

***The Bostonians* from Novel into Film**

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**Abstract**

Henry James's novel *The Bostonians* presents an emotional and political struggle between a traditionalist Southerner, Basil Ransom, and his Boston-based feminist cousin, Olive Chancellor, for influence over a debutante public speaker, Verena Tarrant. Two film adaptations of *The Bostonians* have been made: the heritage style costume drama directed by James Ivory in 1984, and the modern reworking titled *The Californians* (2005, dir. Jonathan Parker). The adaptations shift the perception of emotional attachment between Olive and Verena from late-Victorian romantic friendship to thinly veiled lesbianism. Ivory's film uses the plot of James's novel to relate to the problems of the late twentieth century, especially the issue of the conservative backlash in the 1980s. Parker's version shifts the focus of the narrative from women's rights to environmentalism.

**Keywords**

Henry James, *The Bostonians*, film adaptation, feminism, lesbianism

Henry James's novel *The Bostonians* presents an emotional and political struggle between a traditionalist Southerner, Basil Ransom, and his Boston-based feminist cousin, Olive Chancellor, for the soul of a debutante public speaker, Verena Tarrant. Most scholars perceive *The Bostonians* as James's critical commentary on the budding feminist movement in America, even though the novelist's biography might suggest that he was quite sympathetic towards the cause of women's rights. The novel was adapted for the big screen in 1984, by director James Ivory. The film adaptation shifts the perception of emotional attachment between

Olive and Verena from late-Victorian romantic friendship to thinly veiled lesbianism. The casting of Christopher Reeve (in his first role since the ultra-male Superman) as Basil Ransom opposite Vanessa Redgrave's mature and determined Olive further emphasizes the intensity of the war of the sexes. The changes applied to the plot bring the film adaptation of *The Bostonians* closer to the problems of the late twentieth century, especially the issue of the conservative backlash in the 1980s. Additionally, a recent reworking titled *The Californians* (2005, dir. Jonathan Parker) attempts to retell James's narrative in a modern guise, substituting eco-activism for feminism as a contemporary theme and providing another reading of the relationship between the main characters.

In August 1885 the British Parliament voted the so-called "Labouchere amendment" penalizing "gross indecency" between men; this was the very law that eventually sent Oscar Wilde to prison in 1895. Just as the criminality of homosexuality was debated in London, *The Bostonians* by Henry James, who was born in New York but lived permanently in England from 1876 onwards, was being published in monthly installments in New York *Century Magazine*. The first book issue of the novel was ready in February 1886. Even though the American law was stricter than the British one in the treatment of same-sex relationships, *The Bostonians*, perceived by modern literary critics, such as Judith Woolf, as "a novel about lesbianism masquerading as a novel about women's rights" (62), was received with only mild interest and caused no stir.

*The Bostonians* is a story of psychological domination achieved by means of hypnotic suggestion or the power of personality. Out of the central triangle of characters—Olive Chancellor, Basil Ransom, and Verena Tarrant—it was the last who attracted the most attention of the early press reviewers. London's *Daily News* saw her as a "pretty and pure and enigmatic maiden, whose talk is full of the slang of the lecture room, and whose heart is as glad, her soul is as fresh, as if she were a princess in an old fairy tale" (153).

The novel abounds with scenes of ideological and rhetorical struggles surfacing between Basil and Olive, "with Verena acting as a judge" (Gabler 270). Basil Ransom, a young lawyer from the American South, represented for the contemporary reviewer of the *Chicago Tribune* the constructive force of the "masculine character" (161). As for the third person in this peculiar

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triangular relationship, the opinions were divided. “Olive Chancellor, alas! Many of us have met and dislike as much as we pity her [i.e. women who were like her],” sighed the anonymous reviewer of London’s *Daily News* (153). Olive seeks to “uncreate the woman whom God has made, and to reconstitute her as another kind of being,” seconded G. Barnett Smith, the collaborator of *Academy* magazine (154). There were some positive views, too, like that of an unsigned reviewer of *British Quarterly Review*, who tried to argue that the anti-heroine “is filled with a virtuous belief that the ‘female woman’ has been maltreated, downtrodden for ages – a mere ‘thing’ for the sport and pleasure of man” (160), and that she has noble dreams of a great friendship able to reform the world. Still, the dominant opinion was quite unforgiving of her and of real-life women like her. To quote from *Academy* again:

The true woman knows well enough that her real sphere is the home; enshrined in the affection of her husband and children, she wishes for no other, and there is certainly no other in which she could wield half her present influence over the destinies of the world. (153-54)

Olive Chancellor, the unmarried, wealthy activist for women’s rights who takes Verena under her wing and nurtures her natural oratory talent, has kept her secret. She has remained, as Hugh Stevens called her, “an enigma” (92), at once fascinating and shocking generations of readers.

