THE NEW WOMAN, *THE BOSTONIANS* AND THE GENDER OF MODERNITY

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The 'New Woman' as a social category was by no means stable at the last *fin de siècle*. The phrase was coined in a pair of articles by the novelists Sarah Grand and Ouida in 1894 (Grand and Ouida 1894), but quickly took on a multitude of contradictory socio-sexual connotations, embracing suffragist feminists, purity campaigners, the rational dress lobby and female cyclists, as well as sexual decadents. By the late 1890s the phrase the 'New Woman', and feminism in general, were also often conflated with the sexologists' emergent definitions of lesbian identity. All that was certain about the 'New Woman' was that she was a problem, a challenge to the apparently self-identical culture of Victorianism. She was without doubt a harbinger of modernity, and yet the culture of modernity has traditionally been described as definitively masculine. The main aim of this paper is to illustrate the ways in which the New Woman, in her multifarious guises, entered this masculine space and introduced herself as a major actor in the landscape of modernity at the end of the nineteenth century. My focus will be Henry James's novel from 1886, *The Bostonians*, which I will use to illustrate the more general points of my argument.

Most accounts of the experience of modernity associate it with the public world of work, with politics and with city life, areas from which women in the nineteenth century were largely excluded, or at least rendered invisible. Janet Wolff, in her essay "The Invisible Flâneuse", locates the specifically 'modern' in city life: "in the fleeting, ephemeral, impersonal nature of encounters in the urban environment" (Wolff 1990, 35). She stakes a claim for the middle of the nineteenth century as heralding the birth of modernity, arguing that although cities were not new at this time, the acceleration of urbanisation, transformations in work, in housing and in social relations, all meant that urban existence took on an entirely different character, and this process was accentuated as the century drew to its close. The increasing separation of work and home which was a product of industrial capitalism contributed to the creation of quasi-autonomous public and private spheres, with women readily confined to the private, domestic world through the growth of suburbia, which physically excluded her from city life.

Janet Wolff draws on Walter Benjamin's essays on Charles Baudelaire, identifying the Baudelairean *flâneur* as a symbol of modernity (Benjamin 1992). The *flâneur*, the stroller, is characterised by his "freedom to move about in the city, observing and being observed, but never interacting with others" (Wolff 1990, 39). Late Victorian social explorers such as Charles Booth, James Greenwood, George Sims and Andrew Mearns who ventured into London's East End all qualify as

Baudelairean *flâneurs*, as does Henry James who on his arrival in London relished his "long walks in the rain", his "complete liberty" and "the prospect of profitable work" (Jame 1987, 215-18); he felt able to "take possession of London; I felt it to be the right place" (James 1992; quoted in Walkowitz 1992, 15). As both Rita Felski and Susan Buck-Morss have remarked, there could be no female equivalent of the *flâneur* since any woman who loitered in the streets of the nineteenth-century city was likely to be taken for a prostitute (Buck-Morss 1986, 119; Felski forthcoming). It is for this reason that to identify the *flâneur* as the major player in the city of modernity is to exclude the ways in which women other than prostitutes figured in the 'modern' urban landscape of the middle and late nineteenth century. Women could only experience 'modernity' eccentrically, in Baudelairean terms, as whores, as women of the streets.

That women did play a significant and diverse role in the late-nineteenth century city is being increasingly recognised in revisionist accounts of the experience of modernity. The figure of the prostitute in the city is explored in Judith Walkowitz's excellent new study of late-Victorian London, *City of Dreadful Delight*, and she also draws attention to the role of women in the music halls in the late-nineteenth century city, to shopping ladies and to female charity workers. The music halls in London and in other cities introduced a new public space for women at the *fin de siècle*: women featured both as performers and as members of the audience, with female entertainers often forcefully presenting a woman's perspective to a mixed audience (Walkowitz 1992, 45).

The establishment of the department store in the 1850s and 1860s increasingly provided an important new arena for the legitimate public appearance of middle-class women in the city. Consumerism is a central aspect of modernity, (Wolff 1990, 46) and Rachel Bowlby's book, *Just Looking*, gives an account of the aesthetization and feminization of the commercial world through the rise of the department store and advertising, and the male exploitation of "woman" as both consumer and commodity.

