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Feminism in Henry James's "The Bostonians"

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FEMINISM IN HENRY JAMES'S THE BOSTONIANS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Helen Eugenia Hester

1979

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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FEMINISM IN HENRY JAMES'S THE BOSTONIANS

ABSTRACT

Henry James's The Bostonians is a satirical and biting indictment of the women's rights movement of late nineteenth century America. Through many levels of characterization James builds a compelling picture of corruption, sterility and low moral values, portraying the leaders and followers of the movement in an unflattering and negative manner.

Although James was attacked for his portrayal of Boston society, his remarks about the members of the women's movement are typical expressions of beliefs widely held by his contemporaries about the nature of the men and women involved in the movement. His portrayal of "Boston society" itself is, in fact, flattering; it is women's rights activists and radicals he attacks, not Boston society in general. Articles appearing in such contemporary magazines as Harper's New Monthly Magazine, The Nation, and The North American Review express analogous sentiments about the movement under a benevolent guise of concern for the members of the "fair sex" who might be unduly influenced by the insidious women's rights movement.

Through the conflict between Basil Ransom, as spokesman for conservatism, and Olive Chancellor, as a proponent of the women's rights movement, over control and possession of Verena Tarrant, the symbol of the softness and vulnerability of womanhood, James portrays the conflict between conservatism and radicalism believed to be inherent in the women's suffrage movement. That Ransom ultimately wins this struggle, inducing Verena to marry him, while not a happy resolution, is the only one which James leaves open if any form of order is to be preserved in the relation between men and women. For Olive to have won control would mean, according to the picture the reader is given of women's rights, a destruction of normal male/female relationships, the feminization of men and the coarsening and defeminization of women. This view of the negative aspects of the female movement is supported by contemporary articles from the magazines mentioned. It is through this struggle, and through his biting portrayal of the men and women of the movement, that James espouses a conservative viewpoint. It is this view of the women's movement as a disruptive influence in American life which has been shown through the writings of James's contemporaries, attitudes which are reflected and amplified in the characterizations in The Bostonians.

Sterility of body and mind, corrupt motives, and the moral weakness leading to the disintegration of family ties are the dominant characteristics Henry James attributes to the members and leaders of the feminist movement in The Bostonians. He satirizes those people who are drawn into such an emotion-charged issue as women's rights and holds them and, consequently, their beliefs, up to ridicule, effectively portraying them in an unfavorable light. With few exceptions, the members of the movement are characterized as cranks, charlatans or ineffectual dreamers, and only those with no real involvement in the movement (i.e., the idly curious Boston audiences) are portrayed with kindness or respect.

The anti-feminist sentiments which Henry James expresses in The Bostonians reflect a long tradition of denunciation of the movement. From 1837 to the early twentieth century and beyond, according to Eugene Hecker's A Short History of Women's Rights,¹ the women's rights movement, in America as in England, was the object of a great deal of abuse, not only from members of the press and pulpit, but from people in all ranks of life. The general characteristics James ascribes to the members of the movement, his portrayal of a deteriorating social order and the decline of womanly sentiments, must not be seen as a particularly vicious or vitriolic attack, but as a reflection of popular social attitudes toward feminism. This sentiment, which one might expect from the many ignorant, narrow-minded and

provincial members of a backward society, such as the more unenlightened parts of the American South, is not confined to them, but finds expression in some liberal and well-educated people of the North as well. These are the people one would expect to find reading and contributing to such cosmopolitan magazines as The Atlantic Monthly, Harper's New Monthly Magazine, The Nation and The North American Review. All of these are magazines with which Henry James was familiar as a contributor and as a reader.

In the scenario of The Bostonians which James appended to a letter to his publisher, J. R. Osgood, on April 8, 1883, James said, "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."² The emphasis should be placed, it seems, on the phrase "the decline of the sentiment of sex," with its overtones of decay, regression and disapproval. In his portrayal of Olive Chancellor and the men and women connected with the women's crusade, each with his or her particular motive for involvement, James attacks the movement and its participants.

Although Basil Ransom, as spokesman for conservatism, comes closest to representing James's outlook on the women's movement, James remains detached from Ransom as well as the other characters in the novel. James subjects

Ransom to his irony and satire as much as Olive Chancellor or Mrs. Luna. Despite this detachment, the overall tone of the book indicates distaste for the types of people who are drawn into such an hysterical issue as feminism, and distaste for a public which encourages this movement for its own amusement or diversion. The characters James chooses as representative of the movement are, with the exception of Miss Birdseye, all motivated by some personal desire for approval, publicity, or vengeance, not by an altruistic desire for the betterment of women. The women either negate their femininity entirely, take on masculine characteristics, or are so feminine as to be caricatures of themselves. The men are effeminate, sly or vulgar, altogether unmanly. I agree with Peter Buitenhuis, who states in The Grasping Imagination: "The range of characters in the novel sufficiently represents James's ruling ideas about the Bostonians. All of them except Ransom, an outsider, and Verena, an innocent, represent some distortion of personalities that relates in some way to a dislocation of the sexual role."³ These characters run the gamut from sexless Olive Chancellor and masculine Mary Prance to oversexed Adeline Luna and effeminate Henry Burrage.

It is not just the battle between men and women which James portrays, but the disruption of a culture which he, like so many others, felt was threatened by the activist women. James takes a conservative stance in the book,

and no one escapes his irony, not even Ransom, about whom he says: "It must be repeated that he was very provincial."⁴ Although James satirizes Ransom as well as the radicals, it is important to keep in mind that Ransom is the ultimate victor in the battle with Olive over Verena. Therefore, conservatism triumphs over radicalism, even though the victory is made bittersweet by Verena's tears. Ransom's is not a complete and total victory, but it is victory nevertheless. Conservatism preserves established institutions and methods and resists changes. This is typified by Ransom's attitudes and beliefs. Radical, as represented by Olive Chancellor, favors extreme change and overthrow of established norms.⁵

