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Henry James and the Performace of Women

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Macalester College

Honors Project

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HENRY JAMES AND THE PERFORMANCE OF WOMEN

Henry James and the Performance of Women

Honors Project

Alison Liss

Director: Dr. James Dawes
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INTRODUCTION

The fact that the young Henry James first learned of the drowning death of Margaret Fuller from Washington Irving, the master of the American ghost story, is probably mere coincidence (Edel, 33). Nevertheless, James was haunted by her. In *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, James's 1903 account of the expatriate community in Rome – a territory that Fuller had tread some fifty years earlier – James described his specter:

> The unquestionably haunting Margaret-ghost, looking out from her quiet little upper chamber at her lamentable doom, would perhaps be never so much to be caught by us as on some such occasion as this. What comes up is the wonderment of *why* she may, to any such degree, be felt as haunting…[M]aking the most of it, we ask ourselves how, possibly, in our own luminous age, she would have affected us on the stage of the "world," or as a candidate, if so we may put it, for the cosmopolite crown. It matters only for the amusement of evocation – since she left nothing behind her, her written utterance being naught…Would she, in other words, with her appetite for ideas and her genius for conversation, have struck us but as a somewhat formidable bore, one of the worst kind, a culture-seeker without a sense of proportion, or, on the contrary, have affected us as a really attaching, a possibly picturesque New England Corinne? (*WWS*, 127-128)

This passage encompasses all of James's attitudes towards Fuller as they appear in his fiction, where Fuller-esque characters appear with regularity. His passing equation of Fuller with the occult, the question of whether the type of new woman she exemplified could be tedious or charming, the delineation between her "genius for conversation" and her apparently unimportant written work (in reality not as insignificant as James makes it out to be), and, most importantly, how she would act on "the stage of the 'world'": all are ideas which absorbed him, and in turn often played a pivotal role in his novels. The women Fuller inspired, embodying aspects of the archetypical modern femininity she represented, often stand at the center of

James's fictional worlds, and thus the foremost question of so much James criticism rests upon their shoulders: what is his attitude towards the women of his novels?

The Bostonians is James's novel most explicitly concerned with women's rights, and thus the debate over its position has been especially pitched. Judith Fetterley, though she writes that "no one would want to make a claim for James as an ardent or perhaps any other kind of feminist," nevertheless claims there is "a revolutionary message latent in *The Bostonians*. In the character of Olive, James has grasped, regardless or whether he knew it or not and regardless of what he felt about it, the central elements of radical feminism" (Fetterley, 117, 152). Yet, as Alfred Habegger notes, this is ignoring the fact that Olive is just as much a villain in the story as Basil, and he writes that theories like Fetterley's are "incomplete and erroneous in that they seriously underestimate James's condescending view of women" (Habegger, 5). This debate is only one of many about the place of women in James's fiction, for there is no single, clear answer.

That it is Fuller who is the source of some of James's most ambivalent depictions of women should not be a surprise. A confused attitude towards Fuller was not uncommon, as she seemed to inspire mixed emotions in many people. Emerson, who would later become her friend and mentor[1], reported being initially repulsed by her, and he wrote that she was so disagreeable that many people, "including those

[1] For much of the past century and a half, since Fuller's death, Fuller has been dismissed as "intellectually dependent" upon Emerson and not worthy of her own consideration as an important thinker. The use of the word "mentor" is not meant to imply an assumption of Fuller as intellectually subordinate. Dorothy Berkson addresses the Emerson-Fuller relationship at length in her essay "'Born and Bred in Different Nations': Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson" in *Patrons and Protégées*, ed. Shirley Marchalonis.

who became afterwards her best friends... did not wish to be in the same room with her." This revulsion seemed to be the result of what many took at first to be an overbearing attitude and a collection of irritating mannerisms. Nevertheless, she soon developed a devoted following, and Emerson describes the "enthusiastic attachment" that Fuller inspired:

> I hear from one witness, as early as 1829, that "all the girls rave about Margaret Fuller," and the same powerful magnetism wrought as she went on, from year to year, on all ingenuous natures... When I expressed, one day, many years afterwards, to a lady who knew her well, some surprise at the homage paid her by men in Italy, – offers of marriage having there been made her by distinguished parties, – she replied: "There is nothing extraordinary in it. Had she been a man, any one of those fine girls of sixteen, who surrounded her here, would have married her: they were all in love with her... (qtd. Chevigny, 91-3)

While some negative reactions were a result of merely physical attributes, she also provoked criticism on a more fundamental level. Nathaniel Hawthorne's diatribe aimed at her is perhaps the most well known example of this. His attack on the "damned mob of scribbling women,"[2] by now infamous, might explain his subsequent dismissal of Margaret Fuller, except for the fact that the Hawthornes were good friends with Fuller when they lived in Concord (*Letters*, 304; Kesterson, 65). About her death by drowning, Hawthorne wrote, "Providence was, after all, kind in putting her, and her clownish husband, and their child, on board that fated ship" (*Notebooks* 155-56). This cruel assessment likely stems most directly from Fuller's relationship with the Italian Giovanni Ossoli, for it was a matter of much debate amongst the Boston intellectuals as to whether she had married him before or after

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[2] Nina Baym discusses both the context in which this comment was made and the critical response to it in her essay "Again and Again, the Scribbling Women" in *Hawthorne and Women*, ed. John L. Idol, Jr. and Melinda M. Ponder.

their child was born, if in fact they had married at all. However, the threat associated with Fuller was more than just one aimed at her reputation, as Hawthorne sensed a threat to himself in Fuller's persona, as well.

For both Hawthorne and James, Fuller embodied the quintessential modern American woman, and the fates that meet the characters modeled after her reflect their attitudes towards the women she represented. In addition, the difference between the pair's treatment of Fuller and the characters she inspired speaks to James's relationship with Hawthorne, as well. James produced several essays and a book length study on Hawthorne, and over the course of his career his opinion of the author changed considerably. In his 1879 book *Hawthorne*, James begins dismissively, noting that Hawthorne was a writer of comparatively little output, but that nevertheless:

> some account of the man and the writer is well worth giving. Whatever may have been Hawthorne's private lot, he has the importance of being the most beautiful and most eminent representative of a literature. The importance of the literature may be questioned, but at any rate, in the field of letters, Hawthorne is the most valuable example of the American genius. (*Hawthorne*, 2)

This snide treatment comes as a result of James's opinion at the time of America's inability to produce great novels, as it lacked what James saw as the pillars of good society: "no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class – no Epsom nor Ascot!"[3] (*Hawthorne*,

[3] Critics such as John Carlos Rowe have noted that this list differs not so greatly from Hawthorne's own, in the preface to *The Marble Faun*: "No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a Romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a common-place prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case in my dear native land" (*MF*, 3).

34). This snobbish attitude towards American letters had disappeared, however, by 1904, when James wrote, in a letter in honor of the Hawthorne centenary celebration in Salem, that Hawthorne had given the city "the most precious gift perhaps that an honest city may receive from one of her sons – the gift of a literary association high enough in character to emerge thus brilliantly from the test of Time" (*Amer. Essays*, 24).[4]

Perhaps because of his initially disparaging attitude towards Hawthorne, James interacted quite extensively with him in his work. F.O. Matthiessen wrote that "James, in a sense, started where Hawthorne left off," and many of James's novels are deeply in conversation with Hawthorne (Matthiessen, 301). John Carlos Rowe has analyzed the pair's relationship through the paradigm of Bloom's anxiety of influence, and writes that *Hawthorne* can be read as "James's move from repression to sublimation, from *daemonization* to *askesis*" in his relation to the writer (Rowe 1984, 53).

If James's literary forefather, Hawthorne, led to his interest with Fuller, his real father and brother were no less a part of it, as well. In addition to representing the New Woman[5], who appeared in his fictions as characters such as the independent

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[4] It is interesting, therefore, that one of the first critics to consider James's relationship with Hawthorne was T.S. Eliot, who, like James, surrendered American citizenship in favor of Britain. Perhaps in James's vexed tie to his home country Eliot recognized his own. In any event, Eliot wrote that no one who was not American could "*properly* appreciate James" (Eliot, 30).

[5] This term postdates Fuller by almost fifty years, being coined in 1894 in the *North American Review*. Nevertheless, Fuller may be considered a predecessor of the New Woman. As Martha Patterson defines the term, the New Woman signifies "at once a character type, as set of distinct goals, and a cultural phenomenon… [she] defined woman more broadly than the suffragette or settlement worker while connoting, even

journalist Henrietta Stackpole in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Fuller also embodied what James's brother William James would refer to as the "feminine mystic."

James's interest in mysticism extended back to their father, Henry James Sr. who, after experiencing a nervous breakdown, discovered the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg and devoted much of the rest of his life and fortune to furthering spiritual projects in America. In doing so he came to know many of the Transcendentalists, not only Margaret Fuller but also Emerson and Bronson Alcott. James Sr. also provided some of the financial backing for Brook Farm, the failed utopian community that would become the model for Hawthorne's Blithedale (Edel, 7-9).

Henry James Sr. was not the only member of the family interested in the matters of spiritualism then sweeping the country. In 1885, William James's mother-in-law, a Mrs. Elizabeth Putnam Webb Gibbens, began visiting a well-known psychic and medium, Leonora Piper. Deeply impressed by her, Mrs. Gibbens encouraged James to visit her, as well. William James had at the time a curiosity about mediums and spiritualism and, intrigued, he decided to pay her a visit himself. One way in which Mrs. Piper demonstrated her skills was by describing a person after simply handling a physical object of theirs. James wrote to his sister, Alice, asking for a lock of her hair, which she sent to him. However, weeks later, Alice wrote to her brother and confessed – the hair had not been hers after all, but that of a friend – "I thought it a much better test," she wrote (qtd. Allen, 283). There is no record of Mrs. Piper's interaction with the hair in question, but despite some of his family's apparent

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in its seemingly more conservative deployments, a distinctly modern ideal of self-refashioning" (Patterson, 2).

skepticism about the merits of his endeavor, James continued to visit Mrs. Piper, and eventually wrote that he was "persuaded of the medium's honest, and of the genuineness of her trance… I now believe her to be in possession of a power as yet unexplained" (qtd. Allen, 284).

Mrs. Piper, who later became a friend, was one of the first manifestations of William James's fascination with the psychical arts. James pursued spiritualism with the same discipline that had characterized his other endeavors, and he quickly became involved with the Society for Psychical Research, even serving as president for a time. James was, among other things, a scientist, and one of the tasks he faced with the SPR was the reconciliation of science with a discipline that resisted it. James contrasted his idea of the "feminine-mystical mind" with the "scientific-academic mind," yet he recognized both as valid. As he wrote, "in psychology, physiology, and medicine, wherever a debate between the mystics and the scientifics has been once for all decided, it is the mystics who have usually proved to be right about the *facts*, while the scientifics had the better of it in respect to the theories" (W. James, 27-8).

Like his sister Alice, Henry James was skeptical regarding the claims of spiritualism. His disbelief in religion played a large role in this. On top of that, however, James also objected to spiritualism for artistic reasons. In the preface to 1908 edition of *The Turn of the Screw* printed in *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, James wrote:

> The good, the really effective and heart-shaking ghost-stories (roughly so to term them) appeared all to have been told, and neither new crop nor new type in any quarter awaited us. The new type indeed, the mere modern "psychical" case, washed clean of all queerness as by exposure to a flowing laboratory tap, and equipped with credentials vouching for this – the new type clearly promised little, for the more it was respectably

> certified the less it seemed of a nature to rouse the dear old sacred terror. (*Novels and Tales*, xv)

Many critics have explored the influence of the figure of the medium in *The Turn of the Screw*. The question of whether the ghosts of the story are real – whether, that is, the governess presents a trustworthy account, or if she is, in the words of Edmund Wilson, "a neurotic case of sex repression," (Wilson, 89) – is a question that dominated discourse surrounding the female medium, as well. And if the governess is telling the truth, are her visions the result of some psychical power, to be dryly explored by scientists until some rational explanation is found, or instead do they come from some more nebulous haunting, outside the boundaries of science?[6]

Mesmerism and the figure of the medium were certainly not unfamiliar to Margaret Fuller. Much of the rhetoric that surrounded the medium was the same that Fuller used in her treatise on women's rights, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. "The especial genius of woman, I believe," she wrote, "to be electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency" (Fuller, 309).

