

*IDENTITY AS ALTERITY IN HENRY JAMES'S THE BOSTONIANS:
- VERENA TARRANT: HENRY JAMES'S OTHER TURNED INTO A "WHITE SLAVE"-
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The Bostonians was read either as the reconstruction of Basil Ransom's masculinity, by Leland Person, or as an image of the South, by Aaron Shaheen, as "masculine rivalry" by David Kramer, and as Henry James's view of the Civil War and Post, by Susan Ryan. It's discourse was analyzed both as the Boston marriage – lesbianism – that is, an alternative to the masculine world, by Kathleen McColley, and in terms of it's "sympathy" towards each of the three main characters, by Michael Kearns.

To all these interpretations, this paper tries to add an analysis of the way in which Henry James constructs Verena Tarrant's identity, as perceived by the other characters in the story, as ambiguous, as both mainstream through her whiteness and apparent freedom as a public speaker, and as a social and an ethnic "other", - through her parents and her aspect-, an "other" turned into a "white slave". The focus will be on two moments that I find as most relevant in this sense: her appearance at Miss Birdseye's feminist meeting, and her staying with Olive until her leaving the Music Hall with Basil Ransom.

The first part of the paper will deal with her family background and her physical description, in order to try and understand her ethnic origins, which are never clearly expressed.

In the second part of the paper I will show her resemblance with the black slave characters in two important writings before the Civil War – Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Truth's *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*-, and I will compare both Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom to traditional white slave masters.

I write the term "white slave" between commas in order to define a character who is neither completely white, nor black, but whom I see as being constructed after the pattern of a (former) black slave, without the writer actually stating it.

Henry James's *The Bostonians* starts with two of the main characters, Olive Chancellor, and her cousin, Basil Ransom, as standing for the two sides of (post) Civil War American politics: Olive as the reforming North, Ransom as the old traditional South. We see them in opposition from the beginning, when Olive asks Ransom to accompany her to a women's meeting, an invitation she will instantly regret, and precisely the one subject he most hates, as we will see throughout the book. But it seems that their true conflict starts when they both meet the third most important character in the story, Verena Tarrant, whom they both perceive as a wonderful "other" they need to fight for, conquer, subdue, and shape, as if they worked on a mythical virgin land.

From the scene where she appears, in Ms Birdseye's house meeting, we are first introduced to her family background. We are told she is the daughter of a certain Selah Tarrant, a "mesmeric healer" (James 17) and of Mrs. Tarrant, said to belong to "the old abolitionist stock" (James 17), the daughter of Abraham Greenstreet.

If we look at their names, we can see Selah as being a biblical name of Hebraic origin, "often used at the end of a verse in Psalms and Habakkuk, supposed to be a musical direction" (OED 1315), a name that can suggest a possible Jewish origin, a first prove of Verena's being seen by James as an ethnic "other" . Mrs. Tarrant seems to have no name but the last, Tarrant, like Selah Tarrant, a possible reference to the dance "tarantella", "a spider's dance" suggested

both by the father's hands moving over his daughter in order to make her speak, as McColley notices, and by the mother's capacity to still "cling to society", both resulting in the first two manipulative characters in the story, making Verena their puppet.

If we look at Selah's description in the text, we see an "enormous mouth", "two wrinkles as long as the wigs of a bat, on either side of it", and a "set of big, even carnivorous teeth" (James 24), which make David Kramer compare him with Dracula. While Mrs. Tarrant's thoughts show him as quite an eccentric character, an "itinerant vendor of lead-pencils" (James 38) in his youth, "an awful humbug" at the present, and a former member of what James seems to consider as the queer associations of his time: "the celebrated Cayuga community, where there were no wives or no husbands", the "spiritual picnics" and "the vegetarian camp-meetings" (James 38). As if to complete the picture, Southerner Ransom perceives him as the ordinary type of the "detested carpet-bagger", that is, the Northern adventurer going South to profit from Reconstruction, and the type of the unscrupulous opportunist, a "cunning, vulgar and ignoble" creature:

