The “vagueness of boundary”: Democracy and American Girlhood in *The Bostonians*[1]

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Though Henry James’s creation of Daisy Miller became one of the most powerful triggers for the image-making of the American Girl in turn-of-the-century popular culture,[2] his American girls are continuously revised so that they reflect but do not simply follow the contemporary icon of the American Girl. In *The Bostonians* (1886), which is set in the United States and was written just after James went back to America in the early 1880s, James’s portraits of the American girls are considerably changed, reflecting more the contemporary social and cultural contexts in America and revealing his awareness of the change in women’s roles. James was “struck by the ‘numerosity’ of the women folk” when he visited Boston, and felt that “he was in a city of women, a country of women” (Edel 287). In Boston, not only was the number of women extremely large, but various social movements for women were also proceeding after the Civil War.[3] Through such social groups as the New England Women’s Club, the Boston Women’s Educational and Industrial

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1 This article is a largely revised version of a part of my dissertation, “American Girls: Nation and Gender in James, Wharton, and Cather” (University of Maryland, College Park, 2010).

2 In addition, after the publication of “Daisy Miller,” a number of manuals were published for young girls around the turn of the century, where Daisy is mentioned as a negative example. For more about these manner manuals for American girls, see David Jeremiah Slater Chapter 3.

3 Regarding women’s activity in Boston after the Civil War, see Sarah Deutsch.

Union, and the YMCA, middle-class women "worked to ease the burden of poverty and work on their less fortunate sisters" by supporting them and serving to improve their working conditions (Smith-Rosenberg 174).

In *The Bostonians*, James took up the very problem of "the so-called 'woman's movement,'" which he called "very characteristic of our social conditions" (*CN* 18, 20). Along with this, he dealt with the Boston marriage; he wrote in his notebook, "The relationship of the two girls should be a study of one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England," which he called "American" as well as "full of Boston" (*CN* 19).[4] As critics have variously argued, one of the central matters in the novel is the dichotomy between Olive and Basil or their relationships with Verena, and one of the chief questions is which of Olive and Basil possesses Verena.[5] Instead, this article focuses on "the two girls" (*CN* 19)—Verena and Olive—and reads this novel as another example of James's study on American girls, examining whether they become a conventional woman or a New Woman, and whether they choose a heterosexual marriage or a Boston Marriage—which makes the dichotomy in the novel something other than the much-discussed one between Olive and Basil. Verena's "development" leads to the awakening of her "self," who seeks

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[4] In fact, the Boston marriage is a familiar matter to James; as has largely been recognized, James' own sister Alice had a Boston marriage with Katherine Loring; and, when Katherine took care of her sick sister Louise, James took Alice to a town near the sea and there he wrote *The Bostonians* (Edel 312).

[5] Though I will not deeply examine it in this article, the issue of lesbianism in the relationship between Olive and Verena is widely discussed. See for example David Van Leer and Aaron Shaheen "The Social Dusk". Lillian Faderman rejects critics' view of linking lesbianism and the friendship between Verena and Olive, thus of seeing Olive as "lesbian" and "sick," from the post-Freudian perspective, and argues that James "believed that a romantic relationship between two women was not of itself sick" but that the sisterhood relationship rather served to "permit the self-actualization of the women" (*Surpassing* 195). Edel also suggests that, in James' times, the relationship between Verena and Olive is not necessarily "a lesbian attachment" (812). For Basil's trial to redeem his masculinity, see for example Leland S. Person "In the Closet." For his taking Verena into the Southern discourse, see two essays by Shaheen as well as Ann Brigham 21.

not so much to be the New Woman as to be the conventional lady. In contrast, this novel is also about another American girl, Olive, who seeks to transcend the boundary of class and have “a life of action.” Both stories are linked with the problem of democracy, which in this novel is explored in relation to popularization and mass culture as well as gender and class.

1. Verena’s Choice and Inability of the “Free Union”

Verena’s “development” in the novel is parallel to her transition from girlhood to womanhood, and the narrator symbolically emphasizes the transitional period of Verena by calling Olive “the extraordinary friend whom she had encountered on *the threshold of womanhood*” (*Bostonians* 134, emphasis added). At the beginning of the novel, in the speech at Miss Birdseye’s, Verena calls herself an “American girl”: “I am only a girl, a simple American girl, and of course I haven’t seen much, and there is a great deal of life that I don’t know anything about” (*Bostonians* 50). Being a “girl,” Verena is never a “self-made girl” but rather is a dependent child in the first part of the novel. Different from Daisy Miller, Verena is introduced to society by her parents, and the fact that she needs her father’s mesmeric guidance in making a speech shows her status as a child under her parents’ guard. In a sense, Verena is brought up in a European way, under the parents’ guidance (especially under her father’s control). In addition, the radical environment where Verena grows up has a European connection: her father was a member of the Cayuga Community, which is influenced by Fourierism and which supports free love. In contrast, Olive detests Europe and “would like to abolish it” (*Bostonians* 8), and Olive’s radicalism even rejects heterosexual love. Surprised by the fact that Verena keeps “the consummate innocence of the American girl” (*Bostonians* 95), Olive “rescues” her from her “impossible parents,” and seeks to “re-make” the American girl.