Olive’s intense feeling of friendship towards Verena and her selfless wish to help her transform in time into what Basil in the novel calls a “morbid” obsession (James 341). Critics like Terry Castle have often asked the question whether or not Olive is a lesbian (92), and what the hidden motives behind her and Basil’s actions are. In an ambiguous way, Olive Chancellor is tragic and simultaneously pitiful. As the narrator of *The Bostonians* puts it:

[...] what Basil Ransom actually perceived was that Miss Chancellor was a signal *old* maid. That was her quality, her destiny; nothing could be more distinctly written. There are women who are unmarried by accident, and others who are unmarried by option; but Olive Chancellor was

unmarried by every implication of her being.  
She was a spinster as Shelley was a lyric poet.  
(James 13, emphasis added)

Still, she is referred to as a virgin and her virginity gives her an uncanny power, like Joan of Arc whom she strongly admires (Castle 99). To Basil, who despises her, she seems a “dry, shy, obstinate, provincial *young woman*” (James 272, emphasis added) or “a fighting woman, and she would fight him to the death” (James 342). There seems to be an inherent ambiguity in Olive’s character, allowing for a reading that characterizes her at the same time as “old” and “young.”

Before writing *The Bostonians*, James noted that “[t]he most salient and peculiar point in our social life is the situation of women, the decline in the sentiment of sex” (qtd. in Habegger 193). Thus, it is in fact not the question of age, but of status, wealth, and first of all of sentiment that James tries to probe in his novel. As Janet A. Gabler observes, the battle between Basil and Olive is “the novel’s true centre” (270). Olive attempts to argue that women are as fit to enter political careers as men. She tries to remove Verena from the environment of her (rather dysfunctional) family and interest her in scholarly study and female comradeship. However, as Gabler notes, Olive’s world also includes the influence of her widowed sister, the worldly Mrs. Luna, whom Verena secretly esteems, and the possibility of sensual pleasures, including men (271).

For Basil, “the use of a truly amiable woman is to make some honest man happy” (James 244). Consequently, he gives a lengthy expose of his beliefs during his rendezvous with Verena in New York’s Central Park, the meeting that the girl keeps secret from Olive:

The whole generation is womanized; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it’s a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don’t soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been. The masculine character, the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not

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fear reality, to look the world in the face and take it for what it is - a very queer and partly very base mixture - that is what I want to preserve, or rather, as I may say, to recover; and I must tell you that I don't in the least care what becomes of you ladies while I make the attempt! (292)

Basil's ostensibly romantic interest in Verena masks the existence of a wider political agenda. Basil's desire is based on ideology; he wants Verena to prove his deeply conservative theory of men's superiority over women. Likewise, the motivations of Olive's involvement with Verena may hide a sexual obsession beneath a noble veneer of fighting for social justice. As Elizabeth Brake points out, Olive is a "political creature," but her interest in Verena is personal and carnal (151). According to Janet A. Gabler, Olive is a tragic figure; her "tragic blindness is her failure to accept her own personal prejudices, her hatred of male sexuality, and her love of women" (271). Consequently, she "attempts to turn her private convictions into political dogma" (Gabler 274). In fact, both sides of this rhetorical war live in self-delusion and hypocrisy. "Possessing" Verena serves Olive and Basil's various and rather selfish needs, and the object of their conflict is a "divinely docile" (James 254) ingénue in need of constant protection from a strong personality who combines the characteristics of a parent, a mentor, and a lover. Verena does not seem fit for her role of a civil rights activist, so when in the last scene of the novel Basil spirits her away just before her scheduled public appearance, for many readers this represents a reinstatement of the natural order of things.