James characterizes Basil Ransom as "provincial," with ideas which are "three hundred years behind the times," but his views are actually more in tune with his time than they first appear. Again and again his statements, which seem to be repressive and regressive ones transplanted from the mud of Mississippi, turn out to be echoes of those expressed by very current and seemingly liberal writers—contributors to Harpers, Atlantic Monthly and Galaxy. These writers are liberal, that is, except toward the women's rights movement. Those who actually supported women's rights were a small yet vocal minority. Despite their active campaigning for acceptance of more liberal attitudes toward the women's movement, the mainstream of writing continued to be more conservative, disseminating

stereotyped characterizations. Basil Ransom "had the most definite notions about [women's] place in nature, in society. . . . He admitted their rights; these consisted in a standing claim to the generosity and tenderness of the stronger race" (p. 198). Ransom felt that "their business was simply to be provided for, practice the domestic virtues, and be charmingly grateful" (p. 205). And again he says "The use of a truly amiable woman is to make some honest man happy" (p. 244). Taken together, these statements seem oppressive and old-fashioned, but compare them to a passage from an article by George Cary Eggleston (novelist, editor, lawyer and free-lance writer)⁶ in Harper's New Monthly Magazine (July 1883), entitled "The Education of Women":

As wives and mothers our girls are to be, in Addison's phrase, 'the cement of society.' Without their purity and grace, and intelligence and good temper, society would crumble to pieces. It will be their task to keep the world sweet and wholesome; to create, regulate, and maintain social intercourse of a graceful, profitable kind; to make life worth living. It will be theirs to make homes with the material means which men furnish; to turn mere dwelling-houses into centres of attractive domestic life.⁷

While the Harper's article does not actually say as Ransom does that men are the "stronger race," in a more subtle way it points out that man is the provider, and as such is stronger. Woman's place in American society is in the home, making it pleasant for children and husband, fulfilling the role of wife and mother.

Ransom's remarks are blunt and condescending, while the Harper's article has a more conciliatory tone and is less antagonistic. Beneath these superficial differences the conservative tone and sentiment of both are the same. It is interesting, though not particularly significant, to note that both Eggleston and Ransom were lawyers who served on the side of the South during the Civil War, and that might explain the similarity in views.

Another contemporary of James, Charles Astor Bristed, a respected scholar and prolific author, wrote in The Galaxy (August 1873): "Whatever moral superiority be claimed for women, it can scarcely be denied that in the sum of all three classes of qualities, the physical, mental, and moral, men are the stronger, and likely to remain so for some generations."⁸ Ransom's "three hundred-year-old philosophy" is more current than it appears at first.

As a Southerner, Basil Ransom is an alien not only to the culture of Boston, but geographically and traditionally as well. Lionel Trilling says that when James related the feminist movement to the immense struggle between the North and South, he set the story beyond any danger of seeming to be a mere bicker between morbid women and stupid men, but rather made it plain that his story had to do with a cultural crisis.⁹ For Trilling, this cultural crisis involves conflict between the alien cultures of two geographic locations, each with different values and

customs. But for the bulk of its detractors, the women's movement was a cultural crisis in a more intimate way, not involving anything as objective as different places, but threatening the very foundation of society. Hecker cites an editorial in Harper's New Monthly Magazine (November 1853) which puts the situation this way:

The women's movement is avowedly opposed to the most time-honoured proprieties of social life, it is opposed to nature; it is opposed to revelation. . . . It is equally opposed to nature and the established order of society founded upon it. . . . The blindest must see that such a change as is proposed in the relations and life of the sexes cannot leave either marriage or the family in their present state (p. 154).

In a more recent statement in the January 1880 issue of The Atlantic Monthly, an anonymous author, in an article entitled "Equality," expresses the same sentiments:

The movement goes to obliterate, as far as possible, the distinction between sexes. Nature is, no doubt, amused at this attempt. A recent writer says, 'The *femme libre* [free woman] of the new social order may, indeed, escape the charge of neglecting her family and her household by contending that it is not her vocation to become a wife and mother.' Why, then, we ask, is she constituted a woman at all? Merely that she may become a sort of second-rate man?¹⁰

According to Hecker's history of women's rights, the newspapers declared that the Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York, on July 19-20, 1848, was organized by "divorced wives, childless women, and sour old maids" (p. 158), when in actuality it was not. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the moving force behind the

convention, was married and had seven children, and Lucy Stone, another organizer, was happily married. But this negative description of the leaders of the movement, complete with its prejudices and biased attitudes, serves to illustrate the general attitude toward the women's movement that only malcontents, misfits and unproductive, sexless women were involved in women's rights. This negative description prefigures James's depiction of the leaders and participants in the women's movement in The Bostonians.

Olive Chancellor, as one of the leading proponents of the movement and the main exponent of radicalism in the struggle against Ransom over possession of Verena, is the most important example of James's view of feminism. James's descriptions of Olive bear a striking resemblance to the stereotypes which other writers also used in referring to women's rights activists. In an August 1875 issue of Harper's New Monthly Magazine, a short story by Ella Farman illustrating this stereotyping begins with this paragraph:

—Poor Sara—angular and muscular from hard work, as a rule ill dressed, compelled by fate to be systematically and enterprisingly energetic—I do not wonder that people had the impression that she was strong-minded and 'woman's rights.' It does seem unfeminine to dress in open defiance of fashion and taste; yet it does not logically follow that one is dissatisfied with woman's sphere.¹¹

According to this story, a woman's appearance links her with the feminist movement whether she is an advocate of

women's rights or not. Many people felt that feminism would bring about the destruction of marriage and the family, and lessen the differences between men and women; with the loss of these distinctions they also felt that the women of the movement were necessarily sexless and dowdy. William A. Hammond, neurologist, Surgeon General of the U S Army, and pioneer in the field of nervous and mental diseases in the United States, notes, in his August 1883 article in The North American Review entitled "Woman in Politics," that the members of the movement are not necessarily typical of the majority of women. "Originating with members of the female sex, the movement was at first confined to a limited portion of the United States, and was conducted by a few advanced and perhaps *abnormally constituted* women, to whom in a short time were united a half dozen men of similar tendencies and characteristics"¹² (emphasis added).