Fuller, then, is dually present both as the paradigm of modern womanhood that created so much anxiety for Hawthorne, and as an example of the feminine

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[6] Martha Banta has produced a detailed study on the many moments in Henry James's novels when his many female characters seem to be acting as psychics – for instance, the moment early in *The Ambassadors* when Maria Gostrey predicts that little Bilham has somehow arranged to bring Chad to them: "Well, I don't pretend to be a seer or a prophetess… but if I'm simply a woman of sense he's working for you to-night," she says. Of course she is right, and Strether believes "she was at this instant the nearest approach he had ever met to the priestess of the oracle. The light was in her eyes" *(Ambassadors,* 93-4). Banta sees the ever-present motif of female intuition as a continuation of the Romantic ideal of sympathy, and claims of James's work that "there would be no need for dialogue if the novels and stories were populated solely by women" (Banta, 158).

mystic with which so much of his family was enthralled. Characters inspired by Fuller – independent women, charming speakers, magnetic personalities – abound, and the fate that befalls them in James's work is representative of the fate awaiting them in the larger world.

I

Of beguiling character and commanding presence, Fuller was the foremost woman involved with the Transcendentalists, an identity she did not fully shed in her second career as chronicler of revolutionary Italy.[7] But today she is best remembered as an early member of the women's rights movement. Fuller's unique formulation of the status of women, one of the first in what would later be known as first wave feminism, was influenced not solely by her association with the Transcendentalists, but by the intersection of Emersonian Transcendentalism, Mesmerism, and Swedenborgism. All of these were enjoying an unprecedented vogue in America at the time, but their origins go back to Europe, and to the eighteenth century.

In 1784, thirty-two years after he famously proved the presence of electricity in the atmosphere, Benjamin Franklin was invited to investigate the veracity of the claims made by an Austrian doctor, Franz Anton Mesmer, who believed himself to have discovered a radical new healing method. Mesmer thought he had discovered a universal medium through which all energies – spiritual, medical, electrical – traveled, and he manipulated this fluid, which he termed animal magnetism, in order to cure his patients of every imaginable illness (R. Fuller, 2). Mesmer had earlier tried to befriend Franklin himself. Believing that the atmospheric energy Franklin had detected shared its source with the animal magnetism he used, Mesmer hoped that Franklin's support would legitimize his claims. But Mesmer failed to convince Franklin that his method was anything other than a hoax. So when Louis XVI put

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[7] Annamaria Formichella Elsden argues that it was Rome especially which helped Fuller to articulate her radical agenda, and Italy is used as a focal location by both James and Hawthorne. For a more detailed account, see Elsden's book *Roman Fever: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing.*

together a commission to investigate Mesmer's practices, and named Franklin the only non-Frenchman of the group, the outlook was grim for Mesmer. The *Rapport des Commissaires*, often referred to as the Franklin Commission Report, thoroughly condemned Mesmer's practices as unscientific (Finger, 226-30).

Franklin and the commission's dismissal of Mesmer failed to end his career, though it must have been disappointing to the man, who earnestly believed that he was on the vanguard of a scientific revolution. Mesmer was not without prominent followers, including Marie Antoinette and the Marquis de Lafayette, and though Franklin's condemnation probably slowed mesmerism's spread to America, it did nothing to halt it. The country's first real exposure was the result of a lecture tour by Charles Poyen, a man who called himself a Professor of Animal Magnetism, in 1836 (R. Fuller, 17). Poyen's tour coincided with the beginnings of America's first experiences with practical applications of electricity, and for many Americans the tenets of animal magnetism were just as plausible as theories of electricity. As mesmerism spread throughout America, it transformed into a practice that Mesmer himself probably would not have recognized, and its ideas and practices, combined with theories of electricity, helped shape many intellectual and social movements in the country.

Artists especially, in Europe and America, were inspired by the idea of electricity. The scientist Galvani wrote that electricity was the "soul of the universe," and this idea, coupled with the same view of electricity that Mesmer had hoped Franklin would take – that it was evidence of a universal force, a divine energy, which could be manipulated – inspired the Romantics (qtd. Tatar, 59). Mesmerists

used a "primeval electrical sense," to " [establish] rapport with nature by picking up impulses from a magnetic, electrical, or vital power diffused throughout the universe" (Tatar, 48). Electricity, for the Romantics, became a metaphor for the universal force that powered life. Mary Shelley immortalized the idea of electricity as a life-force in her 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, and Percy Bysshe Shelley thought that electricity was like poetry in its "inability to distinguish fully between matter and immateriality, as thought becomes as material as electricity and the material world becomes as 'active and subtle' as thought" (Gilmore, 477). This line of thinking was one of many things that the American Transcendentalists took from the Romantics, and the idea of electricity as an inspirational medium is present in Emerson's formulation of the artist. In the very closing of "The Poet," Emerson exhorts the artist to master the electric energy around him, writing:

> Doubt not, O Poet, but persist. Say, 'It is in me, and shall out.' Stand there, baulked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until, at last, rage draw out of thee that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity. (Emerson, 1194)

Emerson's idea of a creative electricity surrounding everyone, inspired by the scientific experiments of Franklin showing atmospheric electricity and applied to people through the pseudo-science of Mesmer, was extremely influential. Filtered through the writings of the Romantics, it became one of the major parts of the Transcendental ideology.

Mesmerism was also understood to be the scientific proof of the teachings of Swedenborg. The connection between Mesmer and Swedenborg was established by the Reverend George Bush, who wrote that the "inner dimensions of consciousness,"

described in Swedenborg's writings could be achieved through the practices of mesmerism (Taylor, 109).

In addition to inspiring artists, this idea of a universal energy which could be harnessed helped to create a new religion, as well. Spiritualism was born out of the "Rochester Rappings," which started in 1848 in the home of Katharine and Margaret Fox. The Fox sisters reported to have heard a series of "raps" on the table, which they took to be a sign of the presence of the souls of the deceased, and they began to travel around New England attempting to communicate with these souls (Wilson, 248). Spiritualism at its simplest was a "movement aimed at proving the immortality of the soul by establishing communication with the spirits of the dead" (Braude, 2). The spiritualists took from mesmerism the idea of a universal energy which could be used to communicate, and they harnessed this energy through mediums: people – usually women – who became entranced in order to communicate with other spirits. And as with the mesmerists, electricity was "a crucial metaphorical concept in comprehending the operation of the spiritual universe" (Carroll, 68).

Not all spiritualists, however, were united in their goals. Though all believed communication with the dead was possible, to some it became more important than others, and spiritualists were divided between those "seeking mystical illumination and those out to master the craft of mediumship" (R. Fuller, 95). Those spiritualists who were less interested in the communication with the dead were instead interested in using what was known as "the spiritual telegraph" to better understand themselves, the world around them, and God (Braude, 5). Spiritualists believed in "self-sovereignty," a "state of absolute individual autonomy they believed to be God's

intention for every person" (Braude, 62). Because of this radical autonomy, and because of the divine communication that they believed every person capable of, spiritualists were also deeply invested in the women's rights movement.

In 1848, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton headed the Seneca Falls Convention, the birth of the organized women's rights movement in the United States. This was the same summer that the Fox sisters toured, and talk of spiritualism was all around the convention. In fact, "raps reportedly rocked the same table where Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton penned the 'Declaration of Sentiments,' which formed the convention's agenda" (Braude, 58). Spiritualism was so invested in women's rights that invariably "those who assumed the most radical positions on woman's rights became Spiritualists" (Braude, 59).

A site for some of the spiritualists' strongest ideas about the equality of women was in the position of the medium. The medium was almost always female because women were assumed to have a constitution more suited to mystical communication. In framing the medium in such a way, spiritualists "made the delicate constitution and nervous excitability commonly attributed to femininity a virtue and lauded it as a qualification for religious leadership... The very qualities that rendered women incompetent when judged against norms for masculine behavior rendered them capable of mediumship" (Braude, 83). Spiritualism was the only religious movement that found its women better able to lead than its men.

The female medium was also revolutionary in the fact that she addressed large crowds. Up until that point, a woman speaking before an audience was discouraged. A woman's public voice was invariably tied to her body, and "with increasing

frequency nineteenth-century linguists and social philosophers invoked the precarious sexual purity of the speaking female body in order to control women's public utterances" (Levander, 473). Even many progressive groups refused to let women address the crowd. So in not only admitting, but insisting on the centrality of women publicly speaking, spiritualism radically shifted ideas of the right position for women to take, both spiritually and politically.

All of these movements, though separate, informed each other. Mesmer's conception of a universal energy, which could be tapped into for various purposes, taking its cues from the discovery of electricity, was used by all different groups. The Romantics used this energy as a means of inspiration in the form of mystic communication. Spiritualists believed that it could be used both to communicate with the dead, as well as with the divine, and this individualism helped to fuel the women's rights movement. Margaret Fuller combined all of these different interpretations into something that produced a distinctly feminine idea of artistry. From the Romantics, she, like the rest of the Transcendentalists, found in this energy a source of inspiration. From the Spiritualists, she took the idea that the harnessing of this energy was most suited to women. These ideas are a central part of her argument in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, where she argues that women, if given the same opportunities as men, would produce a powerful, previously untapped, voice in America.

Margaret Fuller met Emerson in 1836, the same year that the Transcendentalist club was founded. Though Fuller was not a founding member, she began attending meetings soon afterwards, and in 1840 she began as editor of the

group's new journal *The Dial* (Berkson 4). The Transcendentalists were deeply influenced by Swedenborg's idea of correspondences, "that God speaks to man through nature" (Taylor 62). Emerson wrote of Swedenborg that he understood "the correspondence of all the parts; the fine secret that little explains large, and large, little, the centrality of man in nature, and the connection that subsists throughout all things" (Emerson 668). This philosophy in which the soul was "a conduit for the divine," and geniuses were most open to truth which "flows through them but is meanwhile not of their own making," was very attractive to a young Margaret Fuller (Taylor, 62). A mystical experience drew Fuller to Transcendentalism. In 1840 she described a day years earlier that inspired her to rethink her relation to the world:

> Suddenly the sun shone out with that transparent sweetness, like the last smile of a dying lover, which it will use when it has been unkind all a cold autumn day. And, even then, passed into my thought a beam from its true sun, from its native sphere, which has never since departed from me. I remembered how, a little child, I had stopped myself one day on the stairs, and asked, how came I here? How is it that I seem to be this Margaret Fuller? What does it mean? What shall I do about it? I remembered all the times and ways in which the same thought and returned. I saw how long it must be before the soul can learn to act under these limitations of time and space… This truth came to me, and I received it unhesitatingly; so that I was for that hour taken up into God. (qtd. Chevigny 168)

This experience is in part what inspired Fuller to join the Transcendentalists, and her description of a communion, between herself and the divine, which is mediated by her natural surroundings is in keeping with many of the Transcendentalist beliefs. Around the same time, Fuller, who had been sickly as a child, discovered Mesmeric healing techniques. She suffered from headaches that "hindered her reading, writing, and even her thinking," as well as "severe spinal curvature," and though she originally participated in mesmerism solely for its physical effects, Fuller eventually

began to feel that the mesmeric trance opened her to mystical experiences, as well, like the one she'd had as a young child (Manson 303, 312). She explored other mystical theories as well. Already familiar with the Swedenborgian idea of correspondences which so interested the Transcendentalists, she explored other aspects of Swedenborg's thought, too. A key part of the Swedenborgian philosophy was a Neo-Platonic conception of heaven, where angels were the androgynous combination of men and women from earth. About Swedenborg's conception of Plato's idea of the androgynous nature of the soul espoused in the *Symposium*, Fuller wrote, "Plato sometimes seems penetrated by that high idea of love, which considers man and woman as the two-fold expression of one thought. This the angel of Swedenborg, the angel of the coming age, cannot surpass, but only explain more fully" (Fuller, 301). The ramifications of this – the insubstantiality of physical gender – were inspiring to Fuller, and elsewhere she wrote that "Swedenborg's angelic state" represented "perfect freedom" (Fuller, 277).

