



Abstract: This essay analyzes Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886) as a novel, like several other works by James, that hints at but never fully articulates homosexual desire. The relationship between Boston feminist Olive Chancellor and her protégé, Verena Tarrant, is a study in self-silencing and repression. In particular, James subtly explores Olive Chancellor's struggle with an internal prison, her suppressed homosexuality, which was likely James's own sexual struggle as well. In addition, James's literary style, his famously imposing and dense walls of verbiage attempt to articulate secrets without ever stating what's hidden. Paradoxically, James's voluminous wall of words calls the reader's attention to what is silent in his characters and in James himself.



Henry James's
The Bostonians is
a fascinating
tragic-comic
portrayal of an

The Unspeakable Self:

Silenced Sexuality in Henry James

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unlikely romantic entanglement of three characters: Olive Chancellor, a sardonic Boston feminist; Olive's cousin Basil Ransom, a Mississippi Civil War veteran, misogynist and conservative; and Verena Tarrant, Olive's feminist disciple and the object of Basil's and Olive's affections, both of whom Verena captivates, ironically, with her public speaking. The novel serves many purposes: as a realistic account of a retrogressive southerner's experiences in the progressive north; as an allegorical portrayal of antebellum and union tensions; as a representation of the nineteenth-century women's movement; and as an exploration of latent homosexuality that hints at James's own

thwarted desires. The novel, like several other works by James that suggest but never fully articulate homosexual desire, is a study in self-silencing and repression. Finally, it is also an example of James's literary use of indirect representation of what he, in his work as well as his life, effusively adumbrates but refuses to say directly.

Analyzing the novel through the idea of a prison metaphor reveals how James subtly explores Olive's struggle with an internal prison, her suppressed homosexuality, which was likely James's own sexual struggle as well (Rowe 193). In the context of literature, "imprisonment is always a metaphor, and a hackneyed one at that," writes Harold March in "The Imprisoned," his study on the "prison metaphor" in Marcel Proust's *The Prisoner* (44). This complex metaphor comments on the uniquely human ability to imprison oneself through suppression and silence, which renews its metaphoric power, imparting a deeper meaning to the text. Such is the case in the following passage found in the opening pages of *The Bostonians*, describing Olive when she first meets Basil:

She stood there looking, consciously and rather seriously, at Mr. Ransom; a smile of exceeding faintness played about her lips—it was just perceptible enough to light up the native gravity of her face. It might have been likened to a thin ray of moonlight resting upon the wall of a prison. (9)

Undoubtedly, the passage is intended to be both contextually and textually feminine, as are Olive's first words to Basil. In a "voice... low and agreeable" she tells him, "I shouldn't tell you that I am very sorry

to have kept you waiting" (9). At the very least, the story is concerned with the stifled speech of one particular woman, Olive, arguably the most constrained character in the book. The passage, as well as the novel, overtly invites a feminist reading. But does *The Bostonians* demand a lesbian reading as well? And are the images of imprisonment and the profusion of references to non-expression ("I shouldn't tell you") indicative of aspects of the self of which even Olive herself is unaware? One must ask, as Bonnie Zimmerman does, in "What Has Never Been," an analysis of the unnamed in lesbian feminist literary criticism, "When is a text a lesbian text?" (455). Zimmerman continues: "Should we limit this appellation to those women for whom sexual experience with other women can be proven?" (455). This is "almost impossible," Zimmerman writes, considering the complex and ambiguous view of women, not to mention lesbians, in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Furthermore, when lesbianism is reduced to an "exclusively sexual phenomenon," it is "an inadequate construction of lesbian experience" (456). However, Zimmerman also notes the problem of "equat[ing] lesbianism with any close bonds between women or with political commitment to women," since such a formulation would make lesbian relationships less meaningful (456-457). Citing Adrienne Rich's seminal essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," however, Zimmerman concurs that an understanding of lesbian relationships should "embrace many more forms of primary intensity" (Rich 648) beyond the physical. According to Rich, lesbian relationships can be defined as those in which the "primary intensity"

is “between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (Rich 648-649). This formulation succinctly describes the most prominent relationship in *The Bostonians*, the relationship between two women, Olive and Verena. Their relationship can be read as lesbian in part because they live, work, and socialize virtually exclusively together.

