. The novel, written in the era of rapid social change in late 19th century America, focuses on the issue of feminism. It dramatizes the rivalry between Olive Chancellor, an ardent feminist, and Basil Ransom, a conservative Southerner, both trying to win the loyalty of Verena Tarrant, a female public speaker. Ransom’s conservatism, sustained by the traditions of Southern chivalry and his outrage against the feminization of America, obviously reflects gynophobic or misogynist discourses of the period. In the final part of the novel, he hauls Verena away by force from the Boston Music Hall, with the result that she gives up her career as a feminist and public speaker, and leaves her partner, Olive. The male backlash against the "new woman" that informs the novel has been examined from several points of view by scholars/critics.

On the other hand, Olive’s attachment to Verena is more complex in that we recognize in her both domineering and sadistic desires. She redeems Verena from her greedy parents, but also tries to control her while enlightening her on the question of women’s rights. Likewise, while Olive dominates Verena for the sake of the feminist cause, she is herself psychologically enslaved by Verena even as she attempts to gain exclusive possession of her. However, little attention has been paid to Olive’s "bondage" and the relation between her attempt to ensure the purity of her "sisterly" tie to Verena in consecrating herself to the feminist cause and the suppression of her own sensuality. Olive’s domination and the two women’s sisterhood have generally been attributed to her Sapphic tendency or deviance from the sexual norm of the time.

The homoerotic relation between Olive and Verena has been the subject of considerable and still-unresolved controversy. The first scholar to raise doubts about the traditional or conventional interpretations of the text was Judith Fetterley. She indicted the early generation of male critics who explicitly demonstrated their anti-feminist bias and the homophobia which informed their response to the novel:

> 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. (Fetterley 109-110)

On the other hand, Lillian Faderman argued that love and friendship between women were regarded as not "abnormal" but socially blameless at that time, and the intimate, monogamous relationship between women, which was called a "Boston Marriage," empowered in particular "achievement-oriented women": "their marriage fostered rather than hampered their pioneering activities toward worldly success" (Faderman 187). Recently, critics such as David Van Leer and Kathleen McColley have discussed both the psychological drama and sexual politics inscribed in the text. Especially, McColley has explored the possibilities of the bonds of sisterhood and homoerotic empowerment:

The intimate portrayal of a Boston marriage, subtle
use of voice and non-voice, and structural narrative dialogic between feminine and masculine language through description and free indirect discourse all work together to create a subtext that successfully prevails in offering alternatives to the dominant hierarchical discourse. (McColley 167)

This paper will explore aspects of female spirituality and sensuality, surveying the rise of women's rights movement in America and some of its consequences for late 19th century American society. The emergence of female public speakers and their relation to spiritualism or mesmerism will also be addressed. Furthermore, we will analyze the connection between Olive's dedication to the feminist cause (and to Verena) and sexual inhibition; Olive's devotion is often compared in the novel to a religious passion with the use of such epithets as "martyr" or "Joan of Arc."

First of all, we will look briefly at how women are generally represented in the novel. As Tony Tanner has pointed out of James, "For a writer who is supposed to shy away from the body he shows himself to be amazingly acute when it comes to registering the sheer corporeal presence of his characters, and what their bodies reveal about their relations to their own sexuality" (Tanner 54). The physical characteristics of progressive women who are involved in the feminist cause or pursuing higher education or professional careers are described from the satirical point of view of Ransom:

She [Miss Birdseye] 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 solvent. The long practice of philanthropy had not given accent to her features; it had rubbed out their transitions, their meanings. The waves of sympathy, of enthusiasm, had wrought upon them in the same way in which the waves of time finally modify the surface of old marble busts, gradually washing away their sharpness, their details. (20-21)

Spare, dry, hard, without a curve, an inflexion or a grace, she [Doctor Prance] seemed to ask no odds in the battle of life and to be prepared to give none. (33)

The first passage is a description of Miss Birdseye, who has dedicated herself to social activism. She is portrayed dismissively in the stereotyped image of a spinster because she rejects femininity and motherhood due to her devotion to fighting injustice.

The latter passage about Doctor Prance reveals how women doctors were widely perceived in this period. Research shows that the number of female doctors in America in 1880 was only about 2,400, which accounted for 2.8 percent of the overall total of doctors. As the small figure suggests, their advancement into the male, public domain could not have been a significant threat to men. Nevertheless, female doctors were accused of being unfeminine, and faced vehement rejection or condemnation by men in this period. There is little question that women who deviate from the traditional female role are stigmatized in the novel.