Unfortunately, James does not rise above the stereotyping so common to the opponents of the women's movement and noted in the preceding paragraphs. Seen through Ransom's eyes, Olive has a smile like "a thin ray of moonlight upon the wall of a prison," and a hand "at once cold and limp" (p. 8). In her plain dark dress, with her colorless hair, her light green eyes having a "glitter of green ice" (p. 19), and with her unspecified (or worse, nonexistent) figure which excites "vague

compassion" in Ransom, Olive not only falls into the category of "sour old maid," as referred to by newspaper accounts of the 1948 Women's Rights Convention, but is also definitely a "childless woman," sterile, unproductive and, therefore, unnatural. Although Olive is shown through Ransom's admittedly prejudiced eyes, James moves from Ransom's view to that of the narrator when he says, "There are women who are unmarried by accident, and others who are unmarried by option; but Olive Chancellor was unmarried by every implication of her being" (P. 18). Olive's fundamental nature is not merely sexless, but actively anti-sexual. In a society which glorifies motherhood, which sees motherhood and matrimony as the sole aspirations of women, Olive's self-imposed denial of her sex is indeed an unnatural state.

Ransom and the narrator dwell upon Olive's morbidity, and the word is repeated five times on one page in Chapter 2 as being one of her outstanding characteristics:

. . .The simplest division it is possible to make of the human race is into the people who take things hard and the people who take them easy. He perceived very quickly that Miss Chancellor belonged to the former class. This was written so intensely in her delicate face that he felt an unformulated pity for her before they had exchanged twenty words. He himself, by nature, took things easy; if he had put on the screw of late, it was after reflection, and because circumstances pressed him close. 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*. Poor Ransom announced this fact to himself as if he had made a great discovery; but in reality he had never

been so "Boeotian" as at that moment. It proved nothing of any importance with regard to Miss Chancellor to say that she was *morbid*; any sufficient account of her would lie very much to the rear of that. Why was she *morbid*, and why was her *morbidness* typical? Ransom might have exulted if he had gone back far enough to explain that mystery (p. 11, emphasis added).

Although James turns his irony on Ransom when he calls him "Boeotian," this description of Olive is consistent through the book. The narrator comments on Olive's shyness and attitude when she visits Henry Burrage's room at Harvard. "She saw all this through the blur of her shyness, the conscious, anxious silence to which she was so much of the time condemned. It may therefore be imagined how sharp her vision would have been could she only have taken the situation more simply; for she was intelligent enough not to have needed to be *morbid*, even for purposes of self-defense" (pp. 155-6, emphasis added). In another instance, Olive's attitude is again described: "She herself had a nervous dread, but she had that about everything" (p. 288). Again, her "nervous dread" is touched upon in the book: "The other danger was the worst; the palpitation of her strange dread, the night of Miss Birdseye's party, came back to her" (p. 292). One final description touches on her hysteria and morbidity: "She neither ate nor slept; she could scarcely speak without bursting into tears; she felt so implacably, insidiously baffled" (p. 392). This morbidity of Olive's is an important point because, as the novel unfolds, Olive is shown to be the victim of her own diseased mind through her fanaticism

and attachment to Verena. The narrator of the novel gives insight into Olive's personality when he states that she is "a person whose two brothers—her only ones—had given up life for the Northern cause. . . . The most secret, the most sacred hope of her nature was that she might some day have such a chance, that she might be a martyr and die for something" (p. 13). Abigail Ann Hamblen points out that "Martyrdom has been the lot of many a reformer—and, James indicates, the desire for it has been in the very nature of reformers."¹³ Prior to her visit to the Tarrants to determine whether she can persuade them to give up Verena for a sum, Olive thinks "Her only consolation was that she expected to suffer intensely; for the prospect of suffering was always, spiritually speaking, so much cash in her pocket" (p. 113). Although this characterization of Olive's morbidity seems extreme, James is joined by his contemporaries in this attitude. In an article entitled "The Woman Question" which appeared in The North American Review (October 1879) Francis Parkman, a legally trained historian and writer, says:

In spite of their advantages, a vast proportion of [American women] fall immeasurably short of the influence and consideration that ought to belong to them. We would by no means be understood to intimate that this is a consequence of liberty. It proceeds from a variety of causes, some of which act injuriously on men also; and foremost among them is an overstrained and *morbid* activity, an incessant tension of nerves, bred partly by climate, but incomparably more by the peculiar social conditions of a

country where all kinds of competition, spurred by all kinds of stimulus, keep mind and body always on the stretch¹⁴ (emphasis added).

This language directly parallels James's description of Olive. Not only is Olive unfeminine and "morbid," but, according to James, she has a martyr complex as well, which, while not a flattering portrait, is not an isolated example of the opinion held by his contemporaries of the kind of women attracted to the movement.

Besides the unattractive characteristic of morbidity, Olive is shown as drawn into a suppressed but essentially homosexual relationship with Verena, the homosexuality being suggested by Olive's actions and attitudes but never openly brought out by James. Homosexuality, the antithesis of a "normal" male/female sexual relationship, undermines completely the sanctity of marriage and the bearing and raising of children which was considered women's role in society. Irving Howe, in the Introduction to the Modern Library edition of The Bostonians, says, "Olive's lesbianism becomes both cause and emblem of her social incapacity. . . . Olive's lesbianism—partly because it is antipathetic to society,—partly because it is suppressed—cuts her off from everyone, except for a time Verena, and renders her incapable of genuine communication in either public or private life" (p. xxiii). Again and again we see Olive's antipathy to men and attraction to Verena: "She had . . . a moral resource that she could always fall back upon; it had already been a comfort to

her, on occasions of acute feeling, that she hated men, as a class, anyway" (p. 22). When Olive asks Verena "where she had got her 'intense realization' of the suffering of women; for her address at Miss Birdseye's showed that she, too (like Olive herself) had had that vision in the watches of the night," Verena answers by asking "where Joan of Arc had got her idea of the suffering of France. This was so prettily said that Olive could scarcely keep from kissing her" (pp. 85-6). In another instance, as Ransom bids Olive goodbye, he "offered his hand in farewell to his hostess; but Olive found it impossible to do anything but ignore the gesture. She could not have let him touch her" (p. 97). In the Tarrant's home in Cambridge, when Matthias Pardon suggests Mr. Tarrant not "lay on hands" to encourage Verena to speak, Olive sees it as a chance to save her, and as "a chance to take a more complete possession of the girl" (p. 132). As she prepares to leave, Olive attempts to extract a promise not to marry from Verena: "And Olive drew the girl nearer to her, flinging over her with one hand the fold of a cloak that hung ample upon her own meager person, and holding her there with the other" (p. 136). Finally, when Verena renews her vow to renounce marriage, Olive reacts with passion: "She came to her slowly, took her in her arms and held her long—giving her a silent kiss" (p. 309). Her attitudes toward men and her feeling for Verena are unnatural and isolate her all the more from those around her.