Although the text is silent on the *verboden* subject of their intimacies, the relationship fits Rich’s definition of one with a “rich inner” significance, that is a bond “against male tyranny,” that provides “practical and political support” for the two women. Moreover, Verena, the blossoming prolocutor for the feminist movement, quickly becomes both the subject of Olive’s political passions and the object of sublimated emotion. While the relationship in the novel fails to live up to Rich’s idealized egalitarianism, the primary and exclusive intensity suggest the intimacy of their relationship. In part due to the isolation of their relationship, there is a stifling air about the pair, which further develops the confinement of the prison metaphor. “Winter days” are spent indoors, “the winter nights secure from interruption” (135) as Olive and Verena dedicate themselves to studying “innumerable big books” (133). Verena succumbs willingly to Olive’s “fine web of authority” which has become “as dense as a suit of golden mail” (130). Their relationship is described as having “confluents and tributaries,” implying a cohesion, a blending of the two through their shared ideology, not overtly a physical cohesion

(137). Regardless, Olive wants nothing more than to express her love for Verena fully and naturally beyond an “unusually weak, indefinite kiss” (226) or a “silent kiss” (234). Olive desires not only friendship, but a woman with whom she “might have union of soul” (63). Verena somewhat obliges and becomes “passionate... put[ting] forth beautiful energy” (130). However, this is still a stunted relationship with no stated or suggested sexual or publicly affirmed social consummation. Even when expressing the union Olive believes she has with Verena, she couches Verena’s articulations about the relationship in negative terms, “You have never yet said anything to me which expressed so clearly the closeness and sanctity of our union” (121). This is no doubt because Verena does not wholly desire Olive, which contrasts with Olive’s all-consuming desire for Verena. Bitterly, Olive also projects a disdain for some of the physical aspects of heterosexual love when she speaks of the “dangers that might arise from encounters with young men in search of sensations” (95). Tellingly, only Mr. Burrage and Basil Ransom are described as in “search of sensations.” Their heterosexual prerogative being at an unfair advantage, it fills Olive with “rage” for it is the accepted way, and it was “the usual things of life that filled her with silent rage” (10). Her love for Verena is obviously “natural to her,” since “almost everything that was usual was iniquitous” (11). “Iniquitous” is a curious word choice, as it implies an ungodly act, something sinful or wicked. This is a moral judgment Olive is making because for her, what is “natural” is moral.

“Passionate love between women” in the nineteenth century was not perceived as immoral, Zimmerman reminds us. Instead, it was viewed in a way that was perhaps more degrading, and certainly more silenced, as being amoral. Lesbianism was “labeled neither abnormal nor undesirable... probably because women were perceived to be asexual” (Zimmerman 460). Estelle Freedman, in her study of “Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America: Behavior, Ideology, and Politics,” writes:

Women of the nineteenth century may well have experienced an aversion to sex, not only because of powerful proscriptions on female passions but because women had good reason to fear the physical consequences of pregnancy and childbirth... In turn throughout the nineteenth century ‘Boston marriages’ had so internalized the idea of passionlessness that they could not engage in genital sexuality. (200)

As a result, “most legal and medical authorities could not even imagine sexual relations between two women because female sexuality was linked, by definition, to reproduction” and thus they “labeled it pathological” (200). Even further, in the nineteenth century “heterosexuals often [had] difficulty accepting that a lesbian... was in fact a woman” (Zimmerman 454). This notion, that lesbians are not women, is reflected in Basil’s perception of Doctor Mary Prance, who to Basil “looked like a boy,” and is described as being “spare, dry, hard, without a curve, an inflection or a grace” (James 33). Doctor Prance is so devoid of his conception of femininity that he “would

greatly have enjoyed being at liberty to offer her a cigar" (274).

Despite this skewed view of Doctor Prance, she emerges as perhaps the most likable character in the book, and to some extent, is held in high esteem by Basil as well. Her presence, practicality, her dry wit, even her projection of a clinical detachment from political and social norms (and in turn their taboos) present the reader with the picture of an independent, successful, and intelligent woman with, what seems, a long-standing relationship with Miss Birdseye (33). The inclusion of a character such as Prance suggests James's respect for those who found a social place despite not conforming to social norms.

Conversely, considering the historical context of the novel, it appears that Olive's "cold nature" and "cold hands" are symptomatic of the woman who is unable to successfully find a comfortable place in nineteenth-century America; except, that is, within herself. From the very first description of her we are presented with an image of a very solemn woman who is later described as a "pale girl... [with] pointed features and a nervous manner... visibly morbid" (10). Her hands are "cold and limp," and she wears a "plain dark dress, without any ornaments, her smooth colorless hair confined" (10). Here we have a woman who is so "serious" and "morbid," her very hair is imprisoned. However, James, from the first description of Olive, likens her to the prison itself; her smile "might have been likened to a thin ray of moonlight resting upon the wall of a prison" (9). Likening her to a prison makes the image all the more complex and provocative. James

here masterfully supplies the curious reader with a wealth of information and a complex system of coded symbols that have allowed the metaphor to strengthen over time in its poignancy and relevance.