He was false, cunning, vulgar, ignoble; the cheapest kind of human product. That he should be the father of a delicate, pretty girl, who was apparently clever too, whether she had a gift or no, this was an annoying, disconcerting fact. [...] He had seen Tarrant, or his equivalent, often before; he had "whipped" him, as he believed, controversially, again and again, at political meetings in blighted Southern towns, during the horrible period of reconstruction. (James 30)

And if we want to see who Mrs. Tarrant is, socially speaking, we will have to perceive her, through Verena's words, as:

...queer, indeed – a flaccid, relaxed, unhealthy, whimsical woman, who still had a capacity to cling. What she clung to was "society", and a position in the world which a secret whisper told her she had never had and a voice more audible reminded her she was in danger of losing. To keep it, to recover it, to reconsecrate it, was the ambition of her heart; this was one of the many reasons why Providence had judged her worthy of having so wonderful a child. Verena was born not only to lead their common sex out of bondage, but to remodel a visiting list which bulged and contracted in the wrong places, like a country-made garment. (James 37)

Besides her parents' names and social behavior that immediately introduce her like an ethnic and social "other" to the Boston high-life, her abolitionist background is also satirized.

First, its description comes right after old Mrs. Birdseye's portrait as "one of the old Abolitionists" (James 10), always dressed in black, a member of "any and every league that had been founded for almost any purpose whatever" (James 14). Such a quotation may remind us of I. L. Caragiale's caricatured character from *O Scrisoare Pierdută*, written in 1883, Zaharia Trahanache¹, except that she has always been poor and has always given all she had to negroes or refugees. And the climax of this ironic description seems to cover all the movement now left without its object: "It would have been a nice question whether, in her heart of hearts, for the sake of this excitement, she did not sometimes wish the blacks back in bondage" (James 14).

This passage should actually integrate her into mainstream Bostonian reformers, such as respected Ms Birdseye. However, this is immediately subverted through two other associations: the marriage of her abolitionist mother to her already caricatured father, and the very description of her grandfather's way of life resulting in financial disaster after his having "spent his modest fortune upon the blacks" (James 37), turning his own family in "the great irregular army of nostrum-mongers, domiciled in humanitarian Bohemia" (James 38).

This last quotation may also tell us a lot about Verena's identity as an eccentric other. First, it may refer to Selah's job as a healer, or as a medicine trader, through the terms "nostrum-mongers"², and at the same time to social reforms as business or as theatrical performances, through Verena's popular public speeches on feminism, that cannot start without his starting her up. On the other hand, this can be also seen as a first irony regarding the popular feminist movement that, in *The Bostonians*, starts with Selah Tarrant making his daughter speak, and ends,

one might say, symmetrically, with Olive and Verena being run by a male agent from the Music Hall.

Another meaning of this quotation may refer to the words “bohemian” and “bohemianism”, which defined socially unconventional and impoverished artists, writers, musicians and actors in many 19th century European cities, a new hint to her being poor and speaking on stages. The term was also associated with unorthodox or anti-establishment political or social viewpoints, often expressed through extra-marital sexual relations, the first represented by Verena’s speaking for feminism, the second, perhaps, by her being for “free-unions”, a belief she expresses during her first visit to Olive’s house.

And a third meaning of “bohemian” comes from 19th century France (the 1800s) and refers to artists concentrated in Gypsy’s neighborhoods, and from the belief that Gypsies came from Bohemia. What will be the relevance of this meaning to Verena’s identity as an “other” will be seen in the following discussion of her physical appearance and the impression she makes on Basil Ransom.