Her understanding of Swedenborg led Fuller to believe that men and women did not have identities set in stone, because male and female were simply "the two sides of the great radical dualism… There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman," (Fuller 310) in the same way that a Swedenborgian angel had two sides, as well. She does, however, speak of male and female *attributes*, which could be possessed by either men or women. Through the whole of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller walks the line between celebrating the female side of nature and acknowledging the power of women who were in some way masculine. Fuller does not want all the positive aspects of a soul to be termed masculine, and she

insists, "let it not be said, wherever there is energy or creative genius, 'She has a masculine mind'" (Fuller, 264).

Fuller divides women into two types: the Muse and the Minerva. All women had to some extent a "superior susceptibility to magnetic or electric influence," but some women had a greater share of this "feminine element," which Fuller terms "Femality." The Muse, according to Fuller, held the "unimpeded clearness of the intuitive powers which a perfectly truthful adherence to every admonition of the higher instincts would bring to a finely organized human being." The Muse was the pure expression of Femality, and it was "more native... to her to be the living model of the artist than to set apart from herself any one form in objective reality; more native to inspire and receive the poem, than to create it." In opposition to that, women "[partake] of the masculine as Minerva" (Fuller, 309-10). Though she envisions a day when each sphere "comprehends and apprehends all the others," in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* she gives preference to Minerva, who she claims has the power to help *all* women achieve equality. The Minerva "[establishes] the legitimacy of freedom, the power of self-poise the perfection of motion," and it is the "love for many incarcerated souls, that might be freed, could the idea of religious self-dependence be established in them, could the weakening habit of dependence on others be broken up," that leads Fuller to champion Minerva over Muse (Fuller, 311).

Margaret Fuller herself was much like the Minerva character she described, and this is a major reason why she was so influential. Fuller today is best remembered as an inspiring speaker, and this is a powerful role that she outlined for women. If the genius of women was "electric," as she wrote, then this electricity could be used as

energy to spark a powerful voice. Her ideas about electricity are tied to those of the Transcendentalists. Harnessed by mesmerism or not, speech was women's special power, and one that they should use as leverage in their quest for equality.

Fuller not only located women's power in speech in the abstract, but felt that she herself was a better speaker than writer. She wrote in her journals "a woman of tact and brilliancy, like me, has an undue advantage in conversation with men. They are astonished at our instincts. They do not see where we got our knowledge; and, while they tramp on in their clumsy way, we wheel, and fly, and dart hither and thither, and seize with ready eye all the weak points, like Saladin in the desert" (qtd. Chevigny 59). But of her writing she wrote, "When I look at my papers I feel as if I never had a thought that was worthy the attention of any but myself, and some fond friend" (qtd. Fish 161). Fuller's fears may not have been totally unfounded, as contemporaries such as Bronson Alcott claimed that "her conversation gave a far better measure of her remarkable powers than her writings, wherein she seemed constrained and ill at ease" (Alcott, 409). Her writing may also have been an attempt to combine the masculine and feminine arts, creating a new style of written word that mimicked speech. Bell Gale Chevigny writes of Fuller's prose that "an occasionally purple style and a form that follows where whimsical thought may lead characterize much of the writing of an age which placed a premium on spontaneity and feeling," (Chevigny, 12). Chevigny credits this style as the result of an unconscious desire to prove her femininity, But considering her project of the combination of the two sides of the "radical dualism," her style should be considered not an effect of unconscious

anxiety, but instead a deliberate part of her project to marry the masculine and feminine arts.

Not only does Fuller place with women the special power of speech, but by endowing them with the gifts of spiritual inspiration, Fuller fashions women as Transcendental hero(ines). Bronson Alcott wrote that "there can be no will in composition. The spirit within is the only writer" (qtd. Buell 56). Reverence for a spiritual inspiration led the Transcendentalists to prize the spoken word over the written, since improvisational oratory was most suited for the delivery of divinely inspired genius. Along these lines, Fuller started a series of Conversations for Women in 1839, which she later opened up to men as well. The women met in the home of Elizabeth Peabody, where Fuller would lead a discussion on a variety of topics (Chevigny 211). The conversations were a great success, and from the records left by women who attended them, Fuller made a great impression, both in her personal nature and in the way she encouraged other women to open up intellectually and spiritually as she had. Ednah Dow Cheney, who went on to work as a suffragist after attending the Conversations, remembered of them "I found myself in a new world of thought; a flood of light irradiated all that I had seen in nature, observed in life, or read in books. Whatever [Fuller] spoke of revealed a hidden meaning, and everything seemed to be put into true relation" (qtd. Chevigny 230).

Despite all of this, Margaret Fuller was above all a prime example of the androgynous Minerva that she proclaimed so powerful. William Henry Channing wrote that she embodied the epithet originally used to describe George Sand, "Thou large-brained Woman, and large-hearted Man," and that she "was at once impressible

and creative, impulsive and deliberate, pliant in sympathy yet firmly self-centered... By the vivid intensity of her conceptions, she brought out in those around their own consciousness, and, by the glowing vigor of her intellect, roused into action their torpid powers" (qtd. Chevigny, 31). Fuller's power was located not just in her femininity and powers of speech, but also in her more masculine aspects. Though she claimed speech as a feminine power, she herself was of course a writer as well, and one who wanted to use writing as a means to combine the masculine art of the pen with the feminine art of oration, and this combination of the two was an idea she emphasized throughout her career. She wanted women like her Minerva to grasp the feminine power and use it. She wanted to take the stage away from the "actresses, improvisatrici, female singers," to whom performance is natural and give it to "female authors, even learned women," who "are sure of an admiring audience, and what is far better, chance to use what they have learned, and to learn more, if they can once get a platform on which to stand" (Fuller, 267). Fuller wanted all women to become performers, and use their magnetic personas as a tool of influence. Later we will see this trope of women, even those who are not actresses, improvisatrici, or female singers, as performers, but the results are not always as Fuller imagined, and though she distanced herself from the Muse, Fuller herself can often be seen as the inspiration.

II

Partway through the serialization of his novel *The Bostonians*, Henry James received a letter from his brother William scolding him for his portrayal of the character of Miss Birdseye. Everyone had taken her to be a caricature of Elizabeth Peabody, the aging reformer (and sister-in-law of Hawthorne), and William wrote, "It is a pretty bad business" (qtd. Edel, 313). Henry vehemently denied the inspiration, and in fact wrote to Peabody apologizing. Though she caused the most fuss, Miss Birdseye is not the only character of the novel based on real New England figures. Verena Tarrant, the character around whom all the action takes place, has much in common with Margaret Fuller. A public speaker promoting women's rights, her politics, at least superficially, align with Fuller, as does her skill with oration. Her most immediate literary predecessor, however, is Zenobia, of Hawthorne's novel *The Blithedale Romance.*

The Blithedale Romance features two main women: the forceful, sensual Zenobia and the slight, easily influenced Priscilla. These women roughly correlate with the two types of femininity outlined by Margaret Fuller: Zenobia, often taken to be a portrait of Fuller herself, is Minerva. Priscilla is the Muse, the easily influenced woman suited to inspire art, not create it.

Zenobia, like Fuller, is a captivating "female reformer." And, like Fuller, she is a powerful speaker who champions women's voice:

> When my sex shall achieve its rights, there will be ten eloquent women, where there is now one eloquent man. Thus far, no woman in the world has ever once spoken out her whole heart and her whole mind... The pen is not for woman. Her power is too natural and immediate. It is with the living voice, alone, that she can compel the world to recognize the light of her intellect and the depth of her heart! (*BR* 111-12)

This powerful voice dominates most of the book. Priscilla, on the other hand, is not dominating but dominated. She is the Veiled Lady who speaks under Westervelt's spell. Even when not entranced, Priscilla is childlike – she is described as "impressible as wax," and Coverdale writes that there were "certain indications that we were all conscious of a pleasant weakness in the girl, and considered her not quite able to look after her own interests, or fight her battle with the world" (*BR*, 73, 69). Priscilla's position as the Veiled Lady clearly identifies her with the Muse, who Fuller aligns with the mythical Cassandra, writing that she has "the unimpeded clearness of the intuitive powers" (Fuller, 310).

Fuller is in fact mentioned once, paradoxically, in the novel. Though throughout Zenobia is painted as a woman whose spoken word is her greatest power – not unlike many accounts of Fuller herself – when Margaret Fuller is mentioned, it is in reference to her written word. In the episode, Priscilla, the opposite of Fuller and Zenobia in many ways, holds a letter that Fuller has sent to Coverdale. Upon seeing her with the letter, Coverdale remarks, "it forcibly struck me that her air, though not her figure, and the expression of her face, but not its features, had a resemblance to what I had often seen in a friend of mine, one of the most gifted women of the age… 'Priscilla,' I inquired, 'did you ever see Miss Margaret Fuller?... You reminded me of her, just now, and it happens, strangely enough, that this very letter is from her!'" Priscilla goes on to refuse the resemblance, saying "How could I possibly make myself resemble this lady, merely by holding her letter in my hand?"[8]

[8] F.O. Matthiessen, among others, has commented on the careful manner – "perhaps too careful" – that Hawthorne attempted to distance Zenobia from Margaret Fuller

The story, then, is a story of Coverdale's conflict of attraction between the two women. As many critics have pointed out, Coverdale seems to describe at every turn an attraction to Zenobia, yet at the end of the novel dreams of her death and professes his love for Priscilla. This suppression of feeling for Zenobia is tied to Hawthorne's conflicted feelings for Fuller herself, and Coverdale's abandonment of Zenobia at the end of the novel analogous to Hawthorne's biting treatment of Fuller after her death.

Throughout the novel, Coverdale repeatedly voices an attraction to Zenobia. From the very beginning of their relationship, Coverdale seems to profess nothing but awe about Zenobia. His description of their first meeting is breathless, a gasping repetition of her name: "Our greetings were hardly concluded, when the door opened, and Zenobia – whom I had never before seen, important was her place in our enterprise – Zenobia entered the parlor" (*BR*, 13). He is so struck by Zenobia that he claims "I can now summon her up like a ghost," and he obsesses especially over the flower she always wears in her hair:

> That flower has stuck deep root into my memory. I can both see it and smell it, at this moment. So brilliant, so rare, so costly as it must have been, and yet enduring only for a day, it was more indicative of the pride and pomp, which had a luxuriant growth in Zenobia's character, than if a great diamond had sparkled among her hair. (*BR*, 15)

This flower, a symbol of Zenobia's sensuality and sexuality, entrances Coverdale, and he mentions it repeatedly throughout the rest of the book. Even after their initial meeting, Coverdale continues to imagine Zenobia. He fantasizes about her sitting for a statue, so that he could look at her without being immodest. He claims that he had

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(Matthiessen, 296). Many have pointed to this moment as an intentionally misleading one.

to "close his eyes" because it was not "the privilege of modesty to gaze at her," but that a sculpture of her, shaped "with the utmost scantiness of drapery," would allow the eye to "chastely be gladdened with her material perfection, in its entireness" (*BR*, 41).