James's novel was adapted for the screen only once,<sup>1</sup> by Merchant Ivory Productions, a filmmaking company set up in 1961 by director James Ivory and producer Ismail Merchant. The two frequently collaborated with the award-winning screenwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala who also provided the screenplay for *The Bostonians*. The roles of Olive, Verena and Basil were played respectively by Vanessa Redgrave, Madeleine Potter, and Christopher Reeve, with a splendid supporting cast including Jessica Tandy as the elderly Boston feminist Miss Birdseye, Linda Hunt as the level-headed Doctor Prance, and Nancy Marchant as Mrs. Burrage whose son courts Verena. The movie was nominated for two Academy Awards

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1 And, as we shall see later, it also inspired a reworking set in modern times.

in 1985 (Costume Design, and Best Actress for Vanessa Redgrave). Jenny Beavan and John Bright's costumes were also nominated for the BAFTA awards, and Vanessa Redgrave's portrayal of Olive Chancellor was nominated for the Golden Globe. Additionally, the actress's performance won her the 1985 award of the National Society of Film Critics. The film was a box-office success, grossing just over \$1m., and its critical reception was generally favorable. Vincent Canby listed *The Bostonians* "among the finest adaptations of a classic novel anyone has yet made" (265).

Merchant Ivory made their name as specialists in heritage movies, that is period pieces set in the nineteenth or early twentieth century (e.g. *A Room with a View* 1985; *Howards End* 1992; *The Remains of the Day* 1993), usually rendered with an almost antiquarian zeal as regards the visual aspects of the production. *The Bostonians* was their second take on Henry James's fiction, after *The Europeans* in 1983. In 2001 they returned to James's fiction with the adaptation of *The Golden Bowl*.

The notion of heritage films first appeared in the 1980s in relation to British costume movies and television dramas. Some of the best known early examples include *Chariots of Fire* (1981, dir. Hugh Hudson) and ITV's series *Brideshead Revisited* (1981, dir. Charles Sturridge, Michael Lindsay-Hogg). The films, usually adapting for the screen popular works of Victorian and Edwardian fiction, relied on highly aestheticized images of thoroughly researched and meticulously recreated costumes and interiors, combined with nostalgic, pastoral landscapes and locations in historic houses. There was a markedly escapist feeling to those beautiful visions, observable especially in contrast with the everyday reality of the 80s in Britain, troubled by social unrest and economic crisis. Despite their seemingly apolitical stance, heritage films usually glorified the idealized, upper- or upper-middle-class lifestyle and often presented a "conservative aesthetic that reveled in a reassuring iconography of English tradition" (Vidal 4), including some controversial issues, such as the treatment of the colonial past.

With respect to the style and setting, *The Bostonians* closely followed the recipe for a perfect heritage movie. The elaborate sets and upper-middle-class Victorian costumes remained, even though New England seaside scenery replaced the more typical views of English lush hills and country houses. Similarly, Harvard college buildings were substituted in place of the romanticized views of Oxbridge, frequent in adaptations of

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British fiction. Still, the film has a distinctly British feel, typical of Merchant Ivory Productions. Even though Henry James planned to write “a very *American* tale, a tale very characteristic for our social conditions” (qtd. in Habegger 193), the film adaptation of *The Bostonians* linked his work with the British tradition of authors such as E. M. Forster whose *A Room with a View*, *Maurice*, and *Howards End* the company were yet to adapt for the screen. Consequently, James’s “*American* tale” was almost fully Anglicized to fit “Merchant Ivory’s trademark emphasis on production values, classicist style and focus on the intimate observation of manners and unspoken desires” (Vidal 10).

There were no major changes introduced to the narrative, and Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s screenplay generally followed the dialogues from the novel. However, some very meaningful alterations were made concerning the style of *The Bostonians* and the interactions between the characters. First of all, possibly to better conform to the conventions of realistic costume drama, the humor of James’s novel was largely reduced. For example, the role of Miss Birdseye, an elderly leader of Boston feminists, who in the book was a somewhat clueless dreamer with little touch with reality, was played by Jessica Tandy rather earnestly and with no irony, as a charming old lady. Similarly, the subject of mesmerism, one of the central topics in the novel, was almost entirely put aside, and the character of Verena’s charlatan father nearly disappeared from the screen. Most significantly, however, the relations between the principal characters were simplified and presented as a peculiar, but recognizable, love triangle.

Leland S. Person notes that “*The Bostonians* premiered when the conservative movement, especially its social and moral reform wing, was beginning to assert itself” (100). Ten years’ fight for the ratification of Equal Rights Amendment ended in a fiasco. Ronald Reagan was President, having won his second election in 1984. During his presidency many Americans, remembering the strong male figures he had played on screen, embraced values of traditional masculinity once again. Jimmy Carter, in contrast, had been perceived by his political opponents as weak and effeminate (Person 100). The alleged weakening of traditional values was blamed by conservative Americans for high inflation and economic crisis; for them Reagan was a crusader fighting against the forces of “the most damnable feminization” (James 292), just as Basil Ransom expressed in his Central Park speech in James’s novel.