Seen by Olive as “the very type and model of the ‘gifted being’” (*Bostonians*

90), Verena gets more powerful as the novel proceeds; the first Book begins just after her success in the West; the second Book begins after her huge success in the Women's Convention and her study in Europe; then, the third Book begins just before her expected great success at the Music Hall. She "is a growing power since her great success at the convention" and Verena herself declares, "We are going on from triumph to triumph" (*Bostonians* 170, 175). As an embodiment of growing power, Verena is seen as a national icon through her involvement in the women's movement. Olive says, "Your mission is not to exhibit yourself as a pastime for individuals, but to touch the heart of communities, of nations," and compares Verena to "Joan of Arc" (*Bostonians* 102, 112);[6] Verena is considered to be "born to regenerate the world" and "what was expected of her then was to become a first-class national glory" (*Bostonians* 156, 159) as a New Woman.

However, the success of Verena in women's movements is not only juxtaposed with the transitional period of Verena from girlhood to (New) womanhood but with the awakening of her "self." At the beginning, when Verena makes a speech at Miss Birdseye's, she repetitively emphasizes that what drives her is "a power outside," saying, "It isn't *me*" (*Bostonians* 45, 43). Later in the novel, Basil tells Verena to be more independent of people around her, to have liberty. Accusing Verena that "she had always done everything that people asked" (*Bostonians* 250-51), Basil uses a variation of Verena's phrase in her first speech at Miss Birdseye's, "It isn't *me*":

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[6] The intensely patriotic figure of Joan of Arc was one of the popular images that appeared both in the turn-of-the-century mass media and in the suffrage movement in America. As is similar to the role of Verena in this novel, the image of Joan of Arc frequently emerged in popular entertainment; at the same time, Joan of Arc, who "represented patriotism, courage, militancy, piety, moral authority and a fighting spirit" in addition to "her sex and challenge to gender roles" (Coyle 66-7) was admired by suffragists, who frequently were dressed as Joan of Arc at demonstrations. For more on the image of Joan of Arc around the turn-of-the-century America, see Laura Coyle.

> “You always want to please some one, and now you go lecturing about the country, and trying to provoke demonstrations, in order to please Miss Chancellor, just as you did it before to please your father and mother. It isn’t *you*, the least in the world, but an inflated little figure (very remarkable in its way too), whom you have invented and set on its feet, pulling strings, behind it, to make it move and speak, while you try to conceal and efface yourself there.” (*Bostonians* 262)

In fact, Basil’s assertion is correct, since Verena is not necessarily the child of reform. Verena’s secret is not only her attraction to Basil but is also her desire to be another type of woman:

> Verena had given great attention to Olive’s brilliant sister; she had told her friend [Olive] everything now—everything but one little secret, namely, that if she could have chosen at the beginning she would have liked to resemble Mrs Luna. This lady fascinated her, carried off her imagination to strange lands; she should enjoy so much a long evening with her alone, when she might ask her ten thousand questions. But she never saw her alone, never saw her at all but in glimpses. Adeline flitted in and out, dressed for dinners and concerts, always saying something worldly to the young woman from Cambridge [. . .]. (*Bostonians* 85)

Being a short passage, this part is essential because it uniquely reveals what Verena herself thinks, what Verena herself wants to do “if she could have chosen.” It is not necessarily her union with Basil that Verena makes a secret (finally she tells Olive about it) but it is her awakening desire to be like Mrs. Luna, to be a conventionally feminine and fashionable (though rather corrupted) woman, the “lady” in the world of fashion. When Verena meets Basil after a year and half’s silence, she asks him for his agreement that Mrs. Luna is “fascinating” and then “ask[s], further, numerous questions about the brilliant

Adeline; whether he saw her often, whether she went out much, whether she was admired in New York, whether he thought her very handsome" (*Bostonians* 180). To Verena, who "had lived with long-haired men and short-haired women" and who is "the girl [who] had grown up among lady-doctors, lady-mediums, lady-editors, lady-preachers, lady-healers, women who, having rescued themselves from a passive existence, could illustrate only partially the misery of the sex at large" (*Bostonians* 57, 67), what is "new" is paradoxically the conventional gender norm. In this respect, Verena's final leave from Olive is not only caused by her love for Basil but by her secret wish to be a woman like Mrs. Luna, the "sister" of Olive, who belongs to the conventional, heterosexual gender system.

The second half of the novel is about the "choice" of Verena, and the ending seems to show Verena's choice of a heterosexual marriage rather than the Boston marriage. In this respect, it seems appropriate that "[t]he plot's reliance on a conventional ending suggests that the author, as well as his Victorian American readership, quakes at the thought of endorsing more transgressive possibilities of sexual and racial liberation that the New Woman often embodied" (Shaheen "The Social Dusk" 292-3). In fact, at the time of the publication of *The Bostonians*, "[m]any contemporary suffragists and other feminist activists dismissed James's novel entirely" (Petty 377). Nevertheless, James does not simply follow the conventional plot, nor does Verena's leaving Olive directly mean that James is in the end against the Boston marriage. Verena's marriage is not celebrated or described as promising. It is to some extent similar to Isabel Archer's in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Verena and Isabel both see the world through their imagination and cannot see the reality there; through marriage, they lose power and control they once had. The ending of *The Bostonians* is quite negative; though Verena says, "Ah, now I am glad!," Basil "presently discovered that, beneath her hood, she was in tears"; the narrator continues, "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" (*Bostonians* 350). Her union with Basil is based on the traditional and patriarchal idea of the "separate spheres," where the wife is confined in the private sphere and where her husband "strike[s] her dumb" (*Bostonians* 249).