As charity workers women were enabled to follow Andrew Mearns and Charles Booth into urban slumlands; women indeed formed the largely unpaid foundations of the modern social services in the last *fin de siècle*. Such female explorers of urban slumlands can be identified in George Gissing's novel from 1880, *Workers in the Dawn*, for example, which features a tireless female philanthropist, Helen Norman, and in Margaret Harkness's novel from 1891, *In Darkest London*, which features not only Salvation Army 'Sisters of Mercy' who tour London's East End, but also Jane Hardy, a trade unionist and socialist - another female social actor in the city to emerge in the late nineteenth century.

The possibility of a role for women in public life is relentlessly explored in Henry James's *The Bostonians.* This novel features a number of 'New Women', a *flâneur*, and two major cities. Its narrative also gives a major role to the representatives of the mass media at the last *fin de siècle*, the explosive growth of which was another characteristic of modernity. The emergence of a lesbian identity made possible by the work of late-Victorian sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and

Edward Carpenter is reflected in its nascent state in *The Bostonians*: Baudelaire's description of the lesbian as the "heroine of modernism" means that this too contributes to the novel's credentials as a case study for a gendered account of modernity at the *fin de siècle*.

Verena Tarrant, one of the main characters in the novel, is a gifted orator, and is taken up by the intellectually-minded feminist, Olive Chancellor, to further the women's cause. At the same time Olive Chancellor is passionately fond of Verena, and attempts to hold off the romantic advances of various young men, including those of her cousin, Basil Ransom. Olive's and Verena's promotion of the feminist cause, and Olive's desire to maintain a partnership with Verena which excludes men, form the two main strands of the novel.

The difficult conflict, for women, between the demands of the public and the private spheres is powerfully illustrated in *The Bostonians*. Olive Chancellor is able to engage in feminist politics and intellectual debate because she has independent financial means and no husband, both of which mean she can evade the usual domestic prescriptions for women of her class and instead inhabit the outskirts of the public sphere. She nonetheless feels unable to speak in public, and wants Verena to act as her mouthpiece on behalf of the women's movement. Olive is most comfortable when Verena speaks in private domestic settings, which is indicative of her reticence regarding the public sphere: she has a horror of the public at large:

> 'I want you to address audiences that are worth addressing' Olive tells Verena to convince people who are serious and sincere ... Your mission is not to exhibit yourself as a pastime for individuals, but to touch the heart of communities and nations.' (James 1886, 136)

Verena begins her career as a feminist orator in Miss Birdseye's small, ramshackle Boston townhouse, to a select audience, most of which is already converted to the women's cause. Olive defers Verena's entrance into fully-fledged public life, ostensibly in order to improve Verena's knowledge of feminist politics before addressing the public at large, but also, less overtly, because Olive has a fear of the public sphere, desiring to maintain a domestic intimacy with Verena, a substitute for traditional heterosexual domesticity.

Nonetheless, Verena's public constituency gradually increases, progressing from the small Boston townhouse to a bigger event in Mrs Burrage's glittering and fashionable residence in New York. Her final public oration in the novel is to be in Boston's Music Hall, where she will face her first mass audience. Her projected performance at the Music Hall is highly significant in terms of Judith Walkowitz's description of this particular public arena as an emergent legitimate public space for women towards the end of the nineteenth century. But the significance of her appearance here is undercut by her commercial presentation at the music hall as an actress, actresses having a substantially less august and legitimate social status in late-nineteenth century public life than political orators. Cheaply reproduced photographs of Verena Tarrant are sold at the music hall in advance of her

performance, as are handbills containing brief details of her biography. The role of the emergent mass media in relation to Verena's entry into the public sphere, and in relation to the promotion of the feminist cause in general, requires scrutiny as it emerges in James's novel.

It is through the figure of Matthias Pardon, "the most brilliant young interviewer on the Boston Press", that Henry James parodies the increasingly influential and powerful mass media of the late nineteenth century. We are told of Matthias Pardon that:

> He was particularly successful in drawing out the ladies; he had condensed into shorthand many of the most celebrated women of his time ... and he was supposed to have a remarkably insinuating way of waiting upon *prime donne* and actresses the morning after their arrival ... He regarded the mission of mankind upon earth as a perpetual evolution of telegrams; everything to him was very much the same, he had no sense of proportion or of quality; but the newest thing was what came nearest exciting in his mind the sentiment of respect. (James 1886, 129)

