



The Bostonians
by Henry James



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With an Introduction by
Josephine Hendin



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INTRODUCTION

by Josephine Hendin

Nearly one hundred years after its publication, *The Bostonians* may still be ahead of its time. Its boldness of conception is only suggested in Henry James's notebook entry of April 18, 1883, where he declared his intention: "I wished to write a very *American* tale, a tale very characteristic of our social conditions, and I asked myself what was the most salient and peculiar point in our social life. The answer was: the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf." More daring in actuality, the novel reversed the expectation, still commonly held, that the drama of feminism is the rescue of one woman by another from male oppression. James offered a more radical situation: a man seeks to rescue a feminist speaker from the female mentor who has enabled her to make a fortune. Surprising in the 1880s, this scenario is still as fresh as current prophecies of a post-feminist culture in which successful female executives, at the peak of their careers, conclude they languish for babies.

James had the foresight to find lasting sexual as well as social trends in the social upheaval that swept through America after the Civil War. As Irving Howe has said of the milieu of *The Bostonians*: "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. . . . All that we have since associated with industrial society was moving into

sight. . . ."¹ Against such chaotic changes, James's Americans would struggle to create a sense of sexual order using the traditions that had guided them in the past. The progressive strain in our culture, optimistic in tone and egalitarian in outlook, would be embodied in the New England tradition of reform with its stress on individual worth and democratic values. Feminism was its sexual edge. The conservatism of southern plantation culture—fatalistic in its emotions, aristocratic in manner, stressing a code of behavior based on personal honor and the chivalric code—would express its sexual faith in male supremacy. From such opposite poles, James constructed his drama of confrontation. In his brilliant portraits of Olive Chancellor, Boston bluestocking, and her protégée, Verena Tarrant, James would describe an intense friendship sealed by feminist activism. Against these reformers he would pit a handsome southerner, Basil Ransom, who wants Verena for his submissive wife. In a satiric replay of the Civil War on the battlefields of sex, James addressed politics as a crisis of sex, culture, and character.

In sexual warfare James found a metaphor for American differences; in American differences, he located a metaphor for sexual warfare. By focusing on the power plays within a passionate triangle, James avoided time-bound issues or programs of the moment to reveal the roots of reform or reaction in the social psychology of love and dominance. Infatuated with neither feminism nor male chauvinism, James wrote with a black humor as devastating in its wit as it is sharp in its critique of sexual politics. No writer in America had dared the subject before; no one has done it so well since.

But from the moment the first chapters were serialized in *The Century Magazine* between 1885 and 1886, it was clear that something was wrong. The work was greeted with silence and slights. William James, Henry's older brother, delivered the sharpest blow, writing to Henry that the book was a "bad business" because in it Henry had ridiculed the reformer and family friend Elizabeth Peabody in his character Miss Birdseye, who is a feminist because she joins all reform movements,

¹Irving Howe, "Introduction," to *The Bostonians* (New York: Modern Library Editions, 1956), p. xviii.

"whose charity began at home and ended nowhere . . . and who knew less about her fellow-creatures . . . after fifty years of humanitarian zeal, than on the day she had gone into the field to testify against the iniquity of most arrangements." "Shocked and appalled" by William's charge, Henry denied it and lashed back: "The story is, I think, the best fiction I have written, and I expected you, if you said anything about it, would intimate that you thought as much—so that I find this charge on the subject of Miss Peabody a very cold douche indeed. . . ."²

To add injury to insult, Henry James's publisher went broke. In bankruptcy, he was unable to pay either the advance promised for *The Bostonians* or the fee for its serialization. Years later, long after James's mastery as a novelist had been established, ill luck would continue to pursue *The Bostonians*. Charles Scribner's Sons was not willing to include it in its New York Edition of James's fiction, although it welcomed far lesser works. James believed the book had "never received any sort of justice." Shortly before his death in 1916, he said, "I should have liked to review it for the Edition—it would have come out a much truer and more curious thing (it was meant to be curious from the first) . . ."³

The Bostonians is still "curious." James found a vantage point on his ambitious subject in an authorial attitude as chilling as it was Olympian. He wrote, it seems to me, from a cold sexual suspicion, a skepticism expressed in both the structure and the meaning of the novel. His satire was shocking in its hard, ironic brilliance. It is not simply that he kept his distance from the social or sexual sufferings of his characters; he barricaded himself from them behind his sexual misgivings. His vision and his solutions to the aesthetic problems posed by his subject were so radical as to be more available to us than to his wary readers in 1886. *The Bostonians* stands between the tradition of realism, with its secure assumptions about sex and society, and the modern novel of paradox, which holds everything in doubt.