It is therefore understandable why James Ivory gave the role of Basil to “the real Superman” (Long 163). Both the director and actor Christopher Reeve (86) admit it was the latter’s appearance in the three *Superman* movies (*Superman*, 1978, dir. Richard Donner; *Superman II*, 1980, dir. Richard Lester; *Superman III*, 1983, dir. Richard Lester) that became the decisive factor in casting Reeve as Basil Ransom. His tall posture and physical strength as well as his muscular chest seem to transcend the limits of the screen. Both Superman and Basil represent a male fantasy of a superhero—a successor of a noble but defeated culture (planet Krypton, the American South defeated in the Civil War) coming to Earth to rescue it from imminent danger. In both cases the future of human civilization is embodied in a female character (Lois Lane in *Superman*, and Verena Tarrant in *The Bostonians*); both these women, despite their pretense of independence, long in their hearts for a strong, protective male. Of course, whether the danger comes from an intergalactic syndicate of crime or from a nascent feminist movement, Superman will prevail any time.

Interestingly, Ransom’s great speech in defense of “the masculine tone” (James 292) does not appear in the movie. The moment when Verena and Basil, walking in Central Park, begin the conversation, the action returns to the room in a ladies’ hostel, where the unhappy and frustrated Olive awaits the return of her friend. It may be said, therefore, that the novel’s most famous passage is uttered off-screen. When the audience see the two protagonists again, Basil offers no more than some stereotypical arguments that in his view feminists hate men as a rule, but that Verena is different; in his opinion, expressed onscreen, she has just been subjected to the bad influence of her parents and Olive. He ends his political speech on a passionately intimate note: “You are meant for something different. You are meant for privacy, you are meant for love. For me.” Hearing these words—they are absent from the text of the novel—Verena seems uncomfortable and embarrassed; she springs from her bench and leaves, possibly because Basil has just seen through her secret attraction to him. Her flushed cheeks also suggest that the seed of doubt has been sowed; Verena starts to lose faith in the cause of women’s rights and in her own skill as an orator. This change in her is only further corroborated in the narrative. A moment earlier, Basil told Verena that his conservative press articles were rejected by publishers, who sarcastically suggested that “his ideas were three hundred years out of date.” In his opinion, however, he



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has not “come too late, [he has] come too soon.” In 1984, it seemed more than ever that he might have been right.

Leland S. Person suggests that Ivory made the lesbian overtones of Verena and Olive’s relationship more visible (99), yet the director himself, in a conversation with Robert Emmett Long, was quite convinced that “in the late 1880s, overt sexuality between two women was not to be imagined, much less talked about” (Long 169). As Lillian Faderman observes, the notion of female homosexuality did not function in the nineteenth century as a category with social, political or legal implications (similar to what the already-mentioned Labouchere amendment declared about male homosexuality). On the other hand, there existed then a notion of a “Boston marriage” (Faderman 325) in which two female friends shared house together for emotional companionship and practical comfort. This was especially popular in the Northern States of the USA after the Civil War, to compensate for the diminished numbers of marriageable young men. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues, these arrangements were not necessarily sexual; however they included a certain “ritualized style of romantic and sentimental affection which to modern ears sounds sexual” (58-59).

On the other hand, however, Olive in the film is quite adamant about Verena taking a vow not to marry. For her, as Terry Castle observes, “rejection of and distaste for heterosexual marriage, conceived of as a form which subordinates and degrades women, does constitute a political identity. The kind of friendship Olive wants is not compatible with marriage; in this sense, to the extent that we can call her a ‘lesbian,’ her lesbianism is distinctly modern, not to be enjoyed alongside the demands of marriage” (101). It is a lifestyle markedly different from the one lived by most homosexual women before the later twentieth century. For them same-sex relationships could usually coexist with heterosexual marriage.

It is hard to judge to what extent Henry James perceived, or criticized, lesbianism as an assumed practical side of feminist politics, but to observe the emotional attachment of Olive and Verena as simply homosexual is largely a projection of modern opinions. As David Van Leer argues, “the twentieth-century tendency to view human love and sexuality within a dichotomized universe of deviance and normality, genitality and platonic love, is alien to the emotions and attitudes of the nineteenth century and fundamentally distorts the nature of these women’s emotional interaction” (102).