In a different way, however, Olive's feminism is also based on the separatist idea, which can be linked with James's avoidance of Verena choosing the Boston marriage with Olive. Just as James found Boston to be "a city of women" (Edel 287), the society of women's movements is depicted as a kind of "Herland" in *The Bostonians*. Though there are a few men there, the majority is female, and Verena, at her debut at Miss Birdseye's, appeals only to women as "sisters": "Of course I only speak to women—to my own dear sisters; I don't speak to men, for I don't expect them to like what I say" (*Bostonians* 49). Central to the turn-of-the-century feminist movement was the consolidation of "a separate female sphere," and its major achievement was acquired "through building separate female institutions" (Freedman 514). In a sense, the sisterhood between Olive and Verena is a personal version of this sisterhood. Olive says repeatedly, "we must wait" (*Bostonians* 64)—they, or Olive, must wait till Verena develops enough to have a Boston marriage in "a separate female sphere." The possibility is already undermined at the beginning, though; while Olive "ha[s] no views about the marriage-tie except that she should hate it for herself," Verena declares she "prefer[s] free unions," which sounds "so disagreeable" to Olive (*Bostonians* 66). The gap between the two girls' ideas on the goal of their social work continues to appear. In the scene at Harvard, Verena insists on equal rights in education: "'I advocate equal rights, equal opportunities, equal privileges. So does Miss Chancellor,' Verena added, with just a perceptible air of feeling that her declaration needed support"; to this, Basil answers, "Oh, I thought what she wanted was simply a different inequality—simply to turn out the

men altogether" (*Bostonians* 178). Indeed, while Verena's "plea is for a union far more intimate—provided it be equal—than any that the sages and philosophers of former times have ever dreamed of," Olive accepts "the doctrine that they [men and women] are natural enemies" and prefers reform based on hierarchy and separatism (*Bostonians* 208).

Thus, from the ambivalent ending emerges James' ambiguous and rather pessimistic attitude toward the "free union," and even toward the idea of "union" itself. On the one hand, Verena's sisterhood union with Olive, who "buys" and educates her, is based on separatism and hierarchy; on the other hand, the heterosexual union with Basil, who thinks that women are "[f]or public, civic uses, absolutely—perfectly weak and second-rate" but "privately, personally, it's another affair" (*Bostonians* 263), is also based on separatism and leads to a confinement of Verena to the private (domestic) space. In an opposite way, both "marriages" are based on the idea of "separate spheres." Verena thus cannot get the "free unions" (*Bostonians* 66) she repeatedly declares she wants: whether she chooses Olive or Basil, her marriage is not a "happy marriage."

Meanwhile, though the ending ostensibly shows the manliness of Basil, who takes Verena away "by muscular force" and feels "his victory" (*Bostonians* 349), his masculinity and victory are completely undermined from the beginning. Basil is a Southern gentleman who was beaten in the Civil War, and is repeatedly feminized, with, for example, "the curious feminine softness with which Southern gentlemen enunciate that adverb" (*Bostonians* 8). It is noteworthy that originally James did not conceive of Basil as a Southerner. In his notebook, a hero who is to be Basil Ransom is described as a person from the West (*CN* 19); however, in the actual novel, Basil is created as a Southerner, and it is Verena, not Basil, who has been in the West for some years. What does this change mean? In American history, the West is linked with the image of the frontier and the American spirit. In *The American*, James describes Christopher

Newman as a man who has made a fortune in the West, that is, as a masculine, American self-made man. If regarding Newman as a typical American business man who has new money, James makes Basil a totally different man—a Southerner, who was defeated and lost his fortune, and who cannot be a genuine "American man." Being a Southerner, Basil is situated from the beginning on the "wrong" side; namely, even if he finally seems to get "his victory" (*Bostonians* 349) in taking Verena with him, Basil's attitude and ideas based on the Southern tradition are in their very roots to be classified as "all wrong" in postbellum America (*Bostonians* 9). At the same time, by making Basil a Southern gentleman, James makes him a cultivated man of a higher class, who is closer to American gentlemen in Europe as in James's previous works.

It is to some extent appropriate to see that the ending, where Verena is united with Basil instead of with Olive, may reflect James's interest in the issue of national unity, the abolition of boundary in terms of nation. The intimate relationship between Verena and Basil is frequently illustrated with an allusion to the North/South dichotomy. Through Miss Birdseye's eyes, the union of Verena and Basil is seen as that of the North and the South: "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 opinion in their integrity" (*Bostonians* 286). In this respect, the final picture of heterosexual marriage between the Northerner Verena and the Southerner Basil seemingly shows a union crossing boundaries in terms of gender and nation. However, the ending with Verena's tears shows James' awareness that Miss Birdseye's transcendental view is merely romantic in reality.