²Percy Lubbock, ed., *The Letters of Henry James*, Vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), p. 117.

³F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, *The Notebooks of Henry James* (New York: George Braziller, 1955), p. 49.

James developed his unusual story in an almost classically romantic way. Olive Chancellor, a learned woman who "was a spinster as Shelley was a lyric poet, or as the month of August is sultry," and whose smile "might have been likened to a thin ray of moonlight resting upon the wall of a prison," has a pathological revulsion toward men. Afflicted by a will to dominance and a will to martyrdom (she wishes to control a cause or die for it), she seems a neurotic, witchlike figure in possession of desirable Verena. Tall, dark, handsome Basil, vibrating sexuality, looks every bit the fairy-tale hero come to rescue the captive maiden (whom he thinks of as a princess in distress) from Olive's grip. James sealed this archetypal drama in a tripartite structure of formal symmetry: In Part I Olive wins Verena and shields her with her cloak from the eyes of several desirous, admiring men. In Part III Basil triumphs and shields Verena with her cloak from the eyes of an audience waiting for a feminist speech. Such structural repetition supports the impression that James intended to create an equality of intent and force between the combatants and to justify Basil's cruelty toward Olive. In Olive's defeat and Basil's triumph there ought to be, if we follow the conventions of romance, joy at the restoration of sexual order. Yet James used romantic expectations to explode the most elemental notions of happiness and to attack the idea of romance.

James manipulated realistic portraits of people and places to disclose and protest against the very nature of expectation and belief. In his America, truth and hope are defined by the press and the magnetic figures it features. All language tends toward the distortions of persuasion and propaganda. James's Bostonians, crowding into their universal "humbler," the mass transit horsecar, live in a blighted landscape in which the buildings of a heroic past—the church steeple, the town hall—contend with factory smokestacks for visibility and rise from yards and streets "which gave a collective impression of boards and tin and frozen earth, sheds and rotting piles." In this environment, the norms of Puritanism and transcendentalism have each gone awry, and the work of the abolitionists, having been completed, has faded. There exists neither code of manners nor belief dense enough to cushion such losses, nor any institution to satisfy spiritual longing.

The city of saints now seems to give way to charismatic speakers and a crude public opinion.

James envisioned this crisis of belief as a crisis of character. The men of New England bear the mark of twisted values. Selah Tarrant, Verena's father, is a mesmeric healer and holder of fake seances who looks like a smiling bat or "the priest of a religion that was passing through the stage of miracles." Showman and con man, his domestic morality is expressed in his virtually selling Verena to Olive. Public virtue is enforced by the likes of newsman Mathias Pardon who "had begun his career, at the age of fourteen, by going the rounds of the hotels, to cull flowers from the big, greasy registers . . . and he might flatter himself that he had contributed in his measure, and on behalf of a vigilant public opinion, the pride of a democratic state, to the great end of preventing the American citizen from attempting clandestine journeys." He wants to marry Verena, knowing she will make a fortune and believing that to link her gift of speech and his of promotion can ensure a successful partnership. The proposed alliance between tabloid and charismatic figure reflects James's sense of the directions American belief would take: it would produce profitable propaganda, ideas for mass titillation and consumption, and flourish on "spiritual" consumerism.