Olive's latent lesbianism and her domineering, almost mannish attitude toward Verena carry with them the idea of the reversal of the traditional male/female roles. Nan Bauer Maglin, author of "Fictional Feminists in The Bostonians and The Odd Women," points out that Verena and Olive are from different socio-economic classes. Olive's wealth and Verena's lack of it place Olive in the masculine position of provider, creating in Verena a feminine kind of dependency which apes the traditional male/female roles to some degree.¹⁵ Carrying Maglin's idea of role reversal one step further, it may be said that Olive "buys" Verena from her father, in effect subjecting her to the role of a partner (i.e. wife) in a distorted marriage contract. Olive takes control of Verena and, since she has paid Verena's father a "bride-price," expects the same fidelity from Verena that any husband expects from his wife. Upon first meeting her, Olive asks Verena, "Will you be my friend, my friend of friends, beyond every one, everything, forever and ever?" (p. 81). As the relationship between the two girls progresses, Olive becomes more demanding, more fearful of "infidelity" on Verena's part. "Olive wished more and more to extract some definite pledge from her; she could hardly say what it had best be as yet; she only felt that it must be something that would have an absolute sanctity for Verena and would bind them together for life" (p. 113). Lillian Faderman, in her discussion of same-sex relationships,

notes that such relationships were tolerated in the nineteenth century: "because a woman had virtually no economic independence, it was safe to assume she would marry at the first suitable opportunity and that her affectional ties with other women, no matter how powerful, would present no real threat to society."¹⁶ Olive, however, with her financial independence and her single-minded desire to control Verena, is definitely a threat to the established social order. Verena herself finally recognizes the hold Olive has over her: "She felt Olive's grasp too clenching, too terrible" (p. 398).

In a final reversal of traditional male/female roles, Olive visits Mrs. Burrage in her New York home to discuss Verena's possible marriage to Henry Burrage, Mrs. Burrage's son. Not only is Olive taking the role a father or brother usually assumes concerning a young woman's marriage, but Mrs. Burrage is taking over Henry's role in pleading for a girl's hand in marriage. The sexual roles are completely reversed, with Olive and Mrs. Burrage playing the part of dominant and controlling males.

By depicting Olive in such a masculine and manipulative manner, by implying homosexuality or at least a relationship with another woman so confined and bizarre as to be "morbid," James casts the censure of the prudish nineteenth century society not only on Olive, but on the cause which she so ardently espouses, and throws Ransom, with his apparent "three century out-of-date philosophy," into a more

favorable light than he would otherwise appear. Who cannot sympathize with Ransom when he asks Verena, "since when [was it] more becoming to take up with a *morbid* old maid than with an honorable young man; and when Verena pronounced the sacred name of friendship he inquired what fanatical sophistry excluded him from a similar privilege" (p. 402-3, emphasis added). Ransom's (and James's) description of Olive, according to feminist writer Maglin, is just a reflection of the epithets thrown at feminists at the time James was writing. Such descriptions as "large-handed, big footed, flat-chested and thin-lipped" (Maglin p. 219) were not uncommon, and we see verbal parallels in James's description of her smile like "a thin ray of moonlight" (p. 8) and her "meager" frame (p. 136). She is a "pale girl with pointed features and a nervous manner" (p. 11). Horace Bushnell, a congregational minister, theologian, and the author of Women's Suffrage; the Reform Against Nature (1869), apprehends the same changes for women suffragists which James illustrates in Olive:

Accordingly, when these softer virtues go by, giving way to the ambitions of candidacy, and the subtle intrigues of party, they will carry off with them the fair colors, the flushes of clean sensibility, and the delicate, smooth lines of form and feature, and we shall have, instead, a race of forward, selfish, politician-women coming out in their resulting type, thin, hungry-looking, cream-tartar faces, bearing a sharper look of talent, yet somehow touched with blight and fallen out of luster. If it could be expected, that as they change type physiologically, they will become taller and more brawny, and get bigger hands and feet,

and a heavier weight of brain, it would not be so much to their disadvantage, and perhaps there will be some little approach to compensation in this way, but there is far more reason to fear that the fight they are to be in, being a fight against nature, will make them at the same time thinner, sharp-featured, lank and dry, just as all disappointed, over-instigated natures always are.¹⁷

The parallels between Bushnell's description of women suffragists and James's description of Olive are too important to be overlooked. Her "slender white hand" is both "cold and limp." And, like Bushnell's feminist, Olive has a "disappointed, over-instigated nature:" "It was the usual things of life that filled her with silent rage; which was natural enough, inasmuch as, to her vision, almost everything that was usual was iniquitous" (p. 12).

As portrayed by James, Olive is everything conservative anti-feminists expect from the women's movement: fanatical, given to hysteria, unattractive (at any rate, not sexually appealing), violently unorthodox and unproductive (as far as the sacred office of motherhood is concerned), and willing not only to renounce marriage for herself, but also to keep another marriageable young woman from it as well.

James's description of Miss Birdseye as a representative of the Old Abolitionists deserves some attention here. Although she is treated with dignity at the end of the book, her introduction is not what can be termed flattering. Because of her continued involvement in

causes, no matter how unselfishly she devoted herself, how "disinterested" she was, James saw her as losing her individuality, the distinctiveness of her personality, thus:

She had a sad, soft, pale face, which (and it was the effect of her whole head) looked as if it had been soaked, blurred, and made vague by exposure to dissolvent. . . . She belonged to any and every league that had been founded for almost any purpose whatever. This did not prevent her being a confused, entangled, inconsequent, discursive old woman, whose charity began at home and ended nowhere, . . . and who knew less about her fellow creatures, if possible, after fifty years of humanitarian zeal, than on the day she had gone into the field to testify against the iniquity of most arrangements (pp. 26-7).