Moreover, there is a problematic scene where the dichotomy between the North and the South dissolves much more dramatically and completely in the union between a man and a man than in that of a man and a woman. While the

discourse of the heterosexual union "wins" over that of a strong sisterhood on the story level, there is a critical moment where a strong sense of brotherhood emerges from the story. Situated at the very center of the novel, the scene at the Memorial Hall of Harvard is highly important.[7] Before entering the hall, Verena cares about Basil's reaction to the exhibition, and Basil asks, "Is there anything against Mississippi?," to which Verena answers, "there is great praise of our young men in the war" (*Bostonians* 188). Here the dichotomy between the North and the South is underlined. However, inside the hall, Basil has a transcendental feeling in front of the memorial of the war:

> Most of them were young, all were in their prime, and all of them had fallen; this simple idea hovers before the visitor and makes him read with tenderness each name and place—names often without other history, and a taunt; they touched him with respect, with the sentiment of beauty. He was capable of being a generous foeman, and he forgot, now, the whole question of sides and parties; the simple emotion of the old fighting-time came back to him, and the monument around him seemed an embodiment of that memory: it arched over friends as well as enemies, the victims of defeat as well as the sons of triumph. (*Bostonians* 189)

What is peculiar here is, in the middle of the scene where Basil and Verena secretly go out together, their relationship temporally evaporates and is substituted by another, spiritual relationship of brotherhood. A fairly sentimental sense of brotherhood dissolves the distinction between the North and the South and eliminates "the whole question of sides and parties";

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[7] Brigham's essay interestingly focuses on the scene of the Memorial Hall and on the theme of union. However, her view is different from mine in that she views the importance of this scene as its function of connecting Basil and Verena, connecting two difference places.

moreover, Basil leaves Verena "for ten minutes" (interestingly, Olive makes Basil wait for ten minutes at the opening of the novel, which suggests their unbridgeable gap) in order to "read again the names of the various engagements" (*Bostonians* 189). Basil's communion with "the sons of triumph" as a son of defeat seems to be made more genuine than his union with Verena, which is presented rather pessimistically at the end of the novel. Therefore, the soldiers' brotherhood in the Civil War seems to be embedded in the text as something not directly related to the surface story but something quite essential, possibly subverting the heterosexual model of the "union" displayed in the surface story. The ostensible "triumph" of heterosexual love is undermined and made ambiguous by the hidden celebration of brotherhood, a male version of the Boston marriage.

2. The Problem of Democracy and Olive's Choice for "a Life of Action"

While the seemingly prevailing, heterosexual union is made quite unstable in Verena's story, *The Bostonians* is about "the two girls" (*CN* 19) as James's notebook shows, and Verena's story is intertwined with the story of another American girl, Olive Chancellor. While Olive has been seen chiefly as the New Woman and hardly as a "girl," she is no less insecure than Verena is as the American girl. At the beginning of the novel, Olive is described as a "girl" through Basil's eyes: "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" (*Bostonians* 10). Far from possessing confidence like Henrietta Stackpole, the New Woman figure in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Olive "ha[s] a fear of everything, but her greatest fear [i]s of being afraid" (*Bostonians* 13). Olive's fear and insecurity may in some ways remind readers of Isabel Archer's fear after receiving an enormous fortune: "It's because I'm afraid. [. . .] Yes, I'm

afraid; I can't tell you. A large fortune means freedom, and I'm afraid of that. It's such a fine thing, and one should make such a good use of it" (*NYE* III: 320). In fact, there is a certain resemblance between Isabel and Olive; as Isabel is retired in the "office" (*NYE* III: 30) in her melancholic Albany house, Olive is in her house; as Isabel first appears in the novel as "the independent young lady" who is "in a black dress" for the mourning for her father (*NYE* III: 17, 16), Olive does as "a young lady" who is radical, wearing "a plain dark dress, without any ornaments" for the mourning for her mother (*Bostonians* 9, 10). Olive, who is "white," "refined," and "unmarried as well as rich" and who loves independence, could be the ideal American Girl in the fashionable world, with her appearance "delicate in fashion that suggested good bearing" (*Bostonians* 16, 15, 16). Basil once has "a whimsical vision of becoming a partner in so flourishing a firm" (*Bostonians* 15), though he denies his possible marriage to Olive immediately. Much harder than Isabel, Olive suppresses her feminine features by making "her smooth, colourless hair [. . .] confined as carefully as that of her sister was encouraged to stray," and "should hate" the marriage-tie (*Bostonians* 10, 66).

As Verena has a secret about her hidden wish to be a lady of society, Olive has another secret of her own:

> It reminded her [Olive], however, on the other hand, that he [Basil] too had been much bereaved, and, moreover, that he had fought and offered his own life, even if it had not been taken. She could not defend herself against a rich admiration—a kind of tenderness of envy—of any one who had been so happy as to have that opportunity. 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. (*Bostonians* 12)

It is significant to note that the reason Olive is indignant toward Basil is not only because he is from the South or because she lost two brothers in the Civil

War but because she could not take part in the battle herself because she is not a man. For her, Basil's defeat is better than her being incapable of fighting in the war.[8]

Moreover, Olive's sense of lack of "a life of action" (Edel 76) in the Civil War due to the boundary of gender is linked with her recognition that she does not lead "a life of action" completely in the women's movement like Miss Birdseye, who at the time of the Civil War "had roamed through certain parts of the South, carrying the Bible to the slave" and "had spent a month in a Georgian jail" (*Bostonians* 139):