First, we are told, “the girl was very pretty, though she had red hair” (James 17). Now, if we are thinking again at her otherness in terms of ethnic origin, and we add this “red” hair to her father’s name, following Romanian Andrei Oișteanu’s theories regarding this myth³, we may see her again, as a Jew, or at the same time, as an Irish, or, perhaps, a mixture of the two. Her supposed whiteness is suggested by her “brilliant head” (James 26), “her blush” that “was the faintest pink” (James 27), her “anemia” (James 23) seen by Dr Prance, by the pallor of her face, “white as women are who have that shade of red hair” (James 31), and by her being “very young and slim and fair” (James 27). However, I see this concept subverted by her appearance on stage, perceived by Ransom, both as “belonging to a troupe”, (James 31) which is also seen as something exotic in that context, and not as something positive, due to the association of the terms “sweetest”-“yet”-“exhibition”. This could be, in Aaron Shaheen’s view, an allusion to the popular culture of the time, to the “consumer culture the ‘unreconstructed’ Southerners might find abhorrent” and which “threatens Ransom’s notions of proper female gentility”. (Shaheen 8) And:

There was, however, something rich in the fairness of this young lady; she was strong and supple, there was color in her lips and eyes, and her tresses, gathered into a complicated coil, seemed to glow with the brightness of her nature. She had curios, radiant, liquid eyes (their smile was a sort of reflexion, like the glisten of a gem), and though she was not tall, she appeared to spring up, and carried her head as if it reached rather high. Ransom would have thought she looked like an Oriental, if it were not that the Orientals are dark; and if she had only had a goat, she would have resembled Esmeralda, though he had but a vague recollection of who Esmeralda had been. She wore a light-brown dress, of a shape that struck him as fantastic, a yellow petticoat, and a large crimson sash fastened at the side; while round her neck, and falling low upon her flat young chest, she had a double chain of amber beads. It must be added that, in spite of her melodramatic appearance, there was no symptom that her performance, whatever it was, would be of a melodramatic character. (James 31)

The colors here always seem to subvert one another when creating Verena’s ambiguous identity, sometimes as mainstream, through “fairness” and “brightness”, and then, again, as this “other”, through her resemblance to the “Oriental” (as opposed to the “Occidental”), or to such a character like Esmeralda. I see this last comparison as relevant in several ways.

First, we are talking about Victor Hugo’s 1831 character from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, whose action takes place in 1482, in Louis XI’s kingdom, and has this 16 years old Gypsy girl from Andalusia charming all onlookers with her “mesmerizing dances”, as the *Hunchback Educator’s Guide* online tells us. Her life will be a sad adventure, from her beginning as a kidnapped baby brought up by Gypsies, through her life as both an orphan and a public dancer, until she tragically ends hanged. If we make a parallel with Verena’s destiny in *The Bostonians*, I think we can start with her childhood in poverty, continue with her public life as the protégé and

the “slave”, at the same time, of rich Olive and of the feminist movement that ask(s) her to leave her parents’ house, and give up marrying anyone she will love, to her final death as a public figure when running away with Ransom with a hood over her head.

A second meaning of this parallel in Ransom’s mind would be that of seeing her as resembling a Gypsy girl, despite her whiteness, which adds to the ambiguity of her ethnic origins. It is worth mentioning here that this is not the only instance of Verena’s being perceived as a Gypsy, nor is he the only character to see that. We will meet this again on Olive’s characterization of Verena as an exotic-queer “other”, this being the reason she likes her so much:

It was just as she was that she liked her; she was so strange, so different from the girls one usually met. Seemed to belong to some queer gypsy-land or transcendental Bohemia. With her bright, vulgar clothes, her salient appearance she might have been a rope dancer or a fortune teller; and this had the immense merit, for Olive, that it appeared to make her belong to the “people”, threw her into the social dusk of that mysterious democracy which Miss Chancellor held that the fortunate classes knew so little about and with which (in a future possibly very near) they will have to count. (James 42)

The Tarrant’s house might also be seen both as an allusion to this Gypsy-land, and, at the same time, it might actually evoke a former black slaves house from the old Southern plantations:

It seemed implied in the very place, the bald bareness of Tarrant’s temporary lair, a wooden cottage, with a rough front yard, a little naked piazza, which seemed rather to expose than to protect, facing upon an unpaved road, in which the footway was overlaid with a strip of planks. These planks were embedded in ice or in liquid thaw, according to the momentary mood of the weather, and the advancing pedestrian traversed them in the attitude, and with a good deal of suspense, of a rope-dancer. There was nothing in the house to speak of; nothing, to Olive’s sense, but a smell of kerosene; though she had a consciousness of sitting down somewhere – the object creaked and rocked beneath her – and of the table at tea being covered with a cloth stamped in bright colors. (James 61)

A third reference of Esmeralda might be to Verena’s way of attracting people through her speeches, or, rather through her wonderful voice, the “gift” we are told about since her first appearance, more than through her words or ideas, which sound rather ordinary. Like Esmeralda, she seduces, like Esmeralda she will “be killed” at the end of the story.