The prison metaphor is extended throughout the novel, indicative of the suppression and silencing of female emancipation. For their radical feminist activities, other characters have been jailed. Miss Birdseye has spent time in a "Georgian jail" (139) and the "celebrated Marie Vernueil" was "recently released from prison" (177). Ironically, Olive, with her appropriately "light green eyes," feels a "tenderness of envy" regarding Basil's fight in the war, and "her nature was that she might some day have such a similar opportunity," that she might "be a martyr and die for something" (10). No doubt she envies these women as well who served actual time in prison since they overtly dedicated their lives to a belief. Olive, too, is in prison. However, its bars are invisible and as a result her seclusion is further silenced. Both Verena's mother, Mrs. Tarrant, and Doctor Prance are likened to "inmates" (319), suggesting their shared societal bondage as women. Verena, however, is referred to as Olive's "precious inmate" (137), intimating that she metaphorically shares Olive's cell. However, she is only confined by Olive's "desire to keep her precious inmate to herself" (137). This is not the prison of female bondage in a patriarchal society. Neither the literal prison Birdseye and Vernueil experienced, nor the metaphoric one of male dominance Dr. Prance and Mrs. Tarrant; Verena's is the prison of suppressed love and

sexuality, and is indicative of Olive's desperation to keep Verena confined so that her suppressed desire could have an outlet. This symbolic "prison," erected by society and enforced by Olive's inability to truly articulate her desire, has made Olive "cold." Verena's future does not bode well. Verena exclaims that the "heart is cold," and, while standing in the snow, Olive implores her to never marry. In turn, they are warned that they "will freeze together" (105).

From the first pages of the novel, the prison metaphor, especially when it is used in relation to Olive, is also interwoven with image of the moon. Again, the first description of Olive captures her faint smile that "might have been likened to a thin ray of moonlight resting upon the wall of a prison" (9). The moon motif, threaded throughout the entire work, is notable especially because of the traditional association between women and the moon. Various mythologies have considered the moon to be of the female gender, perhaps based on speculations that the first deities worshipped were that of the sun and the moon, humans being the offspring of celestial bodies, mother moon and father sun. The concept trickled down into more hierarchical Greek and Roman mythologies. Both mythologies play roles in the novel, and are alluded to directly by Basil when discussing the concept of "new truths" (James 18). Basil claims to know only "old truths—as old as the sun and moon," indirectly engendering both by association, considering that the truths under discussion are regarding gender (18). The Greek goddess of the moon, Luna, appears consistently

throughout the work under the deceptively open guise of Olive Chancellor's sister, Mrs. Luna.

The curious choice of name for Verena's father, Selah Tarrant, is also rich in meaning. His name is a direct reference to the biblical Hebrew term *selah*, to give pause for reflection. Interestingly, the term is used only when the speaker desires the listener to consider what was just said; it outweighs what is about to be said. Selah is the one who pontificates before introducing Verena, who at first apparently cannot speak without his assistance. This serves as a sly reminder that Selah is little more than a rapacious opportunist manipulating his daughter's public speaking career, though he has no real interest in the content of her speech. The Latin term *selas* provides an even more rich comment on the role that Selah plays throughout the novel. The word *selas* is the Latin for light. James's use of this appellation for the father, whose role in the novel is to putatively enable his daughter's speech but more importantly is evidence of the investment James is putting into the extended metaphor under discussion—ironic use of types of and lack of “light” in the novel.

“Moonlight,” and its sarcastic derivation “moonshine,” appears again and again throughout *The Bostonians*. The light of the moon in mythic folklore has most often implied dementia, spawning the folkloric werewolf. Its legacy has provided the etymological foundation for words such as “lunacy,” “lunatic,” and “moonshine”—alcohol that will “make you crazy.” All of this betrays a patriarchal point of view, but also an interesting perspective when reading *The Bostonians*. Basil

repeatedly refers to Verena's speeches and anything feminist as "moonshine." "Do you really believe all that pretty moonshine you talked last night?" he asks Verena (71). As Verena is increasingly taken in by Olive's feminist ideology, Basil admits that "she was none the less charming for that, and the moonshine she had been plied with was nonetheless moonshine for her being charming" (206). It is the very thing he is attracted to. In chapter twenty-two, after nearly acquiescing to Mrs. Luna and seriously considering marriage to her, it is "by the light of a fine winter moon" that he recognizes his obsessive love for Verena (163). The very thing that repels him thus also attracts him. This seeming incongruity might be simply read as a comic take on human attraction without the following statement made by Basil himself in reference to Olive, "any chivalry was all moonshine" (305). From the very beginning, Basil is described as possessing a "Southern chivalry;" apparently Basil finds chivalry both repellent and attractive. This "chivalry" is then linked to the "moonlight" upon Olive's "prison wall," reflected in the "smile of exceeding faintness" on her face (9). Basil's "Southern chivalry" is simultaneously repellent and attractive to Olive. Repellent, in that it is a system of sanctioned female suppression, a mocking ray of light shining into her "prison" of womanhood. Yet it is attractive in that it is symbolic of romance, something she passionately desires but is denied in a "prison" of suppressed and ultimately silenced homosexuality. The contradictions here—of something that is simultaneously attractive and repellent—are also apparent in the very phrase James uses to describe the smile made apparent by the

moonlight. It is one of “exceeding faintness” (9). It is thus barely there (faint) but also simultaneously somehow overdone (exceeding).