What is apparent in the cited passages is that the descriptions of women from the North, from Ransom's Southern point of view, are akin to case studies of women suffering from pathological conditions. In The Notebooks, James wrote that American social life was defined by "the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf" (20). His remark about "the decline of the sentiment of sex" suggests that gender boundaries between men and women had been obscured, as had distinctions between the "public" and the "private," with the result that the female characters have lost their femininity and appear "calcified," and bodies of women are described in terms of disease. The negative representations of women echo or originate from demeaning illustrations of the "new woman" in the

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1 It has been established that Miss Birdseye was based on Elizabeth Peabody (1804-1894), a prominent figure in Massachusetts as an educator and a publisher of The Dial, the transcendentalist magazine.

2 See Gay 181-182.
media and medical articles in late 19th century America. Newspapers and magazines sensationalized and wrote about the "new woman" in venomous terms. At the same time, medical scientists, physiologists, and sociologists convincingly showed the ramifications of higher education and occupations for women, providing medical evidence and a "biological basis" for the view that women who entered public life forfeited their femininity. They concluded that education and an occupation were not only unnecessary but also hazardous to the female constitution and women's reproductive health. Furthermore, they accused highly educated, professional women and advocates for women's rights of being self-seeking because they had not fulfilled their primary role of a wife and mother. They also warned that these women had lost their feminine qualities, and thus remained in a state of immaturity.

We can associate these discourses with the denigrating descriptions of women in the novel, as can be seen in Ransom's statement: "... Think what a confession you make when you say that women are less and less sought in marriage; what a testimony that is to the pernicious effect on their manners, their person, their nature, of this fatuous agitation" (294). The lack of feminine characteristics is visibly reflected as a disease or malady in the bodies of the women who renounce maternity, the natural female biological role. In other words, disease or illness presents itself as a form of penalization, for these symptoms stem from women's irresponsibility. Therefore, women are at risk of retribution and subject to punishment.

The early feminist movement in America had collaborative relations with the abolitionist movement and the temperance cause. Women who engaged in these latter two movements were socially accepted because they were not regarded as deviating from the female role as moral guardian, and instead their actions earned the admiration of most of the public, who took it for granted that women undertook these actions to address political and social abuses like slavery and alcoholism. In the novel, Mrs Farrinder provides a good example of how favorably women were judged who engaged in the social reform movements: "She lectured on temperance and the rights of women; ... 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" (24). The description of Mrs Farrinder contrasts with those of Miss Birdseye and Doctor Prance. She is "a copious, handsome woman" with "abundant hair of a glossy blackness" and a "fine placid mask" (24), which suggests that she displays no pathological symptom on her body or face. Although she is committed to the feminist cause, her embodiment of the domestic virtues exempts her from the fate of being desexualized which befalls Miss Birdseye and Doctor Prance.

Olive Chancellor, however, is presented as a typical example of the "unwomanly" woman, offering a sharp contrast to Mrs Farrinder. She is frequently referred to as being "morbid" or "nervous," as can be seen in the following passage: "But this pale girl, with her light-green eyes, her pointed features and nervous manner, was visibly morbid; it was as plain as day that she was morbid" (7). Elaine Showalter observes that the words "nervous" or "morbid" were cliché code words used to stigmatize women who were interested in the feminist cause:

First of all, doctors had noticed that hysteria was apt to appear in young women who were especially rebellious. ... In literature, too, the women who aspired to professional independence and sexual freedom were denounced as case studies in hysteria and degeneration. (Showalter 145-146)

Today, "hysteria" can simply mean a state of extreme excitement. Olive, in fact, often falls into an aroused mental state; however, in the late 19th century, "hysteria" was widely recognized as a neurotic disease peculiar to women, in which emotional instability was revealed in a variety of physical symptoms: tremors in the hands and limbs, disorders of movement and walking, and the inability to speak. Olive displays extreme diffidence and over-sensitivity and falls into emotional instability, with the result that she quivers and cannot speak. Therefore, she becomes concerned with Verena, an orator of the women’s movement, as Olive is not able to speak on the podium by herself.