Finally, all these ideas are somehow subverted, again, by the very fact that Ransom cannot actually place the meaning(s) of this association, as we’ve just seen in that quotation.

If, however, we do take into account the idea of Esmeralda seducing, in parallel with James’s heroine attracting and, perhaps, converting prejudiced people to feminism, we may also look at the meaning of her own name, Verena. This can also be interpreted in two different ways.

On the one hand, we may agree with Aaron Shaheen in his “Henry James’s Southern Mode of Imagination: Men, Women, and the Image of the South in ‘The Bostonians’”, where he derives the word “verena” from “verbena”, defined in the dictionary as “any plant of the genus *Verbena*, bearing clusters of fragrant flowers; a sacred bough of olive” (OED 1605). This meaning fits Verena for a life in the agricultural South, in Shaheen’s argument, and makes her also “the flower of the great democracy”, in Shaheen’s article and Olive’s words (Shaheen 5).

On the other hand, we may go to a second meaning, that of Saint Verena, who seems to have lived in the 3rd century, brought up in upper Egypt in a noble Christian family. It is said that “God made several miracles through her. She was particularly concerned over young girls and used to look after them spiritually and physically, due to her expertise as a nurse. Due to her, many converted to Christianity.” (“Saint Verena” 1) The connection between this meaning and her identity might be, in my view, her purity, her goodness, and her gift, a miracle supposed by Olive to come from God, and which conquers, if it does not exactly convert, more and more people to the feminist cause, that becomes a kind of another religion imposed by Olive to Verena. And, as Kathleen McColley very well underlines in her article “Claiming Center Stage: Speaking

out for Homoerotic Empowerment in ‘The Bostonians’”, we do have certain words in the text to make this parallel between a socio-political movement and religion possible: for Olive, in her dialogues with Verena:

Olive feels that she had been born to lead a ‘crusade’ to fight the darkness and opposition of countless women who were ‘tortured’ and ‘crucified’ and through this ideal she aspires to fulfill her Joan of Arc destiny. The ‘dreadful image’ continually before Olive is religiously inspired with words such as ‘expiation’, ‘blood-stained’, ‘sacred cause’, ‘zealous’, ‘anguish’ and ‘delivery’. (McColley 8)

Speaking about this idea of imposing and about Verena as the social-ethnic other, I will now pass to Verena as the “white slave”, first of Olive and then of Ransom.

From the first chapters of the story we saw Verena manipulated by her father to speak and by her mother to enter what she perceived as the Boston’s high society. Let’s now see how such an apparently free girl, already a public figure, could be actually constructed after a slave pattern since her staying with Olive until her running away with Ransom, besides the most obvious connection between women bondage and black slavery.

What we need to do first is analyze Olive Chancellor, whose name destines her to be “the head of the government” (OEED 245), that is, to rule, and let’s see how she receives Verena as her guest and examines her from head to foot, an inquisitive look that for critics, such as Kathleen McColley, suggests the beginning of a “Boston marriage”, or of lesbian courtship, but which I see as the look of the master seeing the qualities of his slave in a public auction.