The women of New England affect the purity of belief through perversities of emotion. The aged abolitionist Miss Birdseye "was heroic, she was sublime, the whole moral history of Boston was reflected in her displaced spectacles." Her skewed vision involves distortions of sentiment, for her charity is indiscriminate, and the price of her goodness is her ignorance of human nature. In his study of "one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England," James disclosed grosser subversions of belief through neurotic love. Olive's feminism is tainted by morbid exaltation at the thought of female suffering and by the effort of sublimating all desire to ideology. Her devouring possessiveness and fear of losing Verena lead her to wreck the remnants of morality in Verena's family by paying off Selah and to conceal from Verena an offer of marriage and support for her career that would save her from Basil and offer the prospect of a life that could combine love and work. Her betrayal of Verena, her need not to see anything between a man and a woman

succeed, are moral as well as psychological blights on her friendship and her feminism. The spiritual child of Miss Birdseye is Verena, who shares her inability to see in either Olive or Basil elements of malice. In such excesses of sympathy and in Olive's excesses of jealousy lie derangements of both sentiment and belief.

James lures the reader toward his critique of Bostonians with the possibility that Basil's elitism and conservatism offer solutions. Much confusion over the meaning of the novel has come from too easy an assumption that James's polarization of positions meant that one was "right" and the other, "wrong." As Leon Edel puts it: "The reader is made to believe to some degree that in the struggle between Olive and Basil, he is watching a struggle between good and evil. . . ." ⁴ Those who succumb to partisanship invariably become Basil's supporters. William James: "The fancy is more tickled by R.'s victory being complete." ⁵ Louise Bogan: "Of first-rate intelligence, completely 'unreconstructed,' holding 'unprogressive' ideals of manliness, courage and chivalry, Basil Ransom has a civilized set of principles to fall back upon." ⁶ But such views do not withstand close reading of a novel in which good and evil constantly shift, Basil's victory is diminished by its joylessness, and Basil is far from chivalrous.

That James was critical of conservatism is made entirely clear in his treatment of Basil's character and the southern culture it reflects. Focusing on the paradox of southern character—its surface amiability and charm, its hidden ruthlessness—James's treatment calls to mind that southern catchword, "Save face and you save all." In his descriptions of Basil's good looks and his suppression of Basil's cruelties, James represented the distortions of masculinity contained in such an ethic. Southern languor, leisure, and chivalry are belied as features of moral worth by Basil's passive attitude toward the near starvation of his mother and sister who subsist in Mississippi on a "farinaceous diet."

⁴Leon Edel, *Henry James, The Middle Years: 1882-1885* (New York: Avon, 1964), p. 141.

⁵Henry James, ed., *The Letters of William James*, Vol. I (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), p. 251.

⁶Louise Bogan, *A Poet's Alphabet: Reflections of the Literary Art and Vocation* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), p. 244.

Basil's chivalry is, as James says, "moral tinsel," a form of concealment. As Basil says of Verena as he resolves to squelch her plans: "He really pitied her for not perceiving, beneath his ominous pleasantries, the firmness of his resolution." If the New Englander grows strident and corrupt in proselytizing his or her belief, the southerner grows silky in concealing his purpose. If the power plays of the North involve con games or puritanic forms of feminism, those of the South are marked by masquerades and seductions.

Basil's indolence and suavity suggest the failure of the post-war South to replace or revive its lost culture. Having failed in the practice of law because his efforts are "lax," Basil dreams of controlling national conduct and longs "to act upon the public opinion of the time." James both grants and ridicules his intellectual ambition. More devastatingly, he lets us see Basil's thought processes. In a woman's luxurious parlor, Basil thinks of marrying the woman whom he dislikes but who can keep him in comfort while he fulfills his wish to influence the nation. "Was it not one's duty to put oneself in the best conditions for such action? . . . He almost persuaded himself that the moral law commanded him to marry." The willingness to sell himself for comfort and time reflect the emasculation of a heritage of leisure out of helpless nostalgia for the past. Repining over lost power is evident in his belief in male supremacy. Anxiety over his own masculinity is contained in the fervor of his male chauvinist polemic, his tying his intelligence to bolstering manhood, his tacit acceptance, after having failed in the usual outlets for male success, that he will define himself by fighting one woman and seducing another. If the propagandists of New England delude others, Basil goes further in using the language of persuasion to entice women and deceive himself. That he sees publishing one reactionary article in *The Rational Review* as a sign that he can support a wife and family as well as his mother and sister suggests his delusion that he can play a male role without effort.