In James's novel the intense, exalted emotions Olive feels for Verena bring to mind a fascination between two young friends, especially when Olive invites the girl, who is not much younger than herself, to share house and "be my friend, my friend of friends, beyond every one, everything, forever and forever" (James 68). The same scene has a markedly different appeal when it is played between women belonging to two different generations; Vanessa Redgrave was forty-seven years old when she played Olive, while the debutante Madeleine Potter was only twenty. Much more than the original novel, James Ivory's adaptation focuses on the paranoia of homosexual seduction allegedly posing danger to "good" girls. The main subject of the film becomes a symbolic duel between a Southern "Superman" emanating wholesomeness and strength, and a middle-aged, man-hating lesbian—a duel whose final outcome is never really put in doubt.

In the novel, the hidden nature of Olive's infatuation is partially revealed in her conversation with Mrs. Burrage, whose son Henry is one of Verena's admirers. Mrs. Burrage tries to convince Olive that her protégée would be "much safer" with Henry; otherwise she might become "a possible prey to adventurers, to exploiters, or to people who, once they had got hold of her, would shut her up altogether" (273)—a dark prophecy, which seems to be fulfilled in Verena's final elopement with Basil. Seeing Olive's troubled expression, Mrs. Burrage adds: "I daresay you don't like the idea of her marrying at all; it would break up a friendship which is so full of interest' (Olive wondered for a moment whether she had been going to say 'So full of profit'), for you'" (265). In the film adaptation, Mrs. Burrage (Nancy Marchand) holds her voice in a sarcastic manner while uttering the words that the friendship with Verena would be "full of interest" for Miss Chancellor, giving a meaningful pause before the word "interest." Olive looks deeply embarrassed and quickly averts her eyes. For Henry James the shameful secret of Olive's attraction to Verena seemed to lie in the possibility of her financial gain through the girl's public performances. In Ivory's film, this pecuniary motivation is replaced with matters intensely personal and possibly erotic.

The power of Olive Chancellor in the movie rests in the artistry and talent of Vanessa Redgrave, who conveyed a complex character torn between her political ideals and her hidden private passions. The solitary suffering of Olive, who is well aware of the fact that Verena does not reciprocate her feelings, her despair and disgrace caused by those "improper" feelings,

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make her an object of compassion rather than condemnation, possibly even for a conservatively-minded viewer. According to the director, Redgrave was very conscious of the artistic effect she wanted to achieve, and very adamant in pushing her vision. For her, the one undoubted villain of the movie was Basil: "Was he not deeply evil, and should he not therefore be made to seem more satanic?" she asked (qtd. in Ivory 97). On the other hand, Olive "should not be seen just as a hysterical eccentric, but as a figure of righteousness" (qtd. in Ivory 97). As James Ivory recalled, Redgrave "had convinced herself that Olive, rather than being a[*n* emotional] vampire, was admirable. I didn't agree at all with what she was saying, but it was useless to oppose her" (Long 169).

In the conclusion of the novel, Verena is spirited away by Basil just before the beginning of her speech (rather ironically) titled "A Woman's Reason," which she is scheduled to deliver before a large audience at the Boston Music Hall. Disregarding Verena's pleas to let her speak one last time, Basil hides her under a broad cloak and leads her out of the building, as an emblematic "femme covert," promising to marry her in New York the next morning. Judith L. Sensibar sarcastically remarks that the heroine had a "dubious pleasure of being dragged off caveman style" (62). James's narratorial commentary suggests that "beneath her hood, [Verena] was in tears. It is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these were not the last she was destined to shed" (391). The film adaptation, in contrast, leaves no room for doubt about Verena's future marital bliss. As Leland S. Person observes, a cape is also one of the important attributes of Superman (119); it finally masks Verena's autonomous identity and transforms her into the future Mrs. Ransom, fully integrated with her husband and his opinions. Traditional patriarchal family was reaffirmed as a desirable (and patriotic) model of private life.