> Olive had been active enough, for years, in the city-missions; she too had scoured dirty children, and, in squalid lodging-houses, had gone into rooms where the domestic situation was strained and the noises made the neighbours turn pale. But she reflected that after such exertions she had the refreshment of a pretty house, a drawing-room full of flowers, a crackling hearth, where she threw in pine-cones and made them snap, an imported tea-service, a Chickering piano, and the *Deutsche Rundschau*; whereas Miss Birdseye had only a bare, vulgar room, with a hideous flowered carpet (it looked like a dentist's), a cold furnace, the evening-paper, and Doctor Prance. (*Bostonians* 139-40)

Miss Birdseye "belonged to the Short-Skirts League" and "the brevity" of her

[8] Olive's secret indignation and a kind of sense of loss can be seen partly as James's own. James did not go to the Civil War while two of James's brothers went; though different from Olive's two brothers, they came back alive. As Leon Edel suggests, the "obscure hurt" might have prevented James from participating in the Civil War, and the fact that he did not participate in real battles seems to have made him uneasy (Edel 57-8). Edel presents an episode at North Conway in August 1865, where "two young Civil War veterans, perhaps still in uniform, and Henry, gallantly attended the Temple girls, devoting themselves particularly to Minny" and "Henry felt himself once more on a footing of inequality among his fellows" because "[e]very uniform, every swordbelt and buckle, suggested a life of action that could never be a part of his life" (76). Olive's sense of loss and uneasiness can be attributed to her lack of "a life of action," which James seems partly to share.

"simple garment" reflects her wish "to be free for action" (*Bostonians* 23). She has participated in many social reform movements and she is very poor because she has spent every cent for her reform movement. On the other hand, Olive, though participating in the reform movement, remains a lady. Significantly, in the list of what Olive detests in Miss Birdseye's life appears the name of Doctor Prance, who should be the model such feminists as Olive seek: a New Woman who leads a public life with a profession. If the New Woman plays a role in breaking or making the boundary unstable, Olive cannot be a complete New Woman because she internalizes fixed boundaries, especially of class, and supports polarization. Indeed, she even seeks something different in reformers:

> With her [Olive's] immense sympathy for reform, she found herself so often wishing that reformers were a little different. There was something grand about Mrs. Farrinder; it lifted one up to be with her: but there was a false note when she spoke to her young friend about the ladies in Beacon Street. Olive hated to hear that fine avenue talked about as if it were such a remarkable place, and to live there were a proof of worldly glory. [...] She knew her place in the Boston hierarchy, and it was not what Mrs. Farrinder supposed; so that there was a want of perspective in talking to her as if she had been a representative of the aristocracy. (*Bostonians* 28)

Here, the ambivalence in Olive's attitude toward other reformers in the women's movement is shown. Her belonging to "the oldest and best" family in "the Boston hierarchy" creates a gap between her and her fellow reformers.

Significantly, though there is certainly a conflict between Olive and Basil in the novel, they share their social standing and their view of Verena. Through the eyes of Basil, who first sees her at Miss Birdseye's, the narrator characterizes her as "an Oriental" and a gypsy (*Bostonians* 47). Verena's physical singularity

is underlined from the beginning. When introducing Verena, the narrator emphasizes the color of her hair: "The girl was very pretty, though she had red hair" (*Bostonians* 27). Verena's red hair, the mark of her Otherness, is frequently mentioned by the narrator in the novel, and Mrs. Luna, who fascinates Verena, calls her a "red-haired hoyde[n]" (*Bostonians* 155). The link between Verena and a gypsy is repeated through Olive's perception.

> It was just as she was that she liked her; she was so strange, so different from the girls one usually met, seemed to belong to some queer gipsy-land or transcendental Bohemia. With her bright, vulgar clothes, her salient appearance, she might have been a rope-dancer or a fortune-teller; and this had the immense merit, for Olive, that it appeared to make her belong to the 'people,' threw her in to the social dusk of *that mysterious democracy which Miss Chancellor held that the fortunate classes know so little about*, and with which (in a future possibly very near) they will have to count. (*Bostonians* 63, emphasis added)

Thus, though Basil and Olive regard each other as enemies, they share the view of Verena as something foreign, and the Otherness—or strangeness—that Basil and Olive find in Verena is linked with the word "democracy." Though James's American girls have been seen to represent Tocquevillian democracy, especially regarding young girls' freedom and independence, the idea of democracy explored in this novel is in some ways different from James's previous works. It is related more to the issue of popularization rather than to the freedom of young women.

What is at the center of *The Bostonians* is the issue of boundary—or the "vagueness of boundary" (*Bostonians* 24); and, though Basil and Olive stand on opposite sides in the dichotomies of male/female and North/South, they stand on the same side in terms of class and also share the idea of "separate spheres"

that consolidates boundaries. Conversely, Verena, who is "a flower of Democracy" (*Bostonians* 86) as well as a girl from "transcendental Bohemia" (*Bostonians* 63), is outside the hierarchical system in terms of gender and class, and she prefers "free unions" (*Bostonians* 66). The gap between Olive and Verena resonates with that between Olive and her fellow reformers and therefore with Olive's remoteness from "a life of action." Olive has "a cultivated voice" and "a slender white hand" (*Bostonians* 9) while Miss Birdseye has "a delicate, dirty, *democratic* hand" (*Bostonians* 23, emphasis added). While Olive secretly wishes to "be a martyr" (*Bostonians* 12), Miss Birdseye, who had "her battle" (*Bostonians* 138), gives Olive "a kind of aroma of martyrdom," and Verena has been "in the habit of meeting martyrs from her childhood up" (*Bostonians* 139). If what matters in Verena's story is whether she chooses the Boston marriage or the heterosexual marriage, what is significant in Olive's story is whether she remains a lady of society and lacks a "life in action" or transgresses class/gender boundaries and acquires a "life in action" as the New Woman.

