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INTERPRETING HENRY JAMES'S *THE BOSTONIANS*:  
WOMEN, THEATRICALITY, AND PUBLIC PERFORMANCE

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Kara A. Johnson

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This project discusses Henry James's public women in *The Bostonians*.<sup>1</sup> I explore the novel's portrayals of the theatrical expectations of women in public, the social masquerade of gender, and the political and moral implications of the female voice. Despite women's evident autonomy in venturing out of the domestic sphere, they are still objects for acquisition, observation, physical manipulation, and sexualized objectification by their male audience.

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The public presence of the female body inscribes the political, social, and sexual turbulence of post-Civil War America. James's public women take "center stage" as they evoke sexual fascination, admiration, and curiosity from their spectators. In the novel, the charismatic Verena Tarrant depicts how a woman's existence in the public sphere is a scripted, choreographed, and rehearsed theatrical spectacle. James exposes the evolving, controversial "place" of women in society. *The Bostonians*, in effect, reveals the collapse of various national ideals, including political and domestic virility and morality, which accompany the public presence of women. James's representations of women reflect the "pleasing" figure of the nineteenth-century woman—the picturesque, domestic, and silent *tableau vivant*—as well as a feminist archetype that challenges the very roots of America's sexual identities: the speaking woman.

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The novel's male protagonist, Basil Ransom, attempts to reclaim the public platform, a symbol of political authority and "voice."<sup>2</sup> An embodiment of male anxiety toward the wayward behavior of vociferous women, Basil converts Verena into a silent domestic by forcing her violently into marriage. He enchants her with the "natural" impressions of heterosexual romance within the naturalized atmosphere of New York's Central Park. Therefore, Basil "biologizes"<sup>3</sup> Verena, reminding her of a woman's "natural" obligations to serve as the nation's "behind the scenes" caretaker through marriage, maternity, and silence in the domestic sphere. Through Verena's thwarted public career, James illustrates the grim reality that the fight against the "natural" is often doomed to fail. Women are present in society through their absence; their paradoxical assignment is to speak through silence, to execute a seamless *non-performance* of life.

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For Arts, Humanities, and  
Social Sciences, follow the  
Chicago style format for  
reference footnotes.

<sup>1</sup> Henry James, *The Bostonians* (New York: Random House, 1956).

<sup>2</sup> Claire Kahane, "Medusa's Voice: Male Hysteria in *The Bostonians*," in *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative, and the Figure of the Speaking Woman, 1850-1915* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 66-79.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Blair, "Realism, Culture, and the Place of the Literary: Henry James and *The Bostonians*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*, ed. Jonathan Freedman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 151-168.

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