However, though he throughout the novel seems to be taken with Zenobia, in a confessional afterword Coverdale proclaims, "I – I myself – was in love – with – Priscilla!" (*BR*, 228). Priscilla, the same woman that Coverdale hardly gave a second thought to, is supposedly the one he loves. Coverdale seems to agree with Westervelt when he says that "[Priscilla] is one of those delicate, nervous young creatures, not uncommon in New England," the result of "unwholesome food, bad air, lack of out-door exercise, and neglect of bathing," and that "Zenobia... is far the better model of womanhood" (*BR*, 89). And he fails to try and rescue Priscilla from Westervelt, though he knows her to be the Veiled Lady.

This paradox – Coverdale's professed love for Priscilla compared to his obvious obsession with Zenobia – has led many critics to speculate about Coverdale's reason for lying. John Harmon McElroy and Edward L. McDonald suggest that the "anomalies, improbabilities, and series of coincidences," surrounding Coverdale's return to Blithedale suggest that, after manipulating the characters so that he would find Zenobia alone and abandoned, returned hoping to have improved his chances with her. However, they write, she "again scorned his love-making... [so] he lost control of himself and killed her" (McElroy and McDonald, 9). The seemingly out of character declaration of love for Priscilla, then, is part of an attempt in the narrative to hide his crime. Though this explanation seems far-fetched, and unnecessary to

understand the events, Coverdale does, by the end of the book, seem to wish for Zenobia's death. He describes his fantasy as a dream, saying, "I must have fallen asleep, and had a dream, all the circumstances of which utterly vanished at the moment when they converged to some tragical catastrophe, and thus grew too powerful for the thin sphere of slumber that enveloped them" (*BR*, 210). Though he claims that his vision vanished when he awoke, Coverdale nevertheless seems to know when he awakes that something is amiss with Zenobia, and immediately after awaking we see him underneath Hollingsworth's window, rounding up a search party.

When they do find Zenobia, she has drowned herself, and Coverdale seems to take a morbid pleasure in describing the body that he had previously fantasized about:

> Were I to describe the perfect horror of the spectacle, the reader might justly reckon it to me for a sin and shame. For more than twelve long years I have borne it in my memory, and could now reproduce it as freshly as if it were still before my eyes... Her wet garments swathed limbs of terrible inflexibility. She was the marble image of a death agony. Her arms had grown rigid in the act of struggling, and were bent before her, with clenched hands; her knees, too, were bent, and – thank God for it!—in the attitude of prayer. Ah, the rigidity! It seemed... as if her body must keep the same position in the coffin, and that her skeleton would keep it in the grave, and that when Zenobia rose, at the Day of Judgment, it would be in just the same attitude as now! (*BR*, 216-17)

The marble image is a reminder of Coverdale's vision of her as coy, sexualized sculpture. Yet here, the "cold decorum of marble" does not serve justify an illicit gaze, but instead to preserve her in a submissive, almost abject position for eternity. It seems to be her ultimate punishment. Not incidentally, drowning is the same way that Margaret Fuller died, and, writing only two years after her death, Hawthorne must have thought of his friend as he wrote this scene.

By dreaming of Zenobia's death and proclaiming his love for Priscilla, Coverdale replaces Zenobia's power with his own. Zenobia undergoes what Judith Fetterley refers to as the "processes of idealization which serve to disguise hostility" (Fetterley, 47). Like Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms*, Coverdale's over the top descriptions of Zenobia's exoticism and beauty, coupled with a professed love for another, is meant to disguise Coverdale-cum-Hawthorne's true feelings towards her: a mixture of awe and anxiety.

Zenobia is the spirit behind Blithedale, and through most of the story she is the one directing the action – she is the author. Zenobia is the one who tells stories throughout the tale, stories which Coverdale dutifully records in the novel. Nor does Coverdale really affect any of the action. He merely observes as the real agents in the tale – Zenobia, Hollingsworth, Westervelt, and to a certain extent even Priscilla – move the story forward. The most literal example of this is when Coverdale spies on a secret meeting between Zenobia and Westervelt while hidden in a tree. He begins to imagine the way their conversation might play out, and his possible role in the proceedings. But then, he says, "real life never arranges itself exactly like a romance" (Hawthorne, 97). Of course, the story is a romance – just not Coverdale's romance. Coverdale only abandons the role of bystander and assumes authorship once Zenobia is gone. This is why Zenobia's suicide is so unconvincing. Her death is nothing but the start of Coverdale's role as an author, and therefore the end of Zenobia as a compelling character. Zenobia, before killing herself, puts the authorship into Coverdale's hands, telling him "write this ballad, and put your soul's ache into it, and turn your sympathy to good account" (Hawthorne, 206). Coverdale's final declaration

of love for Priscilla cements this, by inserting him into the tangle of lives that made up the story.

The silencing of Zenobia in this narrative is equivalent to Hawthorne's expressed wish to silence Fuller, about whom he said to his wife, "Would that Miss Margaret Fuller might lose her tongue!" (qtd. Kesterson, 66). If, then, Coverdale is understood as a surrogate for Hawthorne, and Zenobia's drowning is a mirroring of Fuller's, then the troubled relationship that Hawthorne had with Fuller, one which has produced so much speculation, can be understood. The death of Zenobia is a result of Hawthorne's anxieties about Fuller, and these anxieties evidence of Hawthorne's concern about voice. Even after Fuller's death, Hawthorne still displayed a fear that Fuller's voice would overshadow his own.

Voice plays a powerful role in James's novel *The Bostonians*, for Verena Tarrant is a natural performer, and her mesmerizing speeches are the pivotal moments of the book. Philip Fisher theorizes *The Bostonians* as a book about "the complex victory brought about by disappearing in public," about creating a private self out of a public persona (Fisher 1999, 144). But Verena's disappearance may only narrowly be labeled a victory. The terms by which she develops a private self are the same terms by which she is induced to perform – in essence, though she is removed from the public sphere, from public scrutiny, she never stops performing.

Verena, like Margaret Fuller and Zenobia before her, has the power of speech. In her first performance, at the start of the novel, Verena captures the attention of everyone in the room, even the skeptical Southerner Basil Ransom. Basil loses track of time as she speaks, and though she only addresses the room for ten minutes, Basil

"counted that her strange, sweet, crude, absurd, enchanting improvisation must have lasted half an hour" (*Bost*, 48). Verena is also tied to Fuller when James refers to her as "a New England Corinna" (*Bost*, 205). This name comes from Madame de Staël's 1807 novel *Corinne*, about an independent but tragic woman of the same name. Fuller read de Staël as a young woman, and was often called the American Corinne by men such as Emerson and W.H. Channing. Kathleen Lawrence claims that "short of actually naming Fuller, there could be no clearer way for James to allude to her than by using this epithet" (Lawrence, 53). Verena fills the role of the powerful woman at the time, the woman who exploded out of the domestic sphere to not only participate in the public world, but to control it, to captivate it.

Verena not only has vocal power, she is in fact characterized in opposition to writing, and writing has a hand in her downfall. Writing destroys Verena's natural talents – after going through Olive's course of study and preparation for her big speech, "inspiration… seemed rather to have faded away" (*Bost* 305). And the moment when Basil finally wins Verena over is also the moment he tells her that he has finally been published. Verena reports to Olive that Basil has proposed marriage, but the conversation that is recorded in the narrative is not about marriage, but instead about Basil's article recently accepted for publication:

> 'They have accepted one of my articles; I think it's the best.' These were the first words that passed Basil Ransom's lips after the pair had withdrawn…
> 'Oh, is it printed – when does it appear?' Verena asked that question instantly; it sprang from her lips in a manner that completely belied the air of keeping herself at a distance from him which she had worn a few moments before. (*Bost* 286)

Hearing that Basil has been published, that he is a writer, is the end to Verena's façade that she will not marry him.

Philip Fisher writes that "the performed self is at so great a distance from the intimate self that hypnotism, dream, trance, the memorization of a role by an actress are all needed to make the distance and the moral peculiarity felt" (Fisher 1999, 146). But the irony of the novel is that when Verena's intimate self is finally formed, that too is a performing self. Fisher says that Verena creates a private self by "small acts of disappearance and invisibility – having secrets, for example, or withholding information" (Fisher 1999, 143). But her private self is only marginally different from her performed self – she is by nature a performer and by creating secrets, namely with her hidden relationship with Basil, she ties herself to him, doomed to perform for him and only him. Her very body is a sign of her nature, which Basil describes as having "an air of being on exhibition, of belonging to a troupe, of living in the gaslight" (*Bost*, 46). When she speaks, it is akin to watching some sort of frivolous entertainment, "as if she had been performing… on the trapeze" (*Bost*, 205). But even when she is not on the stage, she acts in the same way: "She had the same turns and cadences, almost the same gestures, as if she had been on the platform," and she herself admits, "They tell me I speak as I talk, so I suppose I talk as I speak" (*Bost*, 177). In this way, the secret, private self she creates is the same as her public persona – even in private she is performing. And her private meetings with Basil leads to her marriage with the man, who promises that "the dining-table itself shall be our platform, and you shall mount on top of that" (*Bost*, 303).

Though Verena is at her core a performer, she performs not as a result of some personal drive or ideology. She performs instead because of the influence of those around her. Her father, who mesmerizes her for the opening performance, believes that her gift is the result of "some power outside—it seemed to flow through her" (*Bost*, 44). Basil, too, decides that "she didn't know what she meant, she had been stuffed with this trash by her father," and attributes to her "a singular hollowness of character" (*Bost*, 49). Olive is the third to recognize Verena's vulnerability, and it is with her first interaction with her: "this glance that was the beginning; it was with this quick survey, omitting nothing, that Olive took possession of her" (*Bost*, 62). Once Olive pays Verena's parents for the rights to Verena, she gains the authority to influence or direct the girl. In their public life together, it is understood that "Verena's share in these proceedings was not active; she hovered over them, smiling, listening, dropping occasionally a fanciful though never an idle word, like some gently animated image placed there for good omen. It was understood that her part was before the scenes, not behind; that she was not a prompter, but (potentially at least) a 'popular favourite'" (*Bost*, 135). In all of these cases, Verena is the puppet who is animated by whichever influential person has control of her.

Verena's instance is one of a particularly passive performance. Yet many of James's women perform of their own volition. Verena's passivity is brought on in part because of the nature of her performance – the mesmeric speech requires Verena to be not an agent but a vehicle. Yet when James turned his attention to the theatre, his heroine there becomes not a puppet, but an actress.

III

Midway through his career, James began writing for the theatre. The day of the opening of his play *Guy Domville*, Henry James jokingly wrote to his brother William "I am counting on some Psychical intervention from you – this is really the time to show your stuff" (*Letters*, 507). That James might, even in jest, call upon the Spiritual forces of which he was so skeptical to help him that evening is a small sign of how much he had staked on the show. He had turned to theatre somewhat out of desperation after a string of unsuccessful and unpopular novels. After *The Tragic Muse* completed its serialization in the *Atlantic* in 1890, to a tepid reception, James's publishers offered him a much smaller advance for the novel than they had in the past -- £70 instead of his usual £250 (Edel, 363). Frustrated, he decided to try the theatre – not out of any artistic calling, but because he felt that plays might be a better avenue for money. "I have had to try to make somehow or other the money I don't make by literature," he wrote to a friend. "My books don't sell, and it looks as if my plays might. Therefore I am going with a brazen front to write half a dozen" (qtd. Edel, 364). His first play was an adaptation of his novel *The American.* The reviews were mixed, but James was encouraged enough to try again, and he set to work on a much more ambitious play, one that he called *Guy Domville.*

Unfortunately, William James did not answer Henry's plea for psychic assistance, and the drama was a complete failure. The lack of success seemed to be from the unsubtle performances of the actors, and not from some fault of James's text. George Bernard Shaw, at the time early in his career and mostly unknown, wrote that the performers destroyed "all sense and music out of James's lines" (qtd. Edel,

419). The theatre, which Henry had explored extensively in his writings beforehand, proved to be his biggest professional disappointment, and though he continued to use the theatre in his novels, he never returned to the stage himself.