Importantly, the development of Verena after she comes to live with Olive is found not only in her study for the women's movement but also in her cultural taste. When she first comes to Olive's house, Verena is impressed by the interior of the room, which represents "what her mother had told her about Miss Chancellor's wealth, her position in Boston society," and even wonders "what could be the need of this scheme of renunciation" (*Bostonians* 64). In fact, Verena's speech is the means of "reenter[ing] society" (*Bostonians* 57) for Verena's mother, who "clung to [. . .] 'society'" and to whom "[t]o keep it, to recover it, to reconsecrate it, was the ambition of her heart" (*Bostonians* 56); to Mrs. Tarrant, "Verena was born not only to lead their common sex out of bondage, but to remodel a visiting-list which bulged and contracted in the wrong places, like a country-made garment" (*Bostonians* 56). Verena, who is one of the "low-born girls" (*Bostonians* 152)—in fact a working girl who works for her

parents (she says to Olive, “I have my work, you know” [65])—and who is contrasted with “the daughters of fashion” (*Bostonians* 131) by Henry Burrage, is cultivated under the influence of Olive, a lady of taste, who belongs to the higher class and who takes Verena to the Music Hall for “the superior programmes” (*Bostonians* 138). Living with Olive allows Verena to enter the society—more specifically, “the best society” represented by The Burrages (*Bostonians* 194), and Verena advances to the extent that Mrs. Burrages, who turns down the possibility of her son's marriage with Verena in the first half of the novel, asks Olive not to interfere with their possible marriage in the second half. As a “democratic” girl, Verena has social mobility, and she develops from “a simple American girl” (*Bostonians* 20) to a successful American Girl both in “the fashionable world” (*Bostonians* 192) and in the public world.

In fact, Verena's “development” is linked strongly with commercialistic mass culture. Verena's speech is called a “performance,” and she is compared to “an actress” or “a singer” (*Bostonians* 205). Almost everybody except Basil wants to “produce” Verena in public; for example, Matthias Pardon's wish to marry Verena is seen to be related to “a view to producing her in public” (*Bostonians* 97). Through a series of words related to “public,” James illustrates in a considerably negative way the contemporary consumer society of the time, where everything is linked with business. The power of the “public” increases to such an extent that Verena's face is put on the advertisement, that her pictures are sold, and that her “personal items” (*Bostonians* 329) are going to be in public. While trained by Olive and getting sophisticated in her high culture, Verena at the same time becomes more like the icon in the popular culture. It is interesting that Verena is to have a “performance” in front of “people” in the Music Hall, where Olive once took her to listen to classical music to cultivate her.

The “mysterious democracy” embodied by Verena reminds readers of the idea of democracy represented by Henrietta in *The Portrait of a Lady*, who is

called “a kind of emanation of the great democracy—of the continent, the country, the nation” (*NYE* III: 130). Isabel tells Ralph, “there is something of the ‘people’ in” Henrietta (*NYE* III: 130), who has what Mrs. Touchett and Osmond calls “boarding-house civilization” (*NYE* III:133) and vulgarity; then, Olive thinks that Verena, with “her bright, vulgar clothes, [. . .] belong[s] to the ‘people’” (*Bostonians* 63). The new aspect of American democracy which is portrayed rather comically in Henrietta and her journalism in the 1881 novel is examined in a more negative way in the 1886 novel, which was written after James visited the United States. James's ambiguous view toward this aspect of democracy can be found in his presenting the issue of “blood” in the portrait of Verena, which distinguishes her from Olive, who is an American girl belonging to “the oldest and the best” society (*Bostonians* 28). The narrator repetitively mentions Verena's “blood of the Greenstreets” (*Bostonians* 86) and “lecture blood” (*Bostonians* 193), and emphasizes that Verena's is attributed to her blood; “whatever theory might be entertained as to the genesis of her talent and her personal nature, the blood of the lecture-going, night-walking Tarrants did distinctly flow in her veins” (*Bostonians* 229). Under Olive's tutelage, Verena, who was in “bright, vulgar clothes” (Bostonians 63), is partly transformed into the American Girl in white. At the Burrages, Verena on the platform “dresse[s] in white, with flowers in her bosom” (*Bostonians* 205). Again, she is in white in the Music Hall, but the narrator emphasizes the color of her hair: “She was dressed in white, and her face was whiter than her garment; above it her hair seemed to shine like fire” (*Bostonians* 341). What Basil and Olive find as Otherness in Verena, which is symbolized by her red hair, still remains.