3 For further details about illustrations of the "new woman," see Gay 188-197 and Russett 104-129.
4 See, for instance, Braude 82-116.
II

For women to speak in public was considered by many at the time to be disgraceful and unfeminine. Unlike the temperance cause or the antislavery movement, both of which were accepted as being within the domestic domain of women, the women’s rights movement was radical in that it encouraged the direct political involvement of women who were pursuing the right to vote. Female public speakers called for this right in public, and hence they were accused of destabilizing the woman-as-private/man-as-public conception of social reality. A male backlash arose against the feminization of America that progressive women were promoting, as seen in the exclamation of Ransom, a displaced man and disempowered Southerner:

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 flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been. (292)

What this passage makes clear is that there existed indignation and anxiety about the deterioration of American society on the part of men. Ransom represents the voices of men and expresses animosity or hostility against women because the social malaise is essentially seen as “feminine.” In other words, the attributes of womanhood are associated with nervousness or hysteria, and American society is irreparably infected with femininity. The “new woman” is, as we have seen, stigmatized or labeled as being physically and psychologically morbid in retribution for her social advancement and rejection of traditional female roles. Furthermore, she is regarded as a form of disease in itself, affecting and disrupting American society. Ransom hopes that American society will recover from the “malady” and attempts to reverse the trend whereby women’s “voices” and their feminine attitudes and values are becoming more powerful in American society. He criticizes women’s “fluent, pretty, third-rate palaver, conscious or unconscious, perfected humbug” (279) and indicts women for “forcing thin voices into effectual shrillness” (206). Thus, female “voices” means not only women’s utterances or speech in literal terms but also their opinions or thoughts:

“It is what the great sisterhood of women might do if they should all join hands, and lift up their voices above the brutal uproar of the world, in which it is so hard for the plea of mercy or of justice, the moan of weakness and suffering, to be heard. We should quench it, we should make it still, and the sound of our lips would become the voice of universal peace. . . .” (52)

Verena is a voice or representative that expresses these opinions or thoughts, as Olive believes: “Olive was always trying to flash it [the divine idea] at her, like a jewel in an uncovered case—she kindled, flamed up, took the words from her friend’s less persuasive lips, resolved herself into a magical voice, become again the pure young sibyl” (136). Therefore, Ransom’s recapture of Verena symbolizes a silencing of women’s voices:

He didn’t love her, he hated her, he only wanted to smother her, 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. (330)

His aim is not to love or save Verena, but to eliminate the existence of this representative of women’s voices, as Olive’s judgment of him suggests. In contrast, it is through the voice of Verena that Olive’s desires and feminist thoughts are conveyed to the audience. The characterization of Verena is partly based on Victoria Woodhull (1838-1927), one of the popular female public speakers in America in the late 19th century, and the title of her biography, The Terrible Siren, has a symbolic connotation. Olive needs Verena’s voice owing to her own neurotic sensibility and inability to speak in public, although speaking out will have fatal consequences for her.

Verena is able to make a speech on the situation of American women and their rights when she is in a trance that is induced when her father, a mesmerist, touches her:
They had just heard her say, "It is not me, mother," and he and Mrs Tarrant and the girl herself were all equally aware it was not she. It was some power outside—it seemed to flow through her; he couldn't pretend to say why his daughter should be called, more than anyone else. But it seemed as if she was called. When he just calmed her down by laying his hand on her a few moments, it seemed to come.

(46)

Physicians did not trust mesmerists' or hypnotists' unconventional practices and the occult phenomena peculiar to their subjects. However, their shows were very popular, and seized the public's attention in spite of a lack of evidence about the effectiveness and genuineness of mesmerism. Moreover, a new type of promoter appeared and drew large audiences, making their shows into a form of spectacle. They coaxed young women into a trance or trance-like state on stage and created a nation-wide sensation through advertising and publicity. It is clear that these trance speakers impressed James. He heard a speech by Cora Hatch (1840-1923), the most celebrated medium in New York in 1863, and attended mesmerist shows in Boston in the 1870's.

Female trance speakers displayed the contradictory attributes of being both spiritual and sensual. They were spiritual mediums who communicated with the supernatural, transcending the physical or material world. Women in general were regarded as being asexual, moriastic, and spiritual, compared with men. Moreover, they were considered to be passive and vulnerable to certain influences, and thus some women responded easily to spiritualism. Female trance speakers, however, were not regarded as "feminine," because they were skilled speakers capable of public eloquence. However, irreconcilably, their eloquence was seen as emanating from their feminine spirituality and vulnerability. We can say that these women took advantage of their feminine attributes in order to deliver speeches in public. As Beryl Satter points out, "Like other great scientific discoveries of the day such as the telegram and the telegraph, hypnotism was an entirely immaterial means of communication. But hypnotism went beyond technology by allowing one mind to communicate directly with another" (Satter 50). Thus, these women personify spirit prior to or beyond material existence. Audiences saw in these women the mind transgressing corporeal boundaries or its material limitations.