James's turn to the theatre was reflective of his lifelong interest in the dramatic arts, one that continued even after the failure of *Guy Domville*. The James family attended all the important theatre productions of the day, and Henry wrote of the "sacred thrill" attendant there (qtd. Edel, 31). So many of his novels have pivotal scenes take place at the theatre – it is the site of initial meeting between Lambert Strether and Chad Newsome in *The Ambassadors*, of Gilbert Osmond and Lord Warburton in *The Portrait of a Lady*, and of Hyacinth Robinson and Christina Casamassima in *The Princess Casamassima*. In fact, the novel written directly before his doomed foray into the world of drama, *The Tragic Muse*, revolves around an actress, Miriam Rooth, and in Miriam James explored again the space for women on stage as he had done in *The Bostonians* four years earlier.

The Tragic Muse has as its central concern the difference between that which is beautiful, ideal, and spectral – art – and that which is solid, quotidian, useful – politics. The structure of the novel is such that its two doomed couples are formed from a union of politics and art. Peter Sherringham, the diplomat, is desperately in love with Miriam Rooth, the tragic muse of the title, and their relationship is mirrored in that of Nick Dormer and Julia Dallow. In this pair, however, it is Nick, the man, who is the artist, and Julia whose interest lies in politics, though being a woman she must foist her ambition upon her fiancé. The seeming incompatibility of politics and

art mean that neither of these couples ultimately end up together, although the end hints at a possible reconciliation between Nick and Julia.

Nick and Peter are cousins, and though they lie at different ends of the political-artistic spectrum, they get along well enough. Julia and Miriam, however, severely dislike each other, and Miriam is in fact the superficial cause of the dissolution of Julia and Nick's engagement. Despite their differences, though, the two share a core trait – a desire for the public sphere. Miriam's most primitively forceful moment comes early, when she insists upon her destiny as an actress: " 'I will, I will, I will!... I will succeed – I will be great. Of course I know too little, I've seen too little. But I've always liked it; I've never liked anything else…' She went on, communicative, persuasive, familiar, egotistical (as was necessary), and slightly common" (*TM*, 810). This is Miriam at her most artless – Sherringham calls her "something of a brute" (*TM*, 800) – and yet by the end of the novel, through sheer force of will, Miriam has transformed herself into the most charismatic of performers.

Julia's political ambitions are described in decidedly theatrical terms, as well. "Must you *always* live in public?" Nick asks her, and later he tells her, "you must have so many things, so many people, so much *mise-en-scène* and such a perpetual spectacle to live" (*TM*, 887, 964). Julia wants for him to play the part of politician in her stead, but in doing so – attending political dinner parties and the like – Nick claims to feel like a "humbug," or worse:

> I've imperiled my immortal soul, or at least I've bemuddled my intelligence, by all the things I don't care for that I've tried to do, and all the things I detest that I've tried to be, and all the things I never can be that I've tried to look as if I were – all the appearances and imitation, the pretences and hypocrisies in which I've steeped myself to the eyes; and at

> the end of it (it serves me right!) my reward is simply to learn that I'm still not half humbug enough! (*TM* 963)

For Nick, the performance of a role is hypocrisy. There is no art in it, and it is in fact what stands in the way of his artistic goals. In order to come into his own as a painter, he must quit being the "humbug" who wears a mask, plays a role, and be instead only his natural self. The stakes are so high for Nick, that after abandoning his seat in the House of Commons, he reflects that he "was more in possession of his soul" (*TM*, 969).

If Julia wants to put her partner on the stage before she will marry him, Peter Sherringham wants the exact opposite – to stop Miriam from acting before they can be wed. After Miriam, perhaps, Sherringham is the character with the greatest passion for the theatre. Yet he admits that it is a hobby, and no more: "It's an amusement like any other: I don't pretend to call it by any exalted name" (*TM*, 756). Nonetheless, it is a consuming hobby, and it is Sherringham who fosters Miriam's talent when no one else would. Her first performance is not promising: the recitation of lines from the play *L'Aventurière* are delivered with "a long, strong colourless voice…a rude monotony… an effort at modulation which was not altogether successful" (*TM*, 788). In fact, Sherringham is not initially interested in her potential for performance, but instead with her striking features: "I don't know what's in her," he wonders to himself, "nothing, it would seem, from her persistent vacancy. But such a face as that, such a head, is a fortune!" (*TM*, 787). Without a performance, he assumes her to be empty, void of an animating spirit. And her ostensible performance from the play does little to change that impression. It is only afterwards, when she speaks to him in private, that he begins to be, somehow, interested. She chastises him for not admitting

that her performance was awful, and then he realizes: "her voice had a quality, as she uttered these words, which made him exclaim, 'Every now and then you say something – !'... She had begun to touch him, to seem different: he was glad she had not gone" (*TM* 810). She is magnetic in person, and her eventual success on stage lies in her bringing that charisma which she naturally commands in private to the public sphere.

This dynamic results in the fact that the characters of the book have an enormously difficult time of telling when Miriam is acting and when she is not – that is, if she ever ceases to perform. Sherringham realizes that:

> so far from there being any question of her having the histrionic nature, she simply had it in such perfection that she was always acting; that her existence was a series of parts assumed for the moment, each changed for the next, before the perpetual mirror of some curiosity or admiration or wonder – some spectatorship that she perceived or imagined in the people about her. (*TM*, 831)

Towards the end of the novel Sherringham returns to his initial idea of Miriam as a void – "that idea of her having no character of her own" – and realizes "this was a disadvantage she was so exempt from... Her character was simply to hold you by the particular spell; any other – the good nature of home, the relation to her mother, her friends, her lovers, her debts, the practice of virtues or industries or vices – was not worth speaking of" (*TM*, 1038). Above and beyond everything else, Miriam's foremost trait, and that which attracts Sherringham to her, is that she is deeply a performer. John Carlos Rowe notes that readers have criticized her "relative 'blankness as a central character" and that "Miriam is presented to us primarily as she is seen by others" (Rowe 1998, 77). Yet this depiction is fitting for a character whose most notable aspect is the manner in which she affects those around her.

Rowe writes that "Miriam Rooth is James's most successful and emancipated feminine character… [triumphing] over every character and circumstance that would have misled or doomed any other heroine in Henry James's writings" (Rowe 1998, 76). This seems to be especially the case when compared to *The Bostonians*'s Verena, who, though in such a similar position, ends trapped in an unhappy marriage, while Miriam marries instead to further her career. *The Tragic Muse* can in many ways be seen as a companion novel for *The Bostonians*. Both take as their central concern the place of women in the public sphere. Yet they arrive at drastically different resolutions.

Miriam and Verena are mirrored characters, often described in almost the exact same words. Like Verena, the sound of Miriam's voice as she performs is especially captivating to the men listening – more so that anything she actually says. The aesthete Gabriel Nash has a poor opinion of the theatre – "What can you do with a character, with an idea, with a feeling, between dinner and the suburban trains?' he asks. "What crudity compared with what the novelist does!" (*TM*, 748). Nevertheless, he too is drawn to Miriam, and comes to watch her "simply to treat his ear to the sound (the richest then to be heard on earth, as he maintained) issuing from Miriam's lips. Its richness was quite independent of the words she might pronounce or the poor fable they might subserve" (*TM*, 1055).

The men in both the books, as well, are aware of the danger that the age of publicity holds for such naturally captivating performers as Verena and Miriam. Verena's Basil makes his case for her abandoning the stage by saying that he doesn't want her voice "raised to a scream; not forced and cracked and ruined" (*Bost*, 75). In

The Tragic Muse, there is a fear that Miriam's voice will "crack" as well, but in that book the possible ruin of Miriam the performer may be a type of entertainment, too. James paints a vivid image of Gabriel Nash's imagined picture of Miriam's downfall by means of "the modernness of the age," writing:

> You might have thought he would loathe that modernness; but he had a brilliant, amused, amusing vision of it, saw it as something huge and ornamentally vulgar. Its vulgarity would rise to the grand style, like that of a London railway station, and Miriam's publicity would be as big as the globe itself. All the machinery was ready, the platform laid; the facilities, the wires and bells and trumpets, the colossal deafening newspaperism of the period – its most distinctive sign – were waiting for her, their predestined mistress, to press her foot on the spring and set them all in motion... Regardless of expense the spectacle would be and thrilling, though somewhat monotonous, the drama – a drama more bustling than any she would put on the stage and a spectacle that would beat everything for scenery. In the end her divine voice would crack, screaming to foreign ears and antipodal barbarians... Then she would be at the fine climax of life and glory, still young and insatiate, but already coarse, hard, and raddled... It would be curious and magnificent and grotesque. (*TM*, 1092)

The entertainment, for Nash at least, comes not from Miriam's performance on stage, but her meta-performance of disintegration and disaster. This is the public life which James would later come out so forcefully against in *The Speech and Manners of American Women*, the taint of "gaslight" that follows Verena Tarrant around. The public sphere, the newspaperism represented elsewhere by Matthias Pardon and Henrietta Stackpole, the burgeoning celebrity culture – all posed a threat to the modern woman[9]. But ironically, it is Miriam, the public persona, who ends her story

[9] In many of his novellas and short stories of this period, such as *The Reverberator*, the novella immediately preceding *The Tragic Muse*, James worries over the threats to writers such as himself from this rampant age of publicity. A more thorough treatment of this subject can be found in Richard Salmon's *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity* and *Muse in the Machine: American Fiction and Mass Publicity* by Mark Conroy.

successfully, not trapped in a loveless marriage like the woman who gives up the stage.

Though they seem to have so much in common, and face so many of the same dangers, Rowe is right in that while Verena exits *The Bostonians* in tears, Miriam leaves her novel in a moment of triumph. Miriam's final performance of the novel – that of Juliet – is indeed much discussed by the town and its newspapers. But instead of being manhandled by the "deafening newspaperism," Miriam controls the crowd and the talk, and her great success is of her own doing. Miriam's Juliet is "an exquisite image of young passion and young despair, expressed in the divinest, truest music that had ever poured from tragic lips." She holds the audience in her sway, who "expanded before her like a lap to catch flowers." And Miriam above all receives James's highest compliment: her "great night marked an era in contemporary art, and that for those who had a spectator's share in it the word 'triumph' acquired a new illustration" (*TM*, 1248).

Verena never reaches the stage for her ultimate performance, giving in to Basil at the last minute, giving up the stage and instead living a life in the domestic sphere. Miriam, too, is confronted with the prospects of a marriage that may remove her from the stage, but unlike Verena she holds her own against her suitor. Peter Sherringham asks Miriam, repeatedly, to marry him and leave the theatre. The irony, of course, is that what originally attracts Peter to Miriam is her stage persona, and it is an irony that Miriam is fully aware of. Sherringham invites her to "quietly marry me," and become an ambassador's wife. "The stage is great, no doubt," he tells her, "but the world is greater. It's a bigger theatre than any of those places in the Strand."

Miriam, with faux modesty, replies, "I'm a magnificent creature on the stage – well and good; it's what I want to be and it's charming to see such evidence that I succeed. But off the stage – come, come: I should lose all my advantages" (*TM*, 1189). For, as Sherringham realizes, though Miriam is magnificent both on and off stage, the platform is where she is at her finest – as he says, "she was almost as natural off the stage as on" (*TM*, 947). Sherringham, like Basil, wants Miriam to shine solely in the walls of the home – "You were never finer than at this minute, in the deepest domesticity of private life," he tells her (*TM*, 1191). Yet Miriam turns the tables on Sherringham, inviting him to "stay on *my* stage; come off your own" (*TM*, 1190). Reminding him of the importance that he placed on art, and his initial encouragement of her career, she believes he should be proud to give up his middling career and be the husband of a successful actress. Of course, Sherringham doesn't see things that way.