The greatest seduction in the novel may be James's seduction of his readers into believing that the conceptions of the past, be they southern or northern, hold solutions for the present and future. Readers are lured into the deceptions and self-deceptions of the characters, into sharing the hopes of a feminist ideology

that promises freedom or of a conservatism that holds the promise of security through male power. Such expectations, not fulfilled in the novel, only plunge the reader from illusions of hope to the experience of impasse.

The modernity of *The Bostonians*, its richness of perception, its problematic density, its comedy and tragedy, all derive from James's extraordinary sense of paradox. Characters exist as believable in themselves and as parodies of themselves; they are and are not what they seem. Such tensions exist within each character and govern their relations to each other. Olive, who appears witchlike and morbid, nevertheless helps Verena blossom. Her outrageous statements about the cruelty of men, almost funny in their excess, largely turn out to be true. Basil is always called chivalrous but is rarely so. The discrepancies between what we are told to see and what we actually do see have contributed to misunderstandings of the novel. Yet they must be credited with the novel's density and its haunting perception of the crisis of humanity in a culture that defines sexual reality only in antagonisms.

James's essential concern is the quality of emotion in a culture in which sexual ideology offers no effective way of coping with the deeper anxieties of human entanglements. The heart of his meaning is revealed in the characters who bear the burden of heterosexual desire: Verena and Basil. Each is a product of social forces sweeping through America. North and South encounter each other in the young woman on the rise and the man with nowhere to go; in the self-made girl and the man unmade by war. The drama of New England optimism is contained in Verena's Emersonian spirit; the tragedy of a lost war is contained in Basil's perversion of conservatism to reactionary bitterness. From Olive's puritanism, Verena has absorbed a work ethic that makes her studious in her efforts to improve her skills. Aristocratic incapacity for labor has forced Basil's failure at law. In her ignorance of the dark side of human nature, in an idealism that leaves her disarmed and disabled before Basil, Verena reveals excesses and dangers of Emersonianism. In his inability to be compassionate or even generous to Verena, Basil reflects the distortions of masculine authority aggravated by plantation culture. Brought up in lecture halls to every shifting new faith, endowed

with self-disposable parents, Verena has known one kind of modern uprootedness. Brought up to wealth, power, and dominance only to lose all, Basil has experienced the dislocations of history and circumstance. Each seems pitifully alone.

Of all the characters in *The Bostonians*, Verena has been the least understood or appreciated. She has been accused of not having an idea "in her pretty little head," of simply not being "interesting enough," of being "gaudy," or of having options that are equally trivial: "At best she will be a kind of oratorical actress; and the alternative is that of becoming a submissive wife." Critics have generally misperceived her as only an article fought over by the more interesting Basil and Olive. Yet it must be granted that Verena is crucial to the novel, not simply as a prize, but as measure of the quality of feeling in the encounter of love with power.

Verena is a changeling in the style of such American misfits as Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*, who is radiant with life in a life-denying culture, or the heroic Billy Budd, whose physical and moral beauty are ironically insupportable in his environment. Verena retains a thirst for experience amid characters who have fled from it in fear and nostalgia. Often critical of Olive's views and never believing in Basil's, she has a far more independent mind than she has been accorded and is capable of understanding in human rather than merely political terms. Her great potentialities of emotional strength are revealed in the fullness of her compassion for Olive and Basil, in her natural self-esteem, expressed in her freedom from shame before her audiences and derived from her sense of innate goodness, but, above all, in her magical "gift" for speech, for connection. Through Verena, James measures the effects of love on the only character capable of feeling it. The only one who changes in the course of the novel, Verena undergoes a metamorphosis, from the triumphant woman she is at the beginning of Part II to the confused and weeping outcast, exiled from family, friends, and belief, she becomes at the end.