In this description, though it is attributed to Ransom, there seems to be a deeper insight than can be made by a person who has just met the woman and knows little about her. James himself intrudes here to pass judgment on this little vague woman. Even though her life has been given over to helping others, there is the definite implication that it has been useless. The narrator, and not Ransom, tells us, "Since the Civil War much of her occupation was gone; for before that her best hours had been spent in *fancying* that she was helping some Southern slave to escape" (p. 28, emphasis added). By using the word "*fancying*," James undercuts the old lady's entire life work, casting doubt on her effectiveness. Bushnell also sees the initial good intentions of the women's movement corrupted into uselessness, much in the same way James depicts Miss Birdseye's decline. He says: "The new possibility will at first be a triumph for women,

and will seem to be the dawn of a higher and more hopeful state; but in the long run of time the change will be the running down of womanhood into weakness and contempt."¹⁸

Olive sees Miss Birdseye as a noble character who has sacrificed her life for others, but she disregards Miss Birdseye's remarks "because, of course, one never pretended that she, poor dear, had the smallest sense of the real" (p. 34). This, too, undercuts Miss Birdseye's effectiveness, for if she fancied she had helped others, but has no sense of the real, how much good did she do or just imagine she did? It is immediately after this comment on her sense of reality that the statement is made, "She was heroic, she was sublime, the whole moral history of Boston was reflected in her displaced spectacles" (p. 35). Coming from the omniscient narrator, this belittles the radical, reform-conscious segment of Boston society. This passage may be interpreted in two ways, neither of which is particularly supportive of the movement. If taken literally, the passage may mean that the people in the room, the people literally reflected by Miss Birdseye's glasses, are representative of the whole Boston reform movement, Boston's moral history. This would be anything but complimentary since James held the audiences who attended such reform meetings in very low regard. If the statement is taken on a more figurative level then, though it is not quite as condemning as the first interpretation, it is still a chilling comment on the

Boston reformers. As we have seen, Miss Birdseye is an incompetent old woman even though her motives are highly altruistic. That the moral history is reflected by her would place it in the same category she is in, well-meaning but ineffectual. That the history is reflected in her "*displaced* spectacles" adds another dimension, for though she, and the moral history she reflects, are well-intended, the displacement of her glasses and their office as moral reflectors indicate the wrong direction reform has taken and its inability to lead to anything but disorder and chaos, as far as James is concerned. Miss Birdseye, then, becomes the mirror which in its distortion reflects the true image of the movement and her spectacles become a symbol of that distortion which encompasses the entire movement. This distortion is ironically repeated later in the book as Miss Birdseye awaits death at Marmion. Although Ransom's only purpose at Marmion is to remove Verena from her connection with the women's movement and public speaking, Miss Birdseye thinks he is there as a convert and supporter of the movement. "When I remember what I have seen in the South," says Miss Birdseye, "Mr. Ransom's being here strikes me as a great triumph" (p. 375). And later, as Verena and Ransom walk together and Ransom tries to persuade Verena of the folly of the movement, Miss Birdseye mistakenly believes the situation is the opposite. "She watched them a little, and it warmed her heart to see the stiff-

necked young Southerner led captive by a daughter of New England trained in the right school, who would impose her opinions in their integrity" (p. 378). Olive sees Miss Birdseye as a martyr, but the narrator sees her as a "poor little humanitarian hack" (p. 38).

When Miss Birdseye is dying she tells the young people, "You mustn't think there's no progress because you don't see it all right off; that's what I wanted to say. It isn't until you've gone a long way that you can feel what's been done" (p. 411). Hamblen points out that Miss Birdseye's is a lesson of patience, of willingness to wait, a great contrast to Olive's fierce belligerence (p. 37). Yet for all her good intentions, Miss Birdseye, as James portrays her, is a kindly but ineffectual old woman who, in working for others, has lost herself. "She had been almost celebrated, she had been active, earnest, ubiquitous beyond anyone else, she had given herself utterly to charities and creeds and causes; and yet the only persons, apparently, to whom her death made a real difference were three young women in a small 'frame-house' on Cape Cod" (pp. 413-4). James's harsh portrayal of Miss Birdseye in the beginning of the book is softened at the end, but her life is still a fruitless one. Marmion, the community where Miss Birdseye breathes her last, was once a thriving community but is now decayed and unproductive. It is appropriate, then, that Miss Birdseye, the last remnant of the old abolitionists, should die there.

A glance at the rest of the followers of the movement will show the contempt in which James held them and their cause. Basil Ransom classifies the audience at Miss Birdseye's gathering as "mediums, communists and vegetarians" (p. 32), an assortment of screwballs, in other words. James maintains an ironic detachment from Ransom, and Ransom's view cannot unquestionably be taken for James's, but here we must accept Ransom's view as the narrator's. Throughout the book these audiences, and therefore adherents to the movement, are shown in a very poor light. At the first meeting, the people Ransom characterizes as "mediums, communists and vegetarians" also have an "anxious, haggard look, though there were sundry exceptions—half a dozen placid, florid faces" (p. 32). As Mrs. Farrinder and Verena talk to each other, "the company watched the encounter with a look of refreshed inanition" which suggests their emptiness and the lack of intellectual diet their minds have fed on in the past. Ransom categorizes the group as a "faded and dingy human collection" (p. 58), and though Verena's talk is devoid of intellectual content and full of inanities, "this episode imparted animation to the assembly," suggesting how little is actually needed to stir them up. In a further comment on those in attendance at the meeting, the narrator reports as Olive walks over to Verena, "The little knot of reformers watched her as she arrived; their faces expressed a suspicion of her social importance,

mingled with conscientious scruples as to whether it were right to recognize it" (p. 68). Obviously, these people are not on Olive's social level, but much lower on the scale, and not terribly intelligent besides. In a later episode Olive, with her truly refined tastes and sensibilities, reflects on the commonness of those involved in the movement. "Olive Chancellor despised vulgarity, had a scent for it which she followed up in her own family, so that often, with a rising flush, she detected the taint even in Adeline. There were times, indeed, when everyone seemed to have it, every one but Miss Birdseye . . . and the poorest, humblest people. . . . Miss Chancellor would have been much happier if the movements she was interested in could have been carried on only by the people she liked" (p. 113).