Though Miriam escapes a stifling marriage like the one Verena finds herself in at the end of *The Bostonians*, Miriam does end up married to her own Basil – Basil Dashwood. John Carlos Rowe comments that Dashwood's name is "either a comment on his fast modern lifestyle or an allusion to the English literary tradition" (Rowe 1998, 87). In addition to the ramifications of his surname, however, Basil's given name must be a sort of ironic reflection on Basil Ransom. But unlike Ransom's marriage to Verena, in which he totally controls her, in Dashwood and Miriam's relationship, Miriam has all the control. In many cases Dashwood seems more or less like an afterthought – James writes that "Miriam let Dashwood talk only to contradict him, and contradicted him only to show how indifferently she could do it" (*TM*,

1219). The marriage is also advantageous to Miriam's career, as Dashwood takes over the business side of her career, setting up a theatre where she can perform the parts she chooses.

However, like with so many of James's heroines, Miriam Rooth can be seen not just as an answer to his earlier creation, but also as a reflection from Hawthorne, a parallel to that writer's own Miriam of *The Marble Faun.* Both characters share outward characteristics: in addition to their name, both are charismatic women of vaguely Jewish extract. But structurally, what draws them together is that they both appear, in their respective novels, as works of art.

Miriam Rooth is painted by Nick, and the image, though stunning, is presented as a triumph of the artist, not the model:

> Unfinished, simplified, and in some portions merely suggested, it was strong, brilliant and vivid and had already the look or life and the air of an original thing. Sherringham was startled, he was strangely affected – he had no idea Nick moved with that stride… She had a grand appearance of being raised aloft, with a wide regard, from a height of intelligence, for the great field of the artist, all the figures and passions he may represent. Peter wondered where his kinsman had learned to paint like that. He almost gasped at the composition of the thing, at the drawing of the moulded arms. (*TM*, 1035)

Miriam's career as an actress is presented in stark opposition to her work as an artist's model. The few times, if they are to be found, when Miriam is not acting, she is instead presented as an image for portraiture. During her first appearance at Madame Carré's salon, Miriam's recitation is disastrous, yet all the attendees come away with the feeling that she would make a wonderful artist's model. "You must paint her just like that," Peter tells his cousin (*TM*, 788). And during a spare interval at one of Miriam's first professional performance, Nash goes around back to tell her "You have

stopped acting, you have reduced it to the least that will do, you simply *are*—you are just the visible image, the picture on the wall. It keeps you wonderfully in focus. I have never seen you so beautiful" (*TM*, 994).

Miriam of *The Marble Faun* also has a portrait in the book, but hers is a self-portrait, and thus reflects her own power. Showing the portrait to Donatello, the ekphrastic passage can do little to convey the beauty of the work:

> Reversing the position [of the canvas], there appeared the portrait of a beautiful woman, such as one sees only two or three, if even so many, in all a lifetime; so beautiful, that she seemed to get into your consciousness and memory, and could never afterwards be shut out, but haunted your dreams, for pleasure or for pain; holding your inner realm as a conquered territory, though without deigning to make herself at home there… Gazing at this portrait, you saw what Rachel might have been, when Jacob deemed her worth the wooing seven years and seven more; or perchance she might ripen to be what Judith was, when she vanquished Holofernes with her beauty and slew him for too much adoring it. (*MF*, 48).

Her actual appearance cannot be described, only its effect, and the closest the passage gets to a description of her physical beauty is through comparisons to the beauties of biblical legend. Miriam, like Zenobia, is often considered to be a portrait of Margaret Fuller, though there are other women who may have played a role in her conception as well – the sculptor Louisa Lander, a contemporary of Hawthorne's and even the Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi are also possible models. Nevertheless, Miriam, like Fuller herself, is a charismatic and even haunting presence, yet her magnetism is not conveyed through a bodily propinquity, but instead through the artistic rendering of her image. Hawthorne, writing as the narrator of the book itself, acknowledges this effect, saying "we forbore to speak descriptively of Miriam's

beauty earlier in our narrative, because we foresaw this occasion to bring it perhaps more forcibly before the reader" (*MF*, 48-9).

The framing of both Miriams as works of art is part of a larger trope that appears in both Hawthorne's and James's novels. The *tableau vivant* is a key trope in many of Hawthorne's novels: the three scenes at the scaffold in *The Scarlet Letter* are his most famous use of the effect, but it appears in others, as well. When Coverdale first returns to Blithedale, he first encounters Zenobia directing a *tableau vivant*, the appearance of which is so ridiculous he cannot help but burst into laughter. Zenobia is someone whose presence, Coverdale reflects, "caused our heroic enterprise to show like an illusion, a masquerade, a pastoral, a counterfeit Arcadia" (Hawthorne, 21). Peter Bellis writes that the project at Blithedale is ultimately made to seem "*merely* theatrical, insubstantial, and unreal" (Bellis, 12). The *tableau vivant* literally presents life at Blithedale as a falsity.

James took Hawthorne's interest in the *tableau vivant* and expanded it. F.O. Matthiessen articulated the difference in the pair's treatment of the scene, writing:

> the fact would remain, at least to eyes as acute as James's, that Hawthorne had gained picturesque arrangement but not dynamic composition, that he had hardly show himself more concerned in his writing than when he had looked at pictures, with anything except the sentiment which the artist had wanted to express… [James's] sense of the inadequacy of Hawthorne's loosely finished sketches could again have furnished the stimulus for his reiterated imperative to himself, 'Dramatize, dramatize.' (Matthiessen, 301)

Instead of being presented as images and nothing more, these scenes in James's novels – such as when Strether spies the boat carrying Madame de Vionnet and Chad in *The Ambassadors* – become "worked into a climax of his action" (Matthiessen, 301).

James moves beyond Hawthorne's interest in the plastic arts, and into a depiction of theatrical art. It is this theatre which houses his heroines' performances and, just as Hawthorne's pictoral scenes are removed from the artist's studio and situated instead in the world at large, James's drama is removed from the stage and left to unfold in the private sphere. Many of his heroine's most affecting performances do not take place on the stage at all, but instead inside the home.

IV

The disassociation of performance with the stage is one of the hallmarks of post-structuralist and queer theories of theatricality, and many of James's depictions of the female performer demonstrate this.

In many of the works of Fuller, Hawthorne, and James, the opposition between the written and spoken word is central. Fuller struggled to reconcile, in her writings, the contrast between her prowess as a speaker and what she viewed as her comparatively lacking skills as a writer, and her contemporaries agreed. Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* relates the curious relationship between Zenobia, the consummate speaker and performer, and Coverdale, the poet who produces the written record of Zenobia's tales. And in James's *The Bostonians*, the naively pure and powerful speaker Verena serves as the locus of the conflict between Olive and Basil, both of whom try to influence her through the written word – Olive by reading with Verena and helping to write the speeches she gives, and Basil by writing and publishing his own contradictory political views.

Another way of reading this opposition is as one between performance and text. Barthes wrote of theatricality that it was "theatre-minus-text,"—

> "a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument… that ecumenical perception of sensuous artifice – gesture, tone, distance, substance, light – which submerges the text beneath the profusion of its external language." (Barthes, 26)

In this formulation, theatre – staged theatre – is a combination of two opposing forms: the text upon which the performance is based, and the "theatricality" which subsumes and overwhelms that text. This theatricality is the term for the performative aspects of the theatre – those aspects of the theatre which are demonstrative, vocal and physical.

One of the first critics to seize upon performance as a paradigm for the exploration of fields other than drama was J.L. Austin. Austin's formulation of performative "utterances," statements which enact the condition they describe – such as the words "I do" in the marriage ceremony – became a jumping off point for many modern critics[10].

The one category of utterances that Austin does not take into account are those that we might think of as most naturally performative – those said on stage. It is this exclusion which most interested Jacques Derrida. Of this class of utterances, Austin wrote:

> A performative utterance will, for example, be *in a particular way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance – a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. All this we are *excluding* from consideration. (Austin, 22)

Austin removes performativity from the context of the stage because the actor is not endowed with the power to enact what he or she states in the way a bride or groom can legally create a marriage, under certain circumstances, by saying "I do." In his

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[10] Austin contrasts performative utterances with constative ones, statements which are either true or false depending on the situation. However, the line between a performative and a constative utterance eventually becomes blurred, and the two are shown to be virtually indistinguishable. Austin begins with a list of "performative verbs": to order, to declare, etc. He eventually concedes that an utterance may be performative even if it does not have one of these telling verbs, and that each utterance must be considered on a case-by-case basis. Finally, Austin must admit that even a so-called constative statement may be performative, wherein one performs the act of describing or affirming. This eventual indistinguishability between the constative and the performative is one reason many of the post-structuralists were drawn to Austin's theory of the performative, in which they found a fitting description for the logic under which literary language worked.

essay "Signature Event Context," Derrida deconstructs this division, writing, "For, ultimately, isn't it true that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, 'non-serious,' *citation* (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality – or rather, a general iterability – without which there would not even be a 'successful performative?" (Derrida, 17). By iterability, Derrida means the ability to repeat an utterance in any context and have it still be meaningful. But Austin's theory relies heavily on context – a potentially performative utterance made outside the boundaries of the laws governing that utterance (saying "I now pronounce you man and wife" on stage, when you are not in fact a minister, for instance) is infelicitous. A performative, therefore, is just one instance of an iterable statement which happens to be in the "correct" context. A "non-serious" utterance, therefore, is not the "parasitic" relative of the truly performative utterance, but instead one example of a generally iterable statement.

If post-structuralists were most interested in Austin's separation of the performative from performance, queer theorists were struck by Austin's primary example of the performative statement: "I do." The centrality of this statement to Austin's paradigm reinforces the importance of his heteronormative mindset, something which later critics deconstructed. Judith Butler's foundational work *Gender Trouble* describes gender as "*a corporeal style*, and 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (Butler 1990, 177). This performance is lifelong, and the traditional cry welcoming a baby into the world – "It's a girl!" or "It's a boy"

– is not a constative utterance, but the first of many performative utterances which will identify the child throughout its life (Butler 1993, 232).

If Austin's performative utterance works hand in hand with the forces of heteronormativity, then that which he excludes, the theatrical or poetic utterance, is by comparison a queer utterance. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick note, in Austin's denunciation of staged utterances the

> pervasiveness with which the excluded theatrical is hereby linked with the perverted, the artificial, the unnatural, the abnormal, the decadent, the effete, the diseased... [for Austin], theatricality would be inseparable from a normatively homophobic thematics of the "peculiar," "anomalous, exceptional, 'nonserious.'" (Parker and Sedgwick, 5)

Parker and Sedgwick decouple the heterosexual performative and the queer performance by noting the theatrical aspect of that most heterosexual of institutions, the marriage. "Like a play, marriage exists in and for the eyes of others" (Parker and Sedgwick, 11). As an example, they remind the reader of the countless novels of the Victorian age in which the climax of the marriage plot comes "not in the moment of adultery, but in the moment when the proscenium arch of the marriage is, however excruciatingly, displaced: when the fact of a marriage's unhappiness ceases to be a pseudosecret or an open secret, and becomes a bond of mutuality with someone outside the marriage" (Parker and Sedgwick, 11). We will see this theatrical scene of a marriage gone wrong again later.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also addresses the issue of the performative as a tool of power. She replaces the central utterance "I do," with one she describes as "unsanitizably redolent of that long Babylonian exile known as queer childhood," – "Shame on you" (Sedgwick, 4). The phrase "shame on you" is not only a

performative utterance – by saying it, one causes another person to feel ashamed – but shame itself is a paradoxically performative emotion. Shame is characterized physically by "the 'fallen face' with eyes down and head averted – and to a lesser extent the blush," and these "semaphores of trouble" are broadcast even in the midst of an attempt to hide (Sedgwick, 5). Thus, "shame is the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality" (Sedgwick, 6). Sedgwick explores this aspect of shame in Henry James's Prefaces to the New York Edition of his work. The New York Edition collected most of his writings, chosen by James himself, each work for which he wrote a preface reflecting on his relationship to the novel years later. For Sedgwick, these prefaces enact "two different circuits of the hyperbolic narcissism/shame orbit... and in volatile relation to each other" (Sedgwick, 7)[11]. In reflecting upon the humiliations of his past – including his disastrous attempt at writing for the theatre – James's shame is dramatized both as a relationship between him and his audience of readers, but also between his present and past selves.