In both the book and the film, Olive Chancellor was able to eventually overcome the feeling of betrayal and humiliation caused by Verena's elopement with Basil. In the novel, her defeat was so painful that it verged on martyrdom; critic Thomas F. Bertonneau likens her to Hypatia, the Neo-Platonic philosopher murdered in Alexandria by a raging Christian mob (56). There was, however, a veiled suggestion that Olive might gather strength and deliver the speech herself; Kathleen McColley goes as far as to suggest that Henry James sympathized with "female friendships and their implied homoeroticism" through the use of his narrative techniques (151).

The promise of a prominent female voice was fully realized in the film adaptation. Robert Emmett Long remembered a “New York reviewer who wrote that at the end feminist rowdies in the audience booed Basil Ransom when he carried off Verena, and cheered Olive Chancellor when she delivered her speech about a new day dawning” (164). This spontaneous reaction from some members of the audience may suggest that despite the conservative backlash of the 80s, the feminist undertones of Redgrave’s brilliant performance did not go unnoticed.

Interestingly, a recent film adaptation may serve to inspire some new comments on Henry James’s novel and its reception in the twenty-first century. In 2005 a partial remake of *The Bostonians* was made, relocating the narrative to modern-day California. In *The Californians* the duel of wills happening originally between two distant cousins (Olive and Basil) is replaced with warring Ransom twins, Gavin (Noah Wyle) and Olive (Ileana Douglas). Quite surprisingly, the question of women’s rights seems to be completely removed; it is now regarded as a case already won and therefore not worthy of further discussion. In the film, feminism is replaced with the new cause of environmentalism. Gavin Ransom is presented as a successful real estate developer, and his sister Olive is an ecologist trying to oppose the degradation of the natural environment by construction companies. In the course of the narrative, they both get attracted to Zoe Tripp (Kate Mara), a pretty young musician and singer whom Olive wants to convince to support her cause. There is no suggestion that Zoe might ever reciprocate Olive’s (undeclared) romantic feelings; the main focus of the movie is the negotiation of Zoe’s physical attraction to Gavin and her moral aversion to his greedy and careless approach to nature. Olive suffers in silence, struggling to come to terms with her own shyness and sexual orientation. Contrary to the situation presented in *The Bostonians*, in *The Californians* lesbianism is not perceived as a major problem, damaging one’s self-esteem. Olive’s environmentalist friends consider homosexuality to be one of valid, and perfectly normal, lifestyle options. Her anxiety is marginalized and ridiculed as evidence of prudishness completely unbecoming in modern times.

The film’s presentation of the love triangle is delivered in a much lighter tone than in *The Bostonians*, either in Henry James’s novel or James Ivory’s adaptation. In *The Californians* there is no real feud between

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the Ransoms, just some playful teasing—after all everything remains in the family. In the end Zoe, quite predictably, leaves with Gavin, whose profession does not seem to bother her anymore. Unlike Verena, she is never prohibited from public appearances; she just replaces her former protest songs with rather conventional love songs. Olive Ransom, like Olive Chancellor in the 1984 movie, overcomes her stage fright and emerges as the leader of the movement.

Director Jonathan Parker's satire on greedy entrepreneurs and self-important modern-day hippies does not really hit the mark. The film also failed to attract much critical attention. Reviewer Vince Leo notes, perhaps adding an extra dose of irony, that "director Parker currently works as a real estate developer, as well as a musician, when he isn't engaged in making movies" (Leo). Leo also argues that the handling of the main characters feels awkward, the mocking of the environmentalists appears shallow, and the film lacks real psychological drama. Still, the treatment of same-sex relationships in Parker's film is rather sympathetic. Modern American society is presented as one free of homophobia. Olive's preferences are not questioned on moral grounds; she is just unlucky to fall in love with a heterosexual girl.

As Natasha Hurley reminds us, in *The Bostonians* Olive "can only imagine kissing Verena Tarrant" (316) as a real kiss would be considered too explicit by the readers. Interestingly, the kiss that never materializes is a part of both Ivory's adaptation and *The Californians*; however, it is not made clear whether the reason for this is the assumed conservative morality of the viewers. There is, however, a possibility of reading Parker's optimistic vision of a tolerant society at face value, as a liberal dream come true. The dualisms in Henry James's novel as observed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (97-98) no longer exist; there is no apparent privilege attributed to patriarchy or derogatory pigeonholing of "morbid" spinsters (98).