Even Olive's tasteless sister, Adeline Luna, has something nasty to say about the reformers, including her sister among them, of course. "They are all witches and wizards, mediums and spirit-rappers, and roaring radicals" (p. 6). This statement is not so far off when you consider the Tarrants, Matthias Pardon, and Olive herself in some respects. Though Ransom's view is admittedly biased, he is not alone in holding the members of these meetings in very low regard. "He seemed to see the crowded, overheated hall, which he was sure was filled with carpetbaggers, to hear flushed women, with loosened bonnet strings, forcing thin voices into ineffectual

shrillness. . . . The vulgar multitude" (p. 243).

Ironically, and in keeping with the overall view of the people attending these meetings, the people at the meeting held at Mrs. Burrage's home are characterized as "the best society." This is ironic because these people know nothing about women's rights, are not involved in the movement, and are only out for an evening's diversion.

Likewise, the throng of people at Verena's ill-fated Boston public appearance are not ardent feminists but the cream of Boston society out for an evening's amusement.

Ransom says of the disappointed audience, "They'll howl and thump, according to their nature. . . . Hear them, the senseless brutes!" (p. 461). But, like the gathering at Mrs. Burrage's, those who are uninterested in the movement itself are shown in a better light. When Olive goes out to tell them the show has been cancelled, they accept it calmly, "even when exasperated, a Boston audience is not ungenerous" (p. 464). This is notably a "Boston" audience and not an audience of reform advocates. Thus, throughout the novel, even Olive, the most forceful proponent of women's rights, expresses negative feelings about those attending reform meetings, and the overall feeling is that the followers of the movement are unspeakably vulgar.

The leaders, followers and opportunists James depicts as being attracted to the movement are portrayed with uniform disfavor, an attitude James shares with others. An

anonymous article in the March 2, 1971 issue of The Nation states: "Thus far the tendency of the 'woman's rights movement' has been to swell the ranks of feeble orators, third rate lecturers, and sentimental politicians, and tricky speculators. In other words, it has borne in many of its phases all the marks of unhealthiness, and has seemed to promise, if successful, an aggravation of some of the worst diseases of society."¹⁹ The language of this description parallels that already cited by James in describing the audience at Miss Birdseye's gathering. Francis Parkman states, "If politics are to be purified by artfulness, effrontery, insensibility, a pushing self-assertion, and a glib tongue, then we may look for regeneration; for the typical female politician will be richly endowed with all these gifts."²⁰

Judging by such characters as Mrs. Farrinder, Selah Tarrant and his wife, and Matthias Pardon, James espouses these same views in The Bostonians. Mrs. Farrinder, the speaker at Miss Birdseye's gathering, is "a copious, handsome woman," who had "something public in her eye, which was large, cold and quiet" (p. 30). This is reminiscent of Olive's eyes, "glittering like green ice." Mrs. Farrinder is shown as having no tact, and with an appalling lack of sensitivity she tells Olive she may donate her money to the cause if that is all she has to offer. "She had a husband, and his name was Amariah," and though she is said to "embody the domestic virtues and the graces of the

drawing room" (p. 31), there is no suggestion that Amariah benefits in any way from her domestic qualities.

Selah Tarrant, another participant in the movement, is depicted acidly as a mesmeric healer with big, even, carnivorous teeth, who thinks nothing of manipulating his daughter for his own greedy ends. Ransom classifies him as a carpetbagger, "false, cunning, vulgar, ignoble; the cheapest kind of human product" (p. 58), and this is exactly what he proves himself to be when, for a sum of money, he literally sells his daughter to Olive. Tarrant worships the press: "the vision of that publicity haunted his dreams, and he would gladly have sacrificed to it the innermost sanctities of home" (p. 103), which indeed he does. In this case, Ransom is the spokesman for James in the depiction of Tarrant, for Ransom does not know of Tarrant's transaction with Olive nor of his hunger for publicity. James speaks accurately through Ransom in his repugnant assessment of Tarrant.

Tarrant's wife is no better than he, being "a flaccid, relaxed, unhealthy, whimsical woman, who still had a capacity to cling" (p. 71). Mrs. Tarrant embodies the breakdown of the family as much as her husband does, for her view of marriage is a bleak one. "The implications of matrimony were for the most part wanting in brightness—consisted of a tired woman holding a baby over a furnace register that emitted lukewarm air" (p. 100). As followers of women's rights, or any other movement,

of Tarrant and his wife lends no prestige to the undertaking.

Matthias Pardon, the ubiquitous and prying newspaperman, like Tarrant, is also no valuable addition to the movement, as he ferrets out sensation and scandal for his publication. For him, says Buitenhuis, "the women's rights movement is merely the latest opportunity for brazen publicity" (p. 149), and Pardon's attempts to insinuate himself into Verena's life and exploit her newsworthiness are ample indication of this. Pardon says of Verena, "There's money for someone in that girl; you see if she don't have quite a run" (p. 64), and then tries to induce her to marry him so he can manage her affairs. Later Pardon states he doesn't want to make money through Verena: "I want to make history! I want to help the ladies" (p. 146). Pardon is the snooping newspaperman type which James gently satirizes in The Portrait of a Lady in the form of Miss Henrietta Stackpole, but here in The Bostonians this representative of the press has no redeeming qualities, no likable elements of wit or attractiveness to alleviate his sordidness. When Pardon barges into Olive's home only to be told she isn't there, he says, "So I was told—but I didn't let that prevent me" (p. 435). Pardon's quest for news and exploitation of each situation give the impression of a hawker at a circus sideshow, selling glimpses of some freak to the thrill-

seeking public. Heightening this circus impression is the statement of Verena's manager as the huge Boston audience waits for her to appear and Pardon noses around for news. "I've handled prima donnas, and I've handled natural curiosities, *but I've never seen anything up to this*" (p. 452, emphasis added). This freakish aspect reinforces the abnormal nature of the women's movement and the general opinion of distortion of the natural order.