Poststructuralist critics, as enumerated above, have dismantled the division between the stage and the rest of the world, showing how performance is a pervasive aspect of quotidian life. Sue-Ellen Case has shown how this was an apparent reality for women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: "Since women have generally been confined to the domestic domain and denied admittance to the public arena, their

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[11] Sedgwick is of course ultimately interested in James as a gay artist. This is an issue too complex to address at length here, but interested readers are directed to Sedgwick's book *The Epistemology of the Closet*, where she reads homosexuality into the lack of male desire for women in James's fiction, as well as to Sheldon Novick's controversial revisionist biography, *Henry James: The Young Master*.

performance space has often been within their houses." For upper-class women, this space was often the salon, the site of most of their social interactions. Case elaborates on the theatre of the salon, writing:

> The audience was composed not of consumers who paid for admittance, of strangers who came to listen to the removed dialogue of the traditional theatre, but of personal friends and interesting acquaintances, who came specifically to engage in social dialogue with one another... The women who rand the salons played all the parts involved in theatrical production: the playwright (in conversation), the director (in casting the production by creating the guest lists, helping create the scenes by making the introductions, setting the pace by actively keeping the conversation going), the actor, the set-designer (in decorating the home, deciding the menu, choosing the room for the evening) and the costume-designer (in setting the fashion and formality of the dress code). (Case, 46-7)

For upper-class women, performance necessarily took place in the private sphere, the only area made available to them.

This is the nature of the performance undertaken by the women in *The Portrait of a Lady*. The pursuit of Isabel Archer is from the start treated as entertainment by her cousin, Ralph. He tells her that he is pleased when she turns down the proposal of a wealthy neighbor, because "I shall have the thrill of seeing what a young lady does who won't marry Lord Warburton... Ah, there will be plenty of spectators! We shall hang on the rest of your career" (*PL*, 137)[12]. And when Ralph persuades his father to leave Isabel money in order to help her "career," his father remarks "You speak as if it were for your mere amusement," to which Ralph replies, "So it is, a good deal" (*PL*, 165). Her life in Europe is set up as an act, a comedy, for which Ralph is the audience. But though Isabel is positioned as an actress, thrust on

[12] Alfred Habegger reads this marriage plot as a retelling of the common orphan-heroine story found in popular women's fiction at the time (Habegger, 153).

stage by her huge inheritance, she still has some level of control – she is writing her own lines.

But once she marries Osmond, her performance becomes drastically different – the stakes become much higher. No longer simply entertainment for Ralph, the question of Isabel's marriage becomes "what kept Ralph alive… This was only the first act of the drama, and he was determined to sit out the performance" (*PL*, 339). The nature of her performance changes as well. Where before her natural self was what was entertaining, after her marriage she is referred to again and again as wearing a mask – she pretends to be the happy wife she knows she should be. Ralph laments that "for him she would always wear a mask… There was something fixed and mechanical painted on it; this was not an expression, Ralph said – it was representation, it was even an advertisement"[13] (*PL*, 336). Her mask is that of a contented wife and prominent society member – as Ralph says, "She's the most visibly happy woman I know" (*PL*, 424). Tessa Hadley believes that Isabel's performance is a failure, and writes:

> there is some comedy, too, in Isabel's believing she keeps the secret of her unhappiness of effectively. She proclaims it in fact at every pore, surely, for anyone attuned to her (for example when she replies to Lord Warburton's remarking her husband must be very clever that he "has a genius for upholstery"): not because she wants to be pitied, or even because she wants them to know, but simply because she does not have the faculty of pretence. (Hadley, 28)

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[13] Richard Salmon deals with the question of advertising in *The Ambassadors* in his book *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity*. The profession that Chad eventually settles on, advertising is made to seem especially vulgar in that novel because of its association with the "small, trivial, rather ridiculous object" that the Newsomes manufacture.

Whether or not Isabel succeeds in convincing those around her of the happiness of her marriage is not the point, for the real issue is the fact that she feels the need to put on any type of act at all. Yet the idea that Isabel does not have the "faculty of pretence" is faulty. Like the rest of James's heroines, Isabel has a performed self, and for Isabel, the performed self is at great remove from her natural persona.

Isabel removes the mask only a few times through the book. With the exception of for her husband, the times when she does so are when she seems most affectless. When she finally admits to Ralph, as he is dying, the problems between her and her husband, Ralph can "hardly tell what her tone meant; it was so strangely deliberate – apparently so void of emotion" (*PL*, 427). And to Henrietta, too, when she confesses she does so "very mildly" (*PL*, 415). Both times, the admission of her true feelings, her true self, is done in the least performative manner. When she is being honest, her speech is devoid of any type of act. Just as Verena is a void who is filled with the influence of others, inspired to perform, Isabel, stripped of the marriage performance, is without character – she is blank. Strangely, this is the moment that Sedgwick and Parker single out as the most theatrical in novels of the period, where the sham marriage is revealed. And though these instances compose the climax of *The Portrait of a Lady*, they are lacking the performative nature that characterizes Isabel elsewhere.

Henrietta is the first to hear from Isabel about the unfortunate conditions of her marriage, and the reason that Isabel reveals her secret is because "[Henrietta] was a woman, she was a sister; she was not Ralph, nor Lord Warburton, nor Caspar

Goodwood, and Isabel could speak" (*PL*, 415). This suggests that Isabel's performance, and the performance of women in general, is forced upon them by the surrounding men. Not just the cruel, controlling men, but the presence of men in general. It is the very opposition of the two genders that forces the performance, and without it – in the company of only sisters – it wouldn't be necessary.

Of course in Isabel's case there is a man forcing her to act, though she acts only for those outside of the marriage, and not for her husband. After Isabel realizes that Osmond would like for her to have nothing but the mask, "nothing of her own but her pretty appearance," she realizes that "she was, after all, herself… now there was no use pretending, wearing a mask or a dress, for he knew her and had made up his mind" (*PL*, 363-6). Osmond tells Isabel at the beginning of their courtship that "one ought to make one's life a work of art," and Isabel's performance is a part of that, akin to Basil's idea of Verena as a "moving statue" (*PL*, 266; *Bost*, 47). And so Isabel continues to play the part she knows her husband wants, even if he is disappointed in not being able to rid Isabel of the one fault he finds in her – "too many ideas" (*PL*, 249).

But even if Osmond can't make a puppet out of Isabel, he can his daughter. Pansy is "a passive spectator of the operation of her fate," a "sheet of blank paper," and has "neither art, nor guile, nor temper, nor talent… no will, no power to resist, no sense of her own importance" (*PL*, 207, 243, 273). Osmond controls Pansy in such a way that he can dictate her every move. This seems to result in a strange *lack* of performance – in turning Pansy into a puppet, Osmond seems to rid her of everything individual, and she becomes empty, wooden. We are told "if at nineteen Pansy had

become a young lady she doesn't really fill out the part, that if she has grown very pretty she lacks in a deplorable degree the quality known and esteemed in the appearance of females as style; and that if she is dressed with great freshness she wears her smart attire with an undisguised appearance of saving it – very much as if it were lent her for the occasion... [Her style] was not modern, it was not conscious, it would produce no impression on Broadway" (*PL*, 317) This is the exact opposite of Isabel, a woman who cannot help but impress everyone she meets, such as when, upon first meeting her, Ralph says that, though she is "very pretty indeed," it's her "general air of being someone in particular that strikes me. Who is this rare creature, and what is she?" (*PL*, 48). Where Isabel is arresting in spite of her beauty, Pansy is of interest only because of it. Pansy's suitor notes these qualities, but takes them to be charms, instead, a sign that she is old fashioned: "He was sure Pansy had never looked at a newspaper and that, in the way of novels, if she had read Sir Walter Scott it was the very most... She would be frank and gay, and yet would not have walked alone, nor have received letters from men, nor have been taken to the theatre to see the comedy of manners" (*PL*, 317). Osmond, her father, agrees, saying that "there seems to me something enchantingly innocent in [Pansy]; it's the way I like her to be." Isabel is struck by "Osmond's artistic, the plastic view, as it somehow appeared, of Pansy's innocence" (*PL*, 304). Pansy is praised not for a moral innocence, a lack of experience, but by an innocence created by a lack of depth – she appears to be all surface. But this is just the appearance, and though Pansy is a near perfect actress, that is her tragedy – that it is an act. Isabel guesses this when she reflects on Pansy's obedience: "What a teaching she had had, it seemed to suggest – or what penalties for

non-performance she dreaded!" (*PL*, 305). And Pansy, too, like Isabel, lets her guard down. At the end of the novel, as Isabel leaves her in the convent where she has been abandoned by her father, Pansy blurts out "I don't like Madame Merle!" This statement stands for all the displeasure Pansy has had, and it is the first thing in opposition to her father she has stated through the whole book. But Isabel, taking her tone from Osmond, tells her never to say such a thing again. In response to this, "Pansy looked at her in wonder; but wonder with Pansy had never been a reason for non-compliance. 'I never will again,' she said with exquisite gentleness" (*PL*, 472). So Pansy, despite evidence that she is not simply the blank page she seems to be, concedes to the wishes of her father and probably dooms herself to the convent.

If Osmond hates Isabel as an uncontrollable woman, and banishes Pansy when she, too, threatens to act against his wishes, the one woman who he doesn't attempt to control is Madame Merle. In many ways Merle seems to be the consummate actress. Madame Merle plays her role perfectly – perhaps too perfectly, as Isabel thinks when she reflects that if Merle

> had a fault it was that she was not natural; by which the girl meant, not that she was either affected or pretentious, since from these vulgar vices no woman could have been more exempt, but that her nature had been too much overlaid by custom and her angles too much rubbed away. She had become too flexible, too useful, was too ripe and too final. (*PL*, 171)

In excelling in her act, Merle has lost whatever authentic parts of herself might have remained. This overreaching in her acting is what destroys her. She gradually loses her social connections as she manipulates them, as when Mrs. Touchett becomes finally fed up with her, proclaiming, "I knew she could play any part; but I understood that she played them one by one I didn't understand that she would play

two at the same time" (*PL*, 289). There is no way for the women to win – either they do not act well enough, and end up in a loveless marriage or in a convent, or they act so well that they lose all their friends and, like Merle, leave the country.

The one woman in the book who does not seem to fit this mold is Henrietta Stackpole. The seeming opposite of the role that Osmond creates for Pansy and forces on Isabel, Henrietta is the source of much disdain throughout the novel. Osmond complains to Isabel about her, saying, "Miss Stackpole, however, is your most wonderful invention. She strikes me as a kind of monster… You know I never have admitted that she's a woman… I don't see her, but I hear her; I hear her all day long. Her voice is in my ears; I can't get rid of it" (*PL*, 417). Independent and counter to Osmond's ideas about his women, Henrietta is unwomanly. But her voice is also inescapable, and in this way Henrietta's performance of femininity overshadows the other women. Osmond's view of Henrietta is unhesitatingly negative, but James also seems to treat her at best mockingly. Of her he writes: "Altogether, with her meager knowledge, her inflated ideals, her confidence at once innocent and dogmatic, her temper at once exacting and indulgent, her mixture of curiosity and fastidiousness, of vivacity and indifference… she would be an easy victim of scientific criticism if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant" (*PL*, 56). In the world of the novel, Henrietta is sympathetic because she is aligned with Isabel in opposition to Osmond. But disregarding that, Henrietta is a source of humor, a character to be mocked.