These remarks fell from Miss Chancellor’s lips one by one, as she caught her breath, [...] while she made Verena sit down near her on the sofa, and looked at her all over in a manner that caused the girl to rejoice at having put on the jacket with the gilt buttons. It was this glance that was the beginning; it was with this quick survey, omitting nothing, that Olive took possession of her. (James 42)

This idea of Olive’s “taking possession” of her will be met several times in the course of their relationship, one other instance being her visit to Verena’s house, when she makes the worst decision, in my view, that of asking Verena to swear never to marry. I see this episode as the best proof of the master cutting the slave’s freedom of decision. And even if Olive seems to regret and take it back later, as McColley notices, I think the damage is done and it might be a first step towards Verena’s wishing to marry Ransom, her most illogical choice, that is, due to his completely anti-feminist views:

This little discussion had brought the blood to Olive’s face; she felt that everyone present was looking at her – Verena most of all – and that here was a chance to take a more complete possession of the girl. [...] (James 72)

Another important point that Olive makes here might be both comparing Verena with a (Gypsy) performer on a stage, with a pejorative connotation, and with a black slave, like a little Harry from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*:

“Well, then, go in and speak for them – and sing for them – and dance for them!”

“Olive, you are cruel!”

“Yes, I am. But promise me one thing, and I shall be, oh, so tender!”

“What a strange place for promises”, said Verena, with a shiver, looking about her into the night.

“Yes, I am dreadful. I know it. But promise”. And Olive drew the girl nearer to her, flinging over her with one hand the fold of a cloak that hang ample upon her own meagre person, and holding her there, while she looked at her, suppliant but half hesitating. (James 72)

The last part of the dialogue, the fold of the cloak that Olive “flinges” over Verena, can be interpreted as a protection against the cold outside, in the same McColley’s view, but the way I see it, it actually is the parallel, symmetric gesture of Ransom’s throwing the hood on Verena’s head in order to hide her from the public, that is, to “conceal her face and identity” in Henry James’s words, as if to a slave.

And an even more slave-owner or slave-trader oriented behavior of Olive is her literally buying Verena from her parents and trying to provoke a “complete rupture with her past”, with the apparently well-meant idea of rescuing her from such a terrible family:

... if she should offer him [Selah] ten thousand dollars to renounce all claim to Verena, keeping, - he and his wife – clear of her for the rest of time, he would probably say, with his fearful smile, “make it twenty, money down, and I’ll do it”. (James 70)

And Selah’s response, when receiving the cheque:

Tarrant was on the threshold; he lingered a little, embarrassed by her grimness, for he himself had always inclined to rose-colored views of progress, of the march of truth. He had never met any one so much in earnest as this definite, literal young woman, who had taken such an unhoped-for fancy to his daughter; whose longing for the new day had such perversities of pessimism, and who, in the midst of something that appeared to be terribly searching in her honesty, was willing to corrupt him, as a father, with the most extravagant orders on her bank. (James 100)

But what is Verena’s response to Olive’s behavior? She is described from the very beginning as an “ambiguous” character in that she “had the air of a person who, whatever she might be doing, would wish to be doing something else” (James 20). So, how much does she really wish her “love” relationship with Olive?

A first answer, analyzed by Kearns as a “passive role” in the story, and which would lead us to Stowe’s Uncle Tom this time, is her being very submissive and absolutely loyal to her “master”, which will cause her to become a martyr struggling between her love for Olive and their common career, and her love for Ransom.

A second answer, which completes the first, is the fact that, on the one hand, she understands her status, that of being “seized” and “subjected”, while on the other, she has the innocence of a child, who “took life, as yet, very simple”, or, one might argue, of a Sojourner Truth⁴, even of Romanian Gypsy slave character, Vasile Alecsandri’s young Zamfira⁵:

Verena wondered afterward why she had not been more afraid of her – why, indeed, she had not turned and saved herself by darting out of the room. But it was not in this young woman’s nature to be either timid or cautious; she had as yet to make acquaintance with the sentiment of fear. She knew too little of the world to have learned to mistrust sudden enthusiasms, and if she had had a suspicion it would have been (in accordance with common worldly knowledge) the wrong one – the suspicion that such a whimsical liking would burn itself out [...]. *Verena, as yet, had no sense of being scorched; she was only agreeably warmed.*” (my emphasis). (James 44)

This “lack of self-consciousness”, in Michael Kearns’s words, together with “the use of reported inner speech” (Kearns 1), that “raises more questions than it answers” due to the writer’s technique of mostly focalizing either on Olive or Ransom and too seldom on Verena, when actually talking about her, or the scenes where she is always present, might be interpreted, in my view, as her having no voice in the narrative, but being only perceived through the eyes of her “masters”.