Compared with Parker's version, Ivory's adaptation of *The Bostonians* retains more of Henry James's ambiguity on the subjects of sexuality and same-sex desire. However, a closer analysis of James's biography, especially his sympathetic understanding towards his own sister's "Boston marriage," may allow for a less traditionalist reading. His sister Alice, rediscovered by modern literary scholars as a diarist, was a long-time invalid suffering from

(what was then diagnosed as) “hysteria,” before dying of breast cancer at the age of forty-three. Believing that a change of climate would improve her health, Alice spent long periods of time in Europe, travelling with her close friend and companion Katharine Peabody Loring (Boudreau 53). In his book *Monopolizing the Master*, Michael Anesko quotes a letter by Henry James, which can be read as a confession of sorts: “Now that my sister is gone no one will fully appreciate the long years of inestimable and disinterested devotion that Katharine [Loring] gave up to her. We owe her a debt we can never repay” (207). On the other hand, the close relationship of Alice James and Katharine Loring was sometimes perceived as controversial by other members of the James family. Victoria Coulson notes that William James’s wife, Alice Howe James, “known in the James family, with rather pointed distinction, as Mrs. Alice,” was deeply uncomfortable about her sister-in-law’s close attachment to and cohabitation with another woman (5). It is evident that the question of tolerance towards alternative, non-heterosexual lifestyles was an important issue in the James family.

While the passing of the Labouchere amendment in England in 1885 allowed for a clearer division between—to draw upon Eve Sedgwick’s terminology—homosocial and homosexual relations between men (Rowe 103), there was no similar mechanism for distinguishing relations between women. In the official discourse, at the point of the publication of *The Bostonians*, lesbians did not exist. A century later, when Ivory’s adaptation of *The Bostonians* was filmed, the question of representing deep emotional, and possibly sexual, relations between female characters was addressed differently. The conservative rhetoric of the time oscillated around the themes of deviancy, morbidity, and the assumed threat posed by the homosexual minority to the society at large. Lesbian feminist identity was demonized and emancipated female characters were identified as a menace to the established order and traditional cultural values (Rowe 104-105).

*The Californians*—filmed more than two decades after Merchant Ivory’s production—move the action forward not only in terms of setting, but also of theoretical background. Lesbian identity is presented there as fully integrated with the social mainstream, so the tensions are delegated elsewhere—to the more “fashionable” discussions concerning the environment. In *The Californians*, the emotional problems of Olive Ransom do not result from the intolerance and homophobia of American society. On

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the contrary, among Olive's closest friends there are some lesbians who live openly and are not discriminated against in any way. Olive's decisions to "come out" and to take a more active role in the environmentalist movement are shown as her personal struggles to overcome shyness stemming from her introvert temperament. In Parker's film, the feminist worldview is taken for granted as most female characters are independent, professional women. Also, the traditionalist, heteronormative society seems to be a thing of the past. This vision makes it easy to dismiss Olive's behavior as a specific case of psychological anxiety rather than part of a broader political issue. Parker treats any residual embarrassment of the heroine—shown as the last old-fashioned, closeted lesbian in her neighborhood—as a consequence of her personality that cannot be attributed to the culture in which she lives. Therefore, it is easily ridiculed as antiquated and obsolete. On the other hand, a positive vision of a tolerant society might draw the viewers' attention to the character of the original Olive Chancellor (in the novel and its 1984 adaptation) who is finally vindicated as a successful fighter for equality.

The two adaptations of *The Bostonians* prove that the novel has remained inspirational to filmmakers and that its central issues are still relevant today. However, the alterations made to Henry James's text confirm that it has been used with a clear political agenda. The meticulously recreated period drama directed by Ivory conceals a very vivid conflict between conservatism and liberalism in the 80s. Likewise, a seemingly unassuming modern comedy directed by Jonathan Parker aims to present the environmentalist movement in a similar, though less subtle, manner as *The Bostonians* presented early feminism. The issue of suppressed same-sex desire is also made more overt in the films than in the novel. Ivory's adaptation refashions Olive's multifaceted obsession with Verena as lesbian attraction, and deems it highly disreputable. In *The Californians* Olive's inhibitions concerning her sexual orientation are shown as outdated and ridiculous; the moment she decides to accept this aspect of her personality, her life changes for the better. In the modernized version of *The Bostonians* there is no notion of shaming homosexual characters, and they can enjoy freedom and sincerity in the modern American society. Such a conclusion may be somewhat too optimistic—especially regarding the rights of lesbians and gays elsewhere in the world—but one can argue that it elaborates on the hopefulness suggested already in James's novel.

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