Matthias Pardon's approach to Verena Tarrant and her feminist mission is identical to the way he would approach an actress or a prima donna: he wants to translate her into newsprint, he wants to turn her into a print product consumable by the public. He is even willing to marry her, such is her potential for newsprint and commercial gain thereby. Her role as a major political orator in the public sphere is important to him only in terms of her saleability as such. It is striking that it is Matthias Pardon, the brilliant young reporter, who regards the woman question as *the* modern question. He professes great admiration for the feminist cause, claiming that "All over the world I want to work for their emancipation. I regard it as the great modern question" (James, 1886, 149). The question is surely begged here as to the extent to which the woman question as "the great modern question" in the late nineteenth century was a product of the mass media. The 'New Woman' was herself very much a product of discourse, featuring in the journals of the *fin de siècle* with a frequency which far exceeded her manifestation in public life outside the pages of newsprint where she was dominant.

Olive Chancellor's reticence with regard to the promotion of Verena Tarrant through the mass media is much more than a case of a lover's possessiveness, as some critics have suggested. The tightrope she has to walk in order to exploit the apparatus of the mass media so as to promote the feminist cause and at the same time avoid being exploited by that same media apparatus for commercial gain is shown to be extremely precarious in James's novel. At the Music Hall at the close of the novel, the reader learns that Olive and Verena are "run" by a "Mr Filer", who is "in the lecture business" (James, 1886, 433). They have become highly saleable commodities, just like the 'woman question' itself. And the dealers in

commodities, Matthias Pardon and Mr Filer, are, of course, male. One of the subtexts of *The Bostonians* is that the price women must pay to enter the public sphere is that they must enter it as commodities.

Basil Ransom, one of the other major protagonists in the novel, laments "the exhibition of enterprise and puffery" (James 1886, 427) which he witnesses before Verena's projected speech at the music hall. He correctly identifies Olive's moral, intellectual and emotional struggle as she decides to sell Verena's oratorical skills to a large public audience in order to promote the feminist cause. He perceives her to have "conform[ed] herself to a great popular system" (James 1886, 428). But Ransom's distaste for the projected music hall appearance, and his frantic desire to prevent Verena from speaking, derives from far more than a distaste for the 'popular'. His major preoccupation in the novel is with keeping women, and Verena in particular, out of the public sphere, confined to the private world of domesticity. The public sphere of politics is one which he wants to reserve for himself. He himself wants to enter the world of speech and newsprint, and has made an unsuccessful attempt to get his own reactionary views on the sex question published: he cannot bear that women enter the public sphere of political journalism whilst he, a man, is excluded from it. It is significant, as Josephine Hendin has pointed out, that after a long love scene in Central Park in which he reduces Verena to silence, he has his first success at publication (Hendin 1984, xv; quoted in Showalter 1991, 30). He perceives the public world of letters to be under threat from women writers and speakers, and is rabidly intent on reversing this process. His success in stopping Verena from speaking at the Music Hall, though, is somewhat undermined by the fact that Olive Chancellor herself then takes to the stage and, at last, finds herself able to speak in public.

Basil Ransom, like other reactionary men of the *fin de siècle*, links in his mind the rise of the mass media with the feminization of culture. In one of his tirades against the feminist movement which Verena listens to with almost unbelievable placidity, Ransom laments that:

> The whole generation is womanised; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it's a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases, and false delicacy and exaggerated solicitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been. (James 1886, 334)

The association here between the proliferation of discourse - of what Ransom calls "chattering" and of "hollow phrases" - in the mass media of the late nineteenth century and the feminization of culture was echoed in 1895 by Edmund Gosse, in his essay "The Decay of Literary Taste". In deploring the growth of mass culture and "the opinions of the press" which to his view directed literary taste and opinion in 1895, Edmund Gosse reserves his particular venom for the 'New

Woman' writers whose best-selling novels, he claims, are both a symptom and a cause of literary decay (Gosse 1895, 109-18). Here as in *The Bostonians* the rise of the mass media and the commercialisation of culture is associated with women and with a fall in cultural and intellectual standards.

Basil Ransom's significance in terms of the gender of modernity in *The Bostonians* extends to his role as Baudelairean *flâneur*. Ransom is from the southern states of the USA and is presented very much as an outsider and an observer in the streets of New York and Boston where he roams. It is he rather than Olive Chancellor or Verena Tarrant who is presented as the Baudelairean *flâneur*, and it is he who is the urban spectator, to borrow Judith Walkowitz's phrase, whilst Verena Tarrant is very much the performer who is observed, very much an object of the male gaze at the various meetings she addresses. It is significant that it is during Ransom's many walks through the two cities with Verena that he attempts to dissuade her from the feminist cause and to become his wife instead. Verena feels uncomfortable during the walks, feeling that she is out of her depth and that the walks are not quite proper; and this is because the streets through which they wander together are Ransom's social space, the social space of the *flâneur*, denied to women.