However, these women are also marked by sensuality or sensitiveness, as they are affected by their healers' touch. They cannot fall into a trance and make speeches without that touch. For instance, Verena is manipulated by her father, toward whom Ransom instinctively has antipathy, regarding him as "simply the detested carpet-bagger" or "false, cunning, vulgar, ignorable; the cheapest kind of human product" (53). His detestation of Verena's father shows an emotional complexity, for his dubious act of touching Verena, which is what gives her inspiration, bears a sexual connotation of the sort of which mesmerism had been accused. The reasons why mesmerism was criticized as an inappropriate treatment were that the effects of mesmerist practice on subjects were unclear, and it involved physical contact between practitioners and their female subjects. The audience realized that there existed a "rapport," a special harmony or connection between the mesmerist and his subject on the stage, and this included a sexual overtone.

We have seen a link between the early women's rights movement and mesmerism or hypnotism; however, female public speakers did develop the ability to carry their voices to the public by themselves, independent of exploitative operators. They were able to shift from subordinate positions where they had been overshadowed by a suspicious performance to a position in which they no

Tatar discusses in full detail how mesmerism, charged with having erotic effects, became the target of criticism: "These experts dealt yet another blow to the mesmerist movement by subscribing to the king [Louis XVI] a second, confidential document in which they expressed concern about the moral implications of mesmerism. After describing in vivid detail the physical contact between magnetizers and their female subjects and expatiating on the power of touch to arouse women sexually, they warned of the temptations to which mesmerist physicians exposed themselves" (22).

The French word "rapport" was used to name this invisible but unmistakable connection between the mesmerist and the subject whom he charged with his vital force. James uses the term to illustrate Tarrant's dubious mesmeric means of manipulating his daughter.
longer needed to use characteristics associated with femininity to speak out in public. In the novel, Olive takes Verena away from the influence of the men who surround her, and they go abroad to learn about the women’s rights movements on the European continent and meet their feminist sisters. Verena’s intense practice of her speeches on behalf of the feminist cause helps her with her public speaking technique. She becomes eloquent and gains confidence.

III

Olive’s bonds of sisterhood and love liberate Verena, and simultaneously alienate her suitors and separate her from heterosexuality and thus from marriage. We will therefore consider Olive’s commitment to Verena, as well as James’s use of terms like “martyrdom” or “Joan of Arc.”

Olive, who regards her resistance or fight against male suppression as a “crusade,” wants to sacrifice herself for the feminist cause. At the same time, she idolizes and idealizes Miss Birdseye as a “martyr” for her life-long altruistic devotion to women’s issues, although she suffers desexualization in compensation for her infertility. Verena explains about her inspired speech in a trance with reference to the fact that Joan of Arc received a revelation from the God. Olive comes to identify Verena with Joan of Arc, who signifies a Christian martyr who was able to achieve a form of divinity and the absolute; she embodies not only a spirit of self-sacrifice to God, but also the aggressiveness and combativeness that an armed woman displays in battle, as well as virginal innocence. Additionally, martyrdom is associated with religious ecstasy that is achieved through pain and suffering, as one transcends one’s material existence, as in the notable case of the martyr St. Sebastian.

Olive’s idolization of Joan of Arc points to her passion for martyrdom and desire to transcend the physical limits of the female body. In fact, she possesses a hysterical body which is characterized by her morbidity and nervousness; moreover, she cannot also speak in public due to her excessive shyness or diffidence, as we have mentioned above. She internalizes the social norms and values against her will: that radical feminists tend to suffer from hysteria, a “female malady,” and a behavior of women such as making speeches on the podium is unacceptable. In other words, her “female” body is a cage which confines her within the bounds or limits of women.

Therefore, it is reasonable that Olive worships or reveres Verena, a female orator. Verena violates a social and political taboo, and transcends the feminine, domestic domain and the limitations of femininity. In addition, she is “spiritual” in terms of contacting the supernatural and transcending physical boundaries or limits. Viewed in this light, Olive tries to set Verena up as a modern Joan of Arc: “When Verena should appear it would be armed at all points, like Joan of Arc (this analogy had lodged itself in Olive’s imagination); she should have facts and figures; she should meet men on their own ground” (124).