We know Verena by what she loses. Her great success is evident as we see it through Basil's grudging admiration of how far she had come as a speaker and how well she commands the attention of her audience, the "best" society in an opulent New

York townhouse. In her, Basil encounters a woman who has everything he wants, since she has already achieved a platform that permits her "to act upon the opinion of the time." Her power is visible in his need to patronize and dismiss her evident impact: "The sort of thing she was able to do . . . was an article for which there was more and more demand . . . the stupid, gregarious, gullible public, the enlightened democracy of his native land, could swallow unlimited draughts of it. He was sure she could go . . . for several years . . . and would make a fortune sufficient to keep her in affluence forevermore. . . . He felt ashamed of his own poverty . . . when he thought of the gilded nimbus that surrounded the protégée. . . ." If she were his wife, he would "know a way to strike her dumb."

James's exploration of the social psychology of desire is split between a portrait of the effects of love (Verena's decline), and a study of the nature of desire (what Basil wants) and the mechanisms of seduction (how Basil gets what he wants). With Machiavellian precision, James probes the stages and meaning of Basil's passion. Basil's desire has two edges: the first is a covetousness of Verena's gift for being heard that reveals his love as a desire to appropriate and confer upon himself her talent for being accepted. The second is a craving to control Verena's gift, to focus it on himself by insisting she charm only him. Achievement of the former "creates" his power and relieves his anxiety over failure; fulfillment of the latter reassures his "authority" and alleviates his loss of influence. Each is a form of self-aggrandizement devoted to retrieving him from smallness and frustration.

Basil's efforts to steal or control Verena's magic are charted by James in three key scenes, each of which is characterized by an American landmark. Near Memorial Hall, built in honor of Harvard's Civil War casualties, Basil leads a strategic assault on Verena's New England conscience by persuading her to lie to Olive. "Conscious of a man's brutality," he coerces her by banter, nastiness, and prospects of his conversion to feminism. The lie arouses both her guilt and her efforts to make good on it by "reforming" him. In New York's Central Park, Basil plays serpent in the urban Eden, luring her on with the possibility of his reform, only to intensify her guilt, confuse her with his

mixture of reason and rationalization, and indulge in what is now, somewhat excessively, called mind-rape: telling her he knows better than she does what she thinks and feels.

James is never more devastating than in revealing an amatory style indistinguishable from anger. Basil declares he wishes to save masculine character from feminization and doesn't much care "what becomes of you ladies while I make the attempt!" Thinking of kissing and embracing Verena on a sheltered park bench, he kept "expressing monstrous opinions with exotic cadences, and mild, familiar laughs, which, as he leaned toward her, almost tickled her cheek and ear," as though they were sweet remarks. "It seemed to her strangely harsh, almost cruel, to have brought her out only to say to her things which . . . could only give her pain; yet there was a spell upon her as she listened . . . Ransom's will had the effect of making her linger."

Ransom's "method" is to render Verena vulnerable by confusing her with sexual signals that are alternately seductive and antagonistic, to break down her confidence in her beliefs and in her self-esteem (the more she listens, the more it slips), and to invite and then repel with laughter all her attempts at self-defense, a practice that mars her faith in her gift for connection. His "spell" is the fruit of his labor: he reduces Verena to confusion, silence, and shame. His satanic effect is to make her, for the first time in her life, ashamed to be looked upon. But this is far from the greatest sign of her fall. Ironically, after having reduced her to silence in the park, Basil has his first success at publication. She, on the other hand, is never again shown successfully speaking before an audience.

With clinical exactitude James probes the paradox of a woman's decline through love. Part III charts Verena's loss of status, loss of self, and loss of pleasure as she is asked "to burn everything she had adored; she was to adore everything she had burned." She incorrectly attributes her misery to the effort of detaching herself from Olive or even from the life of a feminist speaker, but Basil correctly realizes it is the price she will pay for being with him. Her sexual excitement in his presence and her confusion make her yield to him power over her gift for speech, for sexual joy, for connection, and for life. That all these are one is suggested in James's sexualized imagery: "She felt it

must be a magical touch that could bring about such a cataclysm. Why Basil had been deputed by fate to exercise this spell was more than she could say—poor Verena, who up to so lately had flattered herself that she had a wizard's wand in her own pocket."