That James has a keen awareness of the change in the definition of “democracy” in the late nineteenth century is hinted at in Basil's reading Tocqueville and Carlyle, feeling “very suspicious of the encroachments of

modern democracy” (*Bostonians* 149). Democracy in this novel means the abolition of boundary, and what James seems to care about most and what makes ambivalent his attitude toward American Democracy is the boundary between high culture and low culture, or the popularization of culture. Though seeing Olive as an enemy, Basil understands Olive’s sacrifice when he sees that they sell Verena’s pictures and “the sketch of her life,” the commercialization of Verena: “Verena was not in the least present to him in connection with this exhibition of enterprise and puffery; what he saw was Olive, struggling and yielding, making every sacrifice of taste for the sake of the largest hearing, and conforming herself to a great popular system” (*Bostonians* 335). Here, Basil does not accuse Olive, and the two relatives stand at the same side against “a great popular system,” represented by such characters as Matthias Pardon and Sarah Tarrant. Significantly, it is not Olive who controls Verena’s performance in the Music Hall in Boston. When Basil cried out for Verena in front of the dressing room, Matthias Pardon tells him that Mr. Filer, who is “in the lecture-business,” is “the man that runs Miss Chancellor” (*Bostonians* 340). Under the control of Mr. Filer, Olive’s romantic plan is made into a business, where Olive has no agency. The battle seemingly between Basil and Olive, or man and woman, shifts here to the one between the American (and Northern) business man and the woman including the feminized Southern man.

Thus, “the emancipation of women”—the abolition of boundary in terms of gender—is closely intertwined with the abolition of boundary in terms of class, and Olive’s incapability of living a “life of action” is closely connected with this. When Olive asks Verena for their sisterhood friendship at the beginning, Olive says, “I will give up—I will give up everything!” (*Bostonians* 64); having a connection with a girl from a low family, Olive decides to give up her “position in Boston society” (*Bostonians* 64) and her sophisticated tastes. However, how much can she give up? There is a key scene, when Olive and Verena visit the Burrages,

where the boundary of class is consolidated. Listening to the piano Henry Burrage plays, Olive cannot help being relaxed and comfortable. In Olive's mind, then, her great cause temporally expires:

> It was given to Olive, under these circumstances, for half an hour, to surrender herself, to enjoy the music, to admit that Mr Burrage played with exquisite taste, to feel as if the situation were a kind of truce. Her nerves were calmed, her problems—for the time—subsided. Civilization, under such an influence, in such a setting, appeared to have done its work; harmony ruled the scene; human life ceased to be a battle. She went so far as to ask herself why one should have a quarrel with it; the relations of men and women, in that picturesque grouping, had not the air of being internecine. In short, she had an interval of unexpected rest, during which she kept her eyes mainly on Verena, who sat near Mrs Burrage, letting herself go, evidently, more completely than Olive. (*Bostonians* 119-120)

As she has "the refreshment of a pretty house, a drawing-room full of flowers, a cracking hearth" after she gets involved in "the city-missions" (*Bostonians* 140, 139), Olive feels comfortable in listening to the music "with exquisite taste" and even thinks that "the relations of men and women, in that picturesque grouping, had not the air of being internecine." Just as Basil does in the memorial hall, Olive temporarily forgets "the whole question of sides and parties" (*Bostonians* 189). James's idea of "civilization" mentioned here refers not to the contemporary idea of "American civilization" based on imperialism and materialism but to the traditional, European, and more aristocratic one. After listening, Verena says to Olive, "It would be very nice to do that always—just to take men as they are, and not to have to think about their badness. It would be very nice not to have so many questions, but to think they were all comfortably answered [. . .] sit there and listen for ever to Schubert and Mendelssohn. They didn't care anything

about female suffrage! And I didn't feel the want of a vote to-day at all, did you?" (*Bostonians* 121). Though Olive denies Verena's idea in the end and the denial serves rather to strengthen their union of sisterhood, it is still important that Olive temporarily forgets about the feminist cause and is comfortable listening to the piano in the house belonging to the upper class.

Indeed, Olive's problem is that she cannot completely abolish boundaries though she tries to do so. Olive's romanticism internalizes the class boundary. On the surface, she intends to cross the boundary of class; nevertheless, she never likes Verena's idea of their "free union," and, as Leslie Petty states, the "imbalance of power" in their union makes it not an alternative of heterosexual marriage but a repetition of it (392). In addition, while Olive has enormous love for Verena, she at the same time repeats what Mr. Tarrant did. At the beginning of the novel, Verena makes a speech under her father's mesmeric power; after she begins to live with Olive, Verena stops to give a speech in the mesmerized state, but her voice is still partly of a ventriloquial body, speaking Olive's words instead of her. In the earlier part of the novel, Olive, asked to address a speech at Miss Birdseye's, repeatedly emphasizes that she "can't talk to those people" (*Bostonians* 29). Though she desires to speak and to have a "life of action," all she can do is to contribute money. Olive's "possession" of Verena reflects this aspect of Olive's commitment to the women's movement. Through Verena's voice, for which Olive pays money, Olive wishes to meet her heroic romanticism in participating in the "great movements." Verena practices and almost memorizes the speeches that, as she once reveals to Basil, are written by Olive: "Well, she makes mine—or the best part of them. She tells me what to say—the real things, the strong things. It's Miss Chancellor as much as me!" (*Bostonians* 175).