Henry Burrage, with his domineering mother ever present, is described variously as being "an insult to one's womanhood" (p. 123), "a fresh, pleasant, handsome young man, with a bright friendly manner" (p. 260), and an "insinuating proselyte" (p. 304). Both Olive and Mrs. Burrage are willing and able to manipulate this agreeable, rather pliable young man, even so far as marriage to Verena is concerned. Burrage is one of the "womanized" men Ransom fears will result from the women's agitation, fears which are well-founded if the results are such as Burrage. The threat of men becoming "womanized" is not confined to The Bostonians, but is reflected in other nineteenth century writings. For example, William A. Hammond, cited earlier, wrote of the movement, "One of the principal objects of many of the women appeared to be to make themselves look as much as possible like men. They cut their hair short, parted it on one side, and displayed longings for short frocks and trousers. Strange to say, the men who affiliated with them exhibited inclinations toward femininity."²¹

Henry Burrage is, in fact, womanized to the point that he has all the attributes necessary to make a good wife. He dresses well as even Olive, who has reason to dislike him, admits (p. 123). He is a good listener and conversationalist, which comes high on the list of things women should be able to do, according to George Cary Eggleston's 1883 Harper's article (already cited) on the education of women.²² Along with his appearance and his conversational ability, Burrage is an excellent pianist, another feminine accomplishment rated highly by Eggleston (p. 294). The talents Burrage displays are exactly the accomplishments Ransom would no doubt wish for Verena, and the ones Olive is preventing Verena from fulfilling for her own home and husband.

In addition to such adherents of the movement as the Tarrants, Mrs. Farrinder, Pardon and Burrage, there are two women who are not supporters of women's rights as such but who are inevitable offshoots of it. These are Mrs. Luna, Olive's overbearing, intolerably familiar and oversexed sister, and Dr. Mary Prance, the sexless and dedicated professional woman. Both women represent extreme distortions of womanhood, if they are judged according to a conservative viewpoint. Mrs. Luna exploits her sexuality for all it is worth, taking advantage of Ransom's sense of obligation to be polite to keep him to herself at Mrs. Burrage's meeting. Mrs. Luna finally drives Ransom to rudeness, an unpardonable sin for a Southern

gentleman. Mrs. Luna has a child, whom she has spoiled until he is totally incorrigible, having shown him an excess of "love" that is as damaging as no love at all. She overextends her flirting with Ransom until his rejection drives her into a rage of denunciations and recriminations. Her own sister recognizes her vulgarity and is embarrassed by it, seeing it as a blot on the family record. Her excess of sexuality is as repulsive in its way as Olive's lack of it and in the same way is as abnormal.

Dr. Prance is the other extreme. When Ransom meets Dr. Prance at Miss Birdseye's, his impression is of an extremely unfeminine woman. "Spare, dry, hard, without a curve, an inflection or a grace, she seemed to ask no odds in the battle of life and to be prepared to give none. . . . It was true that if she had been a boy she would have borne some relation to a girl, whereas Doctor Prance appeared to bear none whatever" (p. 41). This view of women in a man's world is not confined to James, but is reflective of a far wider opinion, one such as is expressed in an anonymous article entitled "A Neglected Side of the Woman's Rights Question" in The Nation (November 26, 1868): "The medical and other professions are not apt to be fair representatives of their sex. They are sure to be persons of strong will, more than usual intellectual power, and under exhibit, in fact, rather what is considered the peculiarly masculine than the peculiarly feminine type of character."²³ In

another anonymous contemporary article entitled "Equality," which appeared in an 1880 Atlantic Monthly issue, the same view of professional women is held.

The education of woman and the development of her powers hold the greatest promise for the regeneration of society. But this development, yet in its infancy, and pursued with much crudeness and misconception of the end, is not enough. Woman would not only be equal with man, but would be like him; that is, perform in society the functions he now performs. Here, again, the notion of equality is pushed towards uniformity. The reformers admit structural differences in the sexes, though these, they say, are greatly exaggerated by subjection; but the functional differences are mainly to be eliminated. Women ought to mingle in all the occupations of men, as if the physical differences did not exist. The movement goes to obliterate, as far as possible, the distinction between sexes.²⁴

The similarities between these views of working women and James's depiction of Dr. Prance indicate that James's portrayal is reflective of a fairly widespread attitude toward women, an attitude which James promotes rather than dispels, for through the rest of the book he portrays Dr. Prance as a tough, dried-out, short-haired character, going fishing and involved in other unfeminine occupations. In order to succeed in a man's world, James says, a woman must lose her femininity, as Dr. Prance has done.

Finally, we must look at Verena, who by contemporary conservative standards is the only truly feminine figure in the book. She is pretty, eager to please and easily manipulated. Throughout the book Verena is noted for her passivity, her generosity, and her ability to inspire

love, and Basil Ransom thinks of her as "tremendously open to attack, she was meant for love, she was meant for him" (p. 378). Olive recognizes that Verena's essence "was the extraordinary generosity with which she could expose herself, give herself away, turn herself inside out, for the satisfaction of a person who made demands of her" (p. 392).

Bushnell lists some of the virtues of womanhood as "the trust, the unselfishness, the deep kindness, the ethereal grace and cheer, the facile and free-playing inspirations" (p. 136), virtues which both Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom recognize and exploit in Verena. It is Verena's beauty which first attracts Basil Ransom to her, her beauty and her bright (although somewhat garish) clothes, both of which contemporaries of James note as desirable attributes in women. While Olive's drab attire and plainness place her in the class of warped and dissatisfied women's rights activists, Verena's beauty, freshness, and bright clothing place her in the ranks of women who are satisfied with their role in conservative society as sources of comfort and inspiration to men. In contrast to the dull and lackluster audience at Miss Birdseye's, Verena presents herself as an oasis to Ransom. "She had far more color than any one there, for whatever brightness was to be found in Miss Birdseye's rather faded and dingy human collection had gathered itself into this attractive but ambiguous young person. . . .