Basil's way of love involves a theft, not simply of Verena's heart, but of her capacity to feel joy. In one of his bitterest ironies, James associates yielding her gifts not with pleasure but with impotence. To regain her power of connection, of intense self-expression, she will have to ransom it from Basil! Yet her power to persuade has been appropriated by him. Leading his final raid into the Boston Conservatory of Music, fortress of Boston culture, Basil strikes Verena totally mute simply by being in the audience where thousands wait to hear her. Begging for his permission to speak before leaving with him "forever," there are "sobs and supplications in her voice, and Ransom felt himself flushing with pure pity for her pain. . . . But at the same moment he had another perception which brushed aside remorse; he saw that he could do what he wanted, that she begged him, with all her being, to spare her, but that so long as he should protest, she was submissive, helpless." As he presses his advantage to its humiliating conclusion, failure and success change places as she weeps and he triumphs. James salts Verena's tears with his prediction: "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." As Verena's passion costs her her capacity for pleasure, so Basil achieves his desire by destroying everything in Verena that charmed him. In this marriage, possibilities of love are foreclosed.

The Bostonians offers a vision of people trapped in sexual paradox. The ideologies to which Olive, Verena, and Basil look for sexual clarity and hope ironically nourish seeds of betrayal and self-betrayal. Their feminism and male chauvinism provide oversimplifications of sexual roles that run the danger of inflaming sexual anxiety and fanning sexual competitiveness. Neither ideology can address complexities of intimacy. Each is marked by a rapacity that makes winning Verena more important than enjoying her and possessing her more important than knowing her. Unformed at the beginning, Verena is formless at the end. James sees her potentialities for emotional largesse as impossi-

ble to fulfill or to locate in a way of living anyone can envision. Her dehumanization by Basil and Olive conveys James's fear that in a culture he saw as merely exploitative the fate of love is to be twisted to a crude utility. Desire in this novel takes that form of need utterly shaped by acquisitiveness: parasitism. In their lack of redeeming humanity, Olive and Basil cannot be said to stand as representative Americans, but only as representatives of American excess. Missing from their imaginations are prospects of mutuality and complementariness.

In the harsh satire of *The Bostonians*, Henry James offered a brilliant diagnosis of sexual disorder in American bodies politic. He wrote no prescriptions; he saw no easy cures. He showed no solutions in reform or reaction, or in any movements of the time that disclosed unvarnished yearning for power. America and Americans would have to find solutions that did not yet exist. Henry James solved *his* American problem by turning to Europe and to England for settings and subjects. There he would describe, in the great novels that came after *The Bostonians*, relations between the sexes that were no more generous than ours. And yet they were graced by richer ways of accommodating and relieving rapacity.

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"Olive will come down in about ten minutes; she told me to tell you that. About ten; that is exactly like Olive. Neither five nor fifteen, and yet not ten exactly, but either nine or eleven. She didn't tell me to say she was glad to see you, because she doesn't know whether she is or not, and she wouldn't for the world expose herself to telling a fib. She is very honest, is Olive Chancellor; she is full of rectitude. Nobody tells fibs in Boston; I don't know what to make of them all. Well, I am very glad to see you, at any rate."

These words were spoken with much volubility by a fair, plump, smiling woman who entered a narrow drawing-room in which a visitor, kept waiting for a few moments, was already absorbed in a book. The gentleman had not even needed to sit down to become interested: apparently he had taken up the volume from a table as soon as he came in, and, standing there, after a single glance round the apartment, had lost himself in its pages. He threw it down at the approach of Mrs. Luna, laughed, shook hands with her, and said in answer to her last remark, "You imply that you do tell fibs. Perhaps that is one."

"Oh no; there is nothing wonderful in my being glad to see you," Mrs. Luna rejoined, "when I tell you that I have been three long weeks in this unprevaricating city."

"That has an unflattering sound for me," said the young man.

"I pretend not to prevaricate."

"Dear me, what's the good of being a Southerner?" the lady asked. "Olive told me to tell you she hoped you will stay to dinner. And if she said it, she does really hope it. She is willing to risk that."