Although the Baudelairean definition of the *flâneur* as the major figure in the modern city more or less excludes women from the experience of modernity, it is nonetheless also true that Baudelaire's definition of modernity made visible a number of categories of female city dwellers, amongst whom he included the figure of the lesbian. His poem *Les Fleurs du Mal* was originally to have been entitled *Les Lesbiennes*. Baudelaire characterised the lesbian as "the heroine of modernism" (he tended to conflate modernism and modernity) because of her circumvention of traditional gender roles. *The Bostonians* has often been read as a portrait of a lesbian relationship, with Olive Chancellor as the 'unnatural' woman who entraps Verena, who is in turn eventually 'saved' from her lesbian entanglement by Basil Ransom (see for example Auchinloss 1975). What is fascinating about this general drift within twentieth-century readings of the novel is that the relationship between Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant is by no means explicitly lesbian, and it is only a post-Freudian age that could read the novel as a study of lesbianism as malady. As Lilian Faderman has illustrated, passionate and intimate friendships between women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were regarded as entirely normal, and could include declarations of love as well as nights spent in bed together kissing, and lifelong devotion. In late-nineteenth century America the phrase a 'Boston Marriage' was used to describe a long-term relationship between two otherwise unmarried women, who were usually financially independent of men either through inheritance or by having a career (Faderman 1981, 190). Henry James's own sister had just such a relationship with another woman, and in *The Bostonians* the friendship between Dr Prance and Miss Birdseye, as well as that between Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant, could be seen to come into this category. Boston marriages weren't attacked at the time because it was assumed that love between women was asexual.

Lesbianism as a category of sexual behaviour only began to enter discourse in the late nineteenth century through the writings of the early sexologists, Havelock Ellis, Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Edward Carpenter. The association between the 'New Woman' and lesbianism is interesting in that the terms Havelock Ellis, for example, used to describe lesbian women were identical to those used to criticise the spinster feminists of the 1890s, the 'New Women' such as Olive Chancellor. Ellis's description, in 1897, of the typical homosexual woman is not dissimilar from many of the anti-feminist depictions of New Women to appear in *Punch* in the 1890s. Lesbian women, he wrote:

> ... usually show some traits of masculine simplicity, and there is nearly always a disdain for the petty feminine artifices of the toilet ... The brusque energetic movements, the attitude of the arms, the direct speech, the inflexions of the voice, the masculine straightforwardness ... will often suggest the underlying psychic abnormality to a keen observer ... There is also a dislike and sometimes incapacity for needlework and other domestic occupations, while there is some capacity for athletics. (Ellis 1925, 250)

Sheila Jeffreys claims that the conflation of lesbian identity with feminist identity was used by anti-feminists of the late-nineteenth century to subvert women's fight for emancipation. It is at least true that many a twentieth-century critic has attacked Olive Chancellor's feminism in *The Bostonians* on these grounds. If she is not exactly presented as a "heroine of modernism", then her friendship with Verena is at least shown to be far more positive and beneficial to both of them than most critics to date have acknowledged. As Lilian Faderman points out, Verena is very happy and productive when she is with Olive, and we are told that in Olive's company Verena "expanded, developed, on the most liberal scale" (Faderman 1981, 194). James himself had no prejudices against same-sex love, and I would claim that his novel calls for a much more sympathetic reading of same-sex love between women, than has generally been elicited from critics.

The conflation of the 'New Woman' with the emergent category of the lesbian at the *fin de siècle* is a most interesting area of study for the literary and cultural critic. At the same time, though, the critical focus on the possibility of a lesbian relationship between Verena Tarrant and Olive Chancellor in *The Bostonians* has often detracted from the novel's engagement with other contested cultural terrains within the experience of modernity, which it has been the object of this paper to reinstate. Women's entry into the public arena in the city of modernity, the relationship between the woman question and the emergent mass media at the *fin de siècle*, the association of mass culture with the feminization of culture, and the figure of the *flâneur* as the major player in the modern city: James's engagement with all of these in *The Bostonians* indicate its significance as a truly 'modern' novel.

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