She wore a light-brown dress, of a shape that struck him as fantastic, a yellow petticoat, and a large crimson sash fastened at the side; while round her neck, and falling low upon her flat young chest, she had a double chain of amber beads" (p. 58-9). Bushnell has noted that "women are bound, in God's name, to save their beauty. For this is the honor and power of their subject state. Man rules by the precedence of quantity and self-asserting energy, and woman by the subject sovereignty of beauty, personal and moral together, which she can little afford to lose by a sally to gain the noisier, coarser kind that does not belong to her" (p. 137). In an 1870 article in The Galaxy entitled "American Women and English Women," Justin McCarthy discusses various aspects of women's clothing and states "loving all that brightens the outer aspects of life, which after all must at best have a good deal of dulness and sombreness in it, I am personally grateful to that stream of womanhood which arrays itself in all the colors of the rainbow or the pigeon's neck, and makes so lustrous a pageant under my windows."²⁵ Verena is not only pretty, eager to please and colorful, but the instinct for motherhood, an instinct which conservative contemporaries of James considered extinct in women's rights activists, is strong within her. "Verena, looking with a quickened eye at the children (she adored children), went on—" (p. 340). The word "quickened" is sometimes used to describe the first movements of a child

in the womb, a certain symbol of fertility and motherhood. Verena is, by nineteenth century conservative standards, much more natural than someone like Olive, who represents the breakdown of the family and womanhood.

Verena is the center of the struggle between Ransom and Olive and all they represent, conservatism versus radicalism, a struggle variously described as "war to the knife" (p. 395) by Olive, and as a battle which "challenged all his manhood" (p. 455) by Ransom. Verena herself, a pawn in the power-play between these two strong people, is not as important as what she represents, a woman with the capability of giving herself to a man wholeheartedly as wife and mother. She is a woman faced with a choice, and her struggles to reach a decision represent the major conflict of the novel.

That Ransom is the victor in the struggle is of extreme significance, for he is the only consistent representative of and spokesman for normality (that is, conservative contemporary normality) throughout the novel. All the major characters are introduced through his point of view and the impression given at that time of their wrong-headedness and abnormality is carried out and reinforced as the story progresses. Though the absolute-ness of Ransom's views is satirized, as is his provincialism, he is not ultimately reduced in stature nor is his viewpoint totally discredited by the actions of others in the novel. On the other hand, most of the women's

rights advocates are shown to be corrupt and destructive in their methods and motives. Ransom's views seem old-fashioned, though actually they are very contemporary, and are such as to preserve the familiar family and social order, and not disrupt it, a conservative stance similar to that of many others of the day. Olive's views, particularly toward Verena, are depicted as unnatural to the point of morbidity, and are based on a desire for revenge against the entire male sex, as well as a desire to dominate another woman and find fulfillment through her.

A definite dislocation of the sexes is shown throughout the book, from Olive and Verena's relationship to the womanly attributes of Henry Burrage, a dislocation tied in various ways to women breaking from their traditional roles within society. When Ransom persuades Verena to marry him, he does not offer her happiness, but he does offer her a form of normality, a form of fulfillment in a traditional conservative role.

In this book James satirizes the feminist movement, but even more he satirizes the fanatics and cranks who are drawn into such a movement. His resolution of the struggle between Olive and Ransom through the marriage of Verena and Ransom is not a happy one, but it is the only one available given the nature and character of the adherents to the women's movement James has established in the book, and the actual attitudes towards women's rights. Sara deSaussure Davis supports this idea in her

article "Feminist Sources in The Bostonians" (American Literature 1979) when she states: "James was true to his overall sense of the feminist movement; Ransom's 'winning' Verena is symbolically and historically appropriate to the history of the movement at that time."²⁶ The hope for women's freedom does not lie in radical reformism, James and his contemporaries say, but through the fulfillment of traditional roles as wives and mothers, and through working within that established framework toward a better life. Radicalism, as portrayed by Olive Chancellor and the followers of the movement, and as perceived by the writers of the time, leads only to humiliation and defeat.

Notes

- 1 Eugene A. Hecker, "Women's Rights in the United States," in A Short History of Women's Rights, 2nd ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1914), p. 150.
- 2 Henry James, The Notebooks of Henry James, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), p. 47.
- 3 Peter Buitenhuis, The Grasping Imagination: The American Writings of Henry James (Toronto: Univ. Toronto Press, 1970), p. 152.
- 4 Henry James, The Bostonians (1886, New York: Random House, Inc., 1956), p. 11. All subsequent references will be made in the text.
- 5 Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, ed. David B. Guralnik, 1967 ed. (Nashville: The Southwestern Company, 1967), pp. 161 and 612.
- 6 Dictionary of American Biography, ed. Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, v. 6 (New York: Scribner's, 1931), p. 54.
- 7 George Cary Eggleston, "The Education of Women," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 67 (July, 1883), p. 293.
- 8 Charles Astor Bristed, "'Woman's Rights' Again," The Galaxy, 41 (August, 1873), p. 198.
- 9 Lionel Trilling, "The Bostonians," in Henry James's Major Novels: Essays in Criticism, ed. Lyall H. Powers (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1973), p. 95.
- 10 Anonymous, "Equality," The Atlantic Monthly, 45 (January, 1880), p. 29.

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- 11
Ella Farman, "A Strong-minded Woman," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 51 (August, 1875), p. 415.
- 12
William A. Hammond, "Woman in Politics," The North American Review, 137 (August, 1883), p. 137.
- 13
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- 14
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- 16
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- 17
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- 18
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- 19
Anonymous, "Woman's Rights Movement," The Nation, 12 (March 2, 1871), p. 134.
- 20
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Hammond, p. 137.
- 22
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- 23
Anonymous, "A Neglected Side of the Woman's Rights Question," The Nation, 7 (November 26, 1868), p. 436.

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24

Anonymous, "Equality," The Atlantic Monthly, 45 (January, 1880), pp. 28-29.

25

Justin McCarthy, "American Women and English Women," The Galaxy, 10 (1870), p. 25

26

Sara deSaussure Davis, "Feminist Sources in The Bostonians," American Literature, 50 (January, 1979), p. 580.

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