In *The Speech and Manners of American Women*, a series of essays published by James in *Harper's Bazaar*, a women's magazine, from 1906-7, James laments the

type of woman that Henrietta represents and champions. James congratulates American women on their "success… for what is success, at this time of day and in the conditions I refer to, but to be a public as possible?" This publicity, created by journalists such as Henrietta – though James snidely writes "taking the term [journalism] in its largest sense" – makes the American woman a celebrity by "[trumpeting], in its brazen voice, from sea to sea, every motion she makes, every step she takes, every dress she wears, every friend she visits or receives, the color of her hair, the number of her gloves, the names of her lap-dogs, the parties to her flirtations and matrimonial engagements; and so on from the cradle to the grave" (*SMAW*, 15). The world's a stage, the women merely players. The problem with this, for James, is not that performance, but the fact that the women take center stage. James pinpoints this as a distinctly American problem, writing that "in societies other than ours the male privilege of correction springs, and quite logically, from the social fact that the male is the member of society primarily acting and administering and primarily listened to – whereby his education, his speech, his tone, his standards and connections, his general 'competence,' as I have called it, color the whole air" (*SMAW*, 10). The American women, in a way, drown out the men, so that women become central at their expense. James, like Osmond with Henrietta, hears the American woman everywhere: her voice is "enjoying immense exercise, is lifted in many causes, but the last it anywhere pleads is that of its own casual interest or charm" (*SMAW*, 25). By this, James means that the woman's voice used for public causes loses the pleasure it gives when used privately – the American women are doing themselves no favors.

Like *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Princess Casamassima* does not explicitly deal with performance. In fact, its milieu of lower class secret societies, with aristocrats who avoid the social scene, and professionals who play in the orchestral pit, but not on stage, seems to be almost the opposite of the performative world of *The Bostonians* or *The Tragic Muse*. Yet the novel, like *The Portrait of a Lady*, explores the performance that happens in private worlds.

The novel's women represent the generational shift in the feminine public role. Miss Pynsent, Hyacinth's adoptive mother, works as a seamstress, a traditional domestic art which she can accomplish from the home. In contrast, the girl the Hyacinth grew up with, Millicent Henning, works in the fashionable shops of the city, selling outfits, and at one point reflects on her "good fortune" at not having to work at home like Miss Pynsent, but instead in "a more exciting, more *dramatic*, department of the dressmaking business" (*PC*, 93, emphasis my own). Millicent is involved in creating the material performance of the bourgeois, and thus becomes to symbolize the performance itself. Miss Pynsent notes, when first encountering her as an adult, that she seems "a public performer of some kind, a ballad singer or a conjurer," and refers to her as "the hussy" (*PC*, 98).

While Miss Pynsent and Millicent, in their disparate ways, are occupied with outfitting performance on the stage of London, Hyacinth's occupation deals with the interior life. As a bookbinder, he decorates the objects that will line the walls inside a moneyed person's home, not something that can be promenaded in a public display of wealth. His craft also handles the written language, which, as in *The Bostonians*, may

be the opposite of feminine performance. Never the less, Hyacinth may be the most susceptible to the dramatic performance of any character in the book.

Hyacinth's father figure, Mr. Vetch, works in the theatre, and Vetch imbues him with an awe of the dramatic stage early in life. Mr. Vetch arranges for Hyacinth to attend a performance, and Hyacinth becomes immediately attached, realizing that there are things "it would be his fate never to see enough, and one of them was the wonder-world illuminated by those playhouse lamps" (*PC*, 66). This early wonder persists, and no one could "be more friendly to the dramatic illusion" than Hyacinth (*PC*, 178).

This susceptibility to the theatrical helps in part to explain Hyacinth's instant attraction to the Princess Casamassima. The princess, like so many of James's heroines, produces an immediate, arresting affect on her viewer, so startling to Hyacinth that he wonders "whether she were not altogether of some different substance from the humanity he had hitherto known. She might be divine" (*PC*, 192). She is a woman who inspires one admirer to confide to Hyacinth that "there is only one thing I care for in life: to have a look at that woman when I can..." (*PC*, 345). Yet just as much as her beauty, a different aspect of the princess impresses Hyacinth: the theatricality with which she imbues her sphere. The night he firsts meets her in the box at the theatre, Hyacinth reflects, "so pleasant was it to sit with fine ladies, in a dusky, spacious receptacle which framed the bright picture of the stage and made one's own situation seem a play within a play" (*PC*, 192). Hyacinth refers towards their physical arrangement, where the walls of the box act as the proscenium arch and they are watched from the crowd by Captain Sholto and Millicent, but also the air of

romance which surrounds her endeavor. The princess is, in the terminology of the book, highly original, and Hyacinth's meeting with her is a narrative which could have come directly from the stage. The princess herself has the air of an actress – when Hyacinth first visits her salon, he has "much the same feeling with which, at the theatre, he had sometimes awaited the entrance of a celebrated actress. In this case the actress was to perform for him alone" (*PC*, 245).

Princess Casamassima's relationship with her audience is ambivalent. Throughout the novel she seeks situations in which she can be the captivation center of attention, as when she visits the Muniments and throws "a spell of adoration over the little company" (*PC*, 408). However, she also absents herself, to an extent, from the English social circuit, and proclaims that she doesn't seek conspicuousness: "though she liked to be original she didn't like to be notorious, an occasion of vulgar chatter" (*PC*, 422).

As Elizabeth Carolyn Miller has noted, the princess is at "the heart of the book's investigation of modern womanhood as a threat to the social order" (Miller, 148). As an aristocrat turned revolutionary anarchist, she embodies, on a much grander scale, the danger posed by many of James's other "independent" heroines to the traditional gendered system.

The drama surrounding the princess's performance is that of many of James's actresses: the question of her sincerity. But where the dilemma with a character such as Miriam Rooth is a fundamental question – what is her natural persona, does she have an authentic, non-performed self? – the concern surrounding the princess is very much a practical one. Captain Sholto attests to the princess's fickle interests, and

when she gives up her possessions to become involved with the revolutionaries, Hyacinth wonders if it is not simply "one of her famous caprices," eventually deciding that it was "little more than a brilliant *tour de force*, which he could not imagine her keeping up long..." (*PC*, 418). This question of sincerity is in fact what ultimately dooms Hyacinth. Because no one trusts her, she is unable to convince Diedrich Hoffendahl to let her take Hyacinth's place.

The princess fails doubly in her performance, for not only is she unable to conjure a convincing, authentic persona, it is also hinted that in the end she will abandon her project of revolutionary poverty and rejoin her husband. Paul Muniment's last words to her are "I don't want to aggravate you, but you *will* go back," and ultimately the princess's performance is revealed as an unsuccessful one and she is doomed to return to an unhappy marriage, like Isabel Archer and Verena Tarrant (*PC*, 581). The pattern is clear, for no matter how independent or revolutionary, James's heroines almost inevitably remain controlled by a husband.

CONCLUSION

Let me return, finally, to a novel that has haunted this paper as Margaret Fuller haunted James. *The Ambassadors*, written over a decade after the works of the 1880s discussed elsewhere in this paper, is at its core about a middle aged man, Lambert Strether who goes to Paris only to discover that he may have missed the best life has to offer. As James put it in his preface, "nothing is more easy to state than the subject of *The Ambassadors*" (*Amb*, xxix). He goes on to reveal that the kernel of the book lies in the scene where Strether confesses to Little Bilham his fear that he is "old; too old at any rate for what I see," and he urges Bilham to "live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what *have* you had?" (*Amb*, 153).

Yet *The Ambassadors* is also very much a novel about female control, or the lack of it. Strether's reason for being in Paris stems from his fiancée, a Mrs. Newsome, who wants him to retrieve her son Chad. "She thought of coming, but she gave it up," says Strether. "I've come in a manner instead of her; and come to that extent... on her business" (*Amb*, 22). Mrs. Newsome is never seen and, like Diedrich Hoffendahl of *The Princess Casamassima*, simply pulls the strings from afar. Strether's assumption is that Chad is in an apparently vulgar relationship with a woman he won't leave, and though Chad denies it – "Do you think one's kept only by women," he asks – Strether comes to believe that Chad is in the hands of Madame de Vionnet (*Amb*, 112). Something has changed about him, and Strether reflects that "Chad had been made over. That was all; whatever it was it was everything" (*Amb* 105). Chad has somehow improved drastically, and he admits that he owes it to

Madame de Vionnet. At this point, Strether breaks from the influence of Mrs. Newsome and abandons his promise to bring Chad back, in fact convincing Chad instead that he must stay in Paris. In doing so, he simply moves from the influence of one powerful woman to the next.

Strether finds Madame de Vionnet "one of the rare women he had so often heard of, read of, thought of, but never met, whose very presence, look, voice, the mere contemporaneous *fact* of whom, from the moment it was all presented, made a relation of mere recognition" (*Amb*, 178). For Strether, Madame de Vionnet is every magnetic, remarkable woman he has known of: she is Margaret Fuller, she is Zenobia, she is Miriam. But when he happens upon Madame de Vionnet together away from the city one weekend, and realizes the full extent of their relationship – that they have been lovers all along – he understands that "it had been a performance, Madame de Vionnet's manner" (*Amb*, 394). Not only is her manner an act, but a failed one at that. When Strether confronts her about the situation, she admits "There's not a grain of certainty in my future – for the only certainty is that I shall be the loser in the end" (*Amb*, 411). Where she started as the enthralling *femme du monde* who not only moulds Chad but brings Strether to her side as well, she ends weeping and afraid of abandonment, drowned in her own tears. In this she resembles no one so much as Zenobia.

At heart, it is this failed performance which characterizes so many of James's heroines. Isabel Archer, Verena Tarrant, and the Princess Casamassima all abandon a performance of some kind, whether it be that of "new woman," "progressive speaker," or "anarchist revolutionary" in order to either enter or return to unhappy

marriages with controlling men. The exception to this rule, Miriam Rooth, has as her alternative the vulgar threats of life in the gaslight.

One of the central questions in James criticism is that of the treatment of his women. Was he a feminist, or not? Hawthorne, it seems clear, had distinctly perverse and punitive views of his female protagonists – from the strange death of Zenobia to the damning of Miriam and his most famous character, Hester, who is forever associated with the sign of her sin, his central women almost always end the book punished[14].

James does not inflict the same punishment on his heroines, yet they are also doomed. If they choose the life on the public stage, they are dirtied by publicity. This is the fate met by Margaret Fuller, and in the end James may have in some ways agreed with Hawthorne that Fuller's death saved her from an even worse fate – gossip. Yet even when James's women are removed from the prying eye of the public, their lot is no better. They are then trapped in unhappy marriages, marriages which they often end up in as a direct result of their performance of independence.

Through all of this, whether damned in public or trapped in private, James's women share an aspect of performance. It is this performance which connects them, ultimately, to Margaret Fuller, for it is through performance that they embody the electrical genius Fuller described. By dooming his performed women, James repudiates the modern woman that Fuller represented, and joins Hawthorne in his ultimate suffocation of the heroines of his novels. Madame de Vionnet, a magnetic

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[14] Which is not to say that there has not been an attempt at feminist rehabilitation for Hawthorne. One recent example is the book *Hawthorne and Women: Engendering and Expanding the Hawthorne Tradition*, ed. John L. Idol Jr. and Melinda M. Poder.

personality like Fuller and Zenobia before her, joins those two in her drowning – figuratively, but no less authoritatively. James's heroines do not need a calamity off of Fire Island to end their story awash in salt water – only a failed performance, a vicious husband, and a few tears.

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