However, at the end of the novel, Olive breaks the boundary, going to the platform herself and entering a "life of action." When Olive knows Verena is deserting her, she "rushed to the approach to the platform" (*Bostonians* 348):

> If he [Basil] had observed her, it might have seemed to him that she hoped to find the fierce expiation she sought for in exposure to the thousands she had disappointed and deceived, in offering herself to be trampled to death and torn to pieces. She might have suggested to him some feminine firebrand of Paris revolutions, erect on a barricade, or even the sacrificial figure of Hypatia, whirled through the furious mob of Alexandria. (*Bostonians* 348–49)

James here illustrates Olive going to the platform as a fighting woman, which will meet her "secret hope" to risk her life for something (*Bostonians* 12). Symbolically, what stops her at the next instant is "the arrival of Mrs Burrage and her son" (*Bostonians* 349), who represent the bourgeoisie, the upper class to which Olive belongs and because of which she cannot feel she fits completely in the women's movement. Sarcastically asked, "Oh, are *you* going to speak?," by "the lady from New York," Olive answers: "I am going to be hissed and hooted and insulted!" (*Bostonians* 349). What "greeted Olive Chancellor's rush to the front," however, is "the quick, complete, tremendous silence" of "the great public waited," and "what ever she should say to them (and he [Basil] thought she might indeed be rather embarrassed), it was not apparent that they were likely to hurl the benches at her" (*Bostonians* 349). Though the next sentence shows "Ransom, palpitating with his victory, felt now a little sorry for her" (*Bostonians* 349), it can be said that Olive too possibly gets her victory: Olive finally "can speak." Claire Kahane, who focuses on the relationship between hysteria and feminism, argues that "the women's movement was characterized by giving women voice, not only metaphorically through suffrage but literally in the pervasive speechifying by women on platforms around the world" (288) and discusses the importance of voice in *The Bostonians*. As Kahane aptly points out, there are two final scenes in this novel; while Basil takes Verena out of the hall and silences her, Olive "becomes a potential phallic woman" on the

platform (Kahane 297). Early in the novel, Verena tells her mother that if Olive isn't "afraid of facing the public, she would go far ahead of" her (*Bostonians* 79). In other words, Olive can be Verena. Of course it is not to say that Olive can be a girl Verena, whose "face and [whose] identity" is "conceal[ed]" (*Bostonians* 349), but that Olive, who has been "a patroness of movements who happened to have money" (*Bostonians* 79), can be "Verena," the first-rate female public speaker. Yet, James leaves the result open. In the long citation above, Olive is compared to "some feminine firebrand of Paris revolutions," which may remind readers of Eugène Delacroix's famous picture of the French revolution titled "Liberty Leading the People," and she is also compared to Hypatia, a female philosopher and mathematician who was killed by the Christian mob.[9] Though both are heroic female figures, readers cannot tell whether Olive becomes the "Liberty leading the people" or the victim of "a great popular system" (*Bostonians* 335), killed by the mass. James's ambiguity about American democracy is in some ways found in the final picture of Olive, who is standing on the democratic stage and "facing the public" with her high, romantic mind (*Bostonians* 79). Thus, the novel ends with two girls standing on the threshold—one between "a girl" and "a married woman" and the other between "a girl" and "a New Woman"—both vulnerable and insecure.

Taken together, *The Bostonians*, juxtaposing two stories of "girls," explores in a complicated way the issue of boundary and American democracy. While James illustrates negatively Basil's conventional gender-based view on the idea of "separate spheres," he still separates himself, to a certain extent, from Olive's feminism because her idea of gender is also based on the "separate spheres" in a different way from Basil's. The democratic "free union" that Verena seeks cannot be found either in her union with Basil or in that with Olive. Moreover,

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[9] For more on the image of Hypatia in literature, see Maria Dzielska 1-26.

the idea of democracy is changed in this novel, as it is linked more with popularization, commercialism, and mass culture. While James shows separatism in gender in a negative light, he is not positive toward "vagueness of boundary" (*Bostonians* 24) between public and private and between high culture and low culture. In this complicated picture of America, the idea of American civilization James seeks might be found in the scene cited above, when Henry Burrage plays the piano: "Civilization, under such an influence, in such a setting, appeared to have done its work; harmony ruled the scene; human life ceased to be a battle" (*Bostonians* 42). The idea of sophisticated "harmony" brings in something different from polarization, demarcation, and also popularization.

Finally, there is one character in the novel who truly "succeeds." The character James portrays most positively in this novel is Doctor Prance, whose name may reflect the name of Sarah Orne Jewett's girl who becomes a New Woman, Nan Prince.[10] Doctor Prance stands in a very peculiar position, since she does not completely commit to either side of the dichotomy in terms of gender. Doctor Prance, "a plain, spare young woman, with short hair and an eye-glass" (*Bostonians* 26), has chosen the traditionally male profession, the doctor. Doctor Prance is categorized as a "boyish" female, who does not necessarily subvert the heterosexual social system itself but succeeds in transcending the idea of the "separate spheres." She does not "care for great movements" (*Bostonians* 34) nor seek any sympathy, heroism, and romanticism; instead, she just works as a doctress and in a way practices the movement in a literal sense. Committing to neither side, feminist or anti-feminist, she most powerfully shows the idea of democracy in terms of gender. Moreover, James,

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[10] Marcia Jacobson, arguing the influence of the New Woman novel as well as of the Civil War Romance in *The Bostonians*, also points out this similarity (25–27).

though being ambivalent about the separatist sisterhood of Olive and Verena, seems to be positive about the sisterhood of Miss Birdseye and Dr. Prance, who live in the same house with others, where "prevailed much vagueness of boundary" (*Bostonians* 24).

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