Olive experiences empathetic identification with Verena; however, the difficulty is that Verena is not only highly “spiritual” but also physical and sensual. Instinctively, Olive has an aversion to any seductive behaviors or coquetries of women that have sexual connotations, as she loathes Mrs Luna, her widowed sister who tries to seduce Ransom. Olive’s sexual phobia, or fear of heterosexual sexuality which depraves and subvert women, is juxtaposed to her deep-rooted hostility to men. As a consequence, Olive demands rigorous standards of integrity and purity from Verena. Olive’s emotional attachment to Verena reinforces the bond of sisterhood, and strictly prohibits heterosexual relations. She suppresses Verena’s heterosexual tendencies and endows her with the virtues and strength of an armed maiden: “The fine web of authority, of dependence, that her strenuous companion had woven about her, was now as dense as a suit of golden mail; and Verena was thoroughly interested in their great undertaking; she saw it in the light of an active, enthusiastic faith” (145). Andrea Dworkin argues that Joan of Arc is characterized both by her transvestism and her armored being:

Her male clothing was both symbolic and functional. It was appropriate clothing for her movement and praxis. It protected her bodily privacy even as it declared it. Her body was closed off and covered; between her legs was inaccessible. In armor, which she wore as men did, she was doubly inaccessible, closed off: genitally private. The clothes characterized her virginity as militant: hostile to men who would want her for sex and hostile to female status
altogether. (Dworkin 100)

Olive, as we have mentioned earlier, alienates Verena’s followers who wish to take advantage of her, including her father, and rejects her suitors, like Ransom. She recognizes that heterosexuality is equivalent to women’s sexual subordination or submission to men. Thus, she is concerned that Ransom will destroy Verena’s purity and virginity, with the result that her sacred status with which the "Joan of Arc" figure is associated will be threatened. Verena’s surrender to Ransom, then, signifies a betrayal of the bond of sisterhood, a fall from the sublime to a disgraced heterosexuality, and a relinquishment of female resistance against men. In other words, Olive’s martyr-like exploration of spirituality and effort to enhance the purity of the bond of sisterhood by suppressing her female physicality and sensuality result in her failure to have Verena transcend her physical existence.

Conclusion

Critics have offered diverse views of the scene in which Ransom takes Verena away from the Boston Music Hall, which is filled with an eagerly awaiting audience. On the one hand, we can conclude that "the hood of Verena’s long cloak over her head, to conceal her face and her identity" (432-433) signifies that the forces working for male dominance will in effect silence the female voice; on the other hand, Verena, in tears, reveals her grief over the loss of her career as a public speaker and her feeling of misery, for Ransom cannot guarantee her future happiness because he lacks financial means and the possibility of any sort of meaningful career. Thus, while we cannot say the male principle that Ransom personifies can be totally dominant, it seems clear that Olive’s attempts to fight against male oppression are frustrated at the point where she loses Verena, a substitute for Olive, who stammers badly when she feels nervous.

However, the consequence of being deprived of a vicarious voice is that it paradoxically provides Olive with the chance to reclaim her own voice, and thus her overt shyness disappears: "Olive was close at hand, on the threshold of the room, and as soon as Ransom looked at her she became aware that the weakness she had just shown had passed away. She had straightened herself again, and she was upright in her desolation" (392). Olive has up to this point used Verena as a trance speaker as well as a well-trained public voice, for she suffers from symptoms associated with hysteria, a “female malady,” and cannot speak out in public; this “female malady” is described as feminizing or a social malady infecting America. She had idealized Verena as an armed maiden, like Joan of Arc, and strengthened their bond of sisterhood against male dominance, while undermining her partner’s heterosexual relations. However, Verena’s elopement or conversion to heterosexual love places Olive in a situation in which she has to walk onto the stage alone and speak to a frenzied audience on behalf of Verena.

At this moment, her fear and embarrassment, which had made her unable to give public speeches, disappear, and she regains her own voice, as if her spirit and voice, which had been imprisoned in her “female” body, were released. We see a complete reversal of the positions of Olive and Verena, as the following comment suggests: "If he [Ransom] had observed her, it might have seemed to him that she hoped to find the fierce expiation she sought for in exposure to the thousands she had disappointed and deceived, in offering herself to be trampled to death and torn to pieces’ (393). Thus it is Olive who is turned into Joan of Arc, a martyr to her faith and her cause.

Works Consulted


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