Another important attitude of Verena, that I see as resembling that of a slave, is what I will now call a pattern of resistance towards Olive. We have already seen that she was made to leave her house and to swear never to marry in order to dedicate all her life exclusively to the new feminist religion-cause. Had this also been her real will, like Olive’s, she would have adhered to it without delay, especially since we are told by the text that, just like slaves, “she had no worldly pride, no traditions of independence, no ideas of what was done and what was not done” (James 40). But we see her in a need to postpone the imposed vow, and even when she seems prepared to make it, the silences in her dialogues with Olive, that is, her unexpressed thoughts telling only the reader that she would actually have wanted to marry, but denied the proposal only to please her “master”, make us see the other side of her otherwise wonderful life as the protégé. This attitude develops into the slave’s struggle for independence, manifested in this case through

freedom of thought and action, both towards Olive and towards Ransom. Verena's resistance consists of her asking him to let her walk home alone in order to think by herself, and, on the other hand, of her beginning to hide her meetings with him to Olive, turning this secret into her dearest form of property, liberty, mental independence:

At this point Verena began to hesitate. It was not, after all, so easy to keep back only a little; it appeared rather as if one must either tell everything or hide everything. The former course had already presented itself as unduly harsh; it was because it seemed so that she ended by keeping the incident of Basil Ransom's visit to Monadnoc Place buried in unspoken, in unspeakable considerations, *the only secret she had in the world – the only thing that was all her own. [...] and she was conscious at the same time that the moment her secret was threatened it became dearer to her*". (my emphasis) (James 158)

Unfortunately for all these struggles toward freedom, the end of the novel will actually completely cover her identity and send her into "white slavery" for life.

Ransom, as he went, thrust the hood of Verena's long cloak over her head, to conceal her face and her identity. [...] Ah, now I am glad! said Verena, when they reached the street. But though she was glad, he presently discovered that, beneath her hood, she 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. (James 248)

Romantically speaking, this should have been the happy ever after from all fairytales, since the young heroine will run away with the man she loves and is otherwise forbidden to her. However, here we have again her ambiguous personality I have discussed at the beginning of my paper, which makes this end somewhat symmetrical to the beginning of the novel. Then we were told then that she "had the air of a person who, whatever she might be doing, would wish to be doing something else" (James 20), now she is glad and cries at the same time. Second, she changes one master for another, with Ransom taking her by force instead of buying her, and covering her again, like Olive, with a hood instead of a shawl, which she "flinges" and he "thrusts". Susan Ryan, in her article "The Bostonians and the Civil War", sees this ending as James's "nostalgia for the old South and well-ordered, hierarchical gender roles" (Ryan 7). While Kearns sees Verena as "violated by more persons than Olive and Basil" (Kearns 1). I see it, in addition, as the slave changing the better, Northern, master for the Southerner worse.

Footnotes

¹ Zaharia Trahanache, președintele Comitetului permanent, Comitetului electoral, Comitetului școlar, Comișii agricole și al altor comitete și comiții (p 62)

² nostrum = a quack remedy, a patent medicine, esp. one prepared by the person recommending it; a pet scheme, esp. for political and social reform

monger = a dealer or trader

³ Andrei Oișteanu, cap. "Omul Roșu (Piață Rea)", *Imaginea Evreului în Cultura Română*

⁴ "At this time she looked upon her master as a God and believed that he knew of and could see her at all times, even as God himself. And she used sometimes to confess her delinquencies, from the conviction that he already knew them, and that she should fare better if she confessed voluntarily: and if any one talked to her of the injustice of her being a slave, she answered them with contempt, and immediately told her master. She then firmly believed that slavery was right and honorable."

⁵ "Iar mai cu seamă boierul, de o bucată de vreme, o găsea foarte pe plac și, fără nici o rușine, îi zicea vorbe și îi făcea propuneri mârșave, pe care Zamfira nu le putea înțelege."

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