In the final scene of the novel, Basil shows up just as Verena is about to speak to a gathered crowd; he overpowers her with “muscular force.” “Muffled and escaping” due to his actions, Verena’s words would have been “deaf to him” (349). Her cries of “Olive! Olive!” also are not heard (349). Verena’s final speech to the feminist community is thus silenced. Verena escapes confinement in a metaphorical prison with Olive, a union that cannot have full expression, but enters another prison in her marriage to Basil. In the end, she is silent and in tears. Olive, however, also does not escape. Her “fear of everything... her greatest fear... of being afraid” (12) and the pressures and norms of society re-enforce her confinement. This further disables her from even considering a complete escape from her self-silencing. After Verena’s departure, Olive takes the stage alone to speak in Verena’s stead. Although Olive’s “rush... to the front” of the stage in place of the now-absent Verena might seem to offer hope, the silence in the hall as the audience waits to hear “whatever she would say to them” is never filled. Olive’s narrative thus ends in anticipation of words that are never spoken.

That Olive’s narrative also ends in aborted speech is fitting, given her characterization. Olive’s name is both feminine and drab. The olive is an ancient symbol of peace, something sorely absent from Olive’s soul. Most revealing are the Latin roots of her last name, Chancellor. It has come to mean a person with judicial authority. This is fitting

considering Olive's controlling and judgmental nature. But its roots are in the Latin *cancell*, meaning prison bars, and the Latin *cancellarius*, meaning doorkeeper. As her name suggests, she is both prisoner and jailer. This is precisely Olive Chancellor's dilemma. James is able to write a seemingly contradictory but nuanced depiction of one who is simultaneously in both positions, perhaps because this is James's personal dilemma as well.

Behind his famously imposing, densely complex, and often intimidating walls of verbiage, James explores his own struggles through the behavior of his characters. Like the "exceeding faintness" of Olive's smile, the suggestion of same-sex desire seems simultaneously almost invisible, but also excessive in the constant suggestion of the depth and significance of the relationship between Verena and Olive. In her first meeting with Verena, Olive takes a "quick survey" of her new acquaintance and "omitting nothing... [takes] possession of her. 'You are very remarkable; I wonder if you know how remarkable' [Olive] went on, murmuring the words as if she were losing herself, becoming inadvertent in admiration" (62). The excessive Jamesian verbiage acts as a cover; it's a form of shrubbery, to be gotten through. Tzvetan Todorov, in "The Structural Analysis of Literature: The Tales of Henry James," reiterates the standard characterization of James's style as "excessively complex, obscure, unnecessarily difficult" (905). Todorov explains that the difficulty in reading James arises because he "surrounds the 'truth'... with a number of subordinate clauses... which produce, in their

accumulation, an effect of complexity" (905). Only by digging beneath the "subordinate clauses [does] one reach... 'the kernel,'" writes Todorov. This begs the questions: What is James's "kernel" of "truth" and why does he employ a writing style that necessitates the search for, in Todorov's phrasing, a "treasure [that] can only be absent" (917)? Perhaps the "kernel," the unspoken, embedded "truth" to James's style lies within what Stephen Donadio, in his book *Nietzsche, Henry James, and the Artistic Will*, calls James's "sexual puzzle" (395). For Donadio and others, James's homoerotic tendencies had an extraordinary effect on the style and structure of his fiction.

James's "puzzle" revolved around what he called "the essential loneliness of [his] life" (Kaplan 389). This "essential loneliness" certainly might be attributed to the hermetic nature of writing, especially in light of James's prolific outpouring of work. But as history, and even James himself, has made plain, it was predominantly attributed to his "lifelong struggle, [with the] desire for young men... the solitude... the rebellion, the despair," writes Fred Kaplan in his biography on James, *The Imagination of Genius* (402). He "could not imagine a sexual relationship with a woman" (385). He did have need of "intimacy... true to his own desires," but his "needs, difficult as they were" to satisfy, even "identify," made him place his "emphasis on friendship" (402). His "passionate friendships" (387) included both men and women, though "his real objects of desire," young men, "were ones that he had strong reasons to de-eroticize as much as possible" (301). James had "considerable success in doing

so" (301). He was admittedly guilty of withdrawing "through cowardice" and of "masking" his inner turmoil with a polite and socially acceptable mask, a theme that is explored in his fictional meditation on cowardice and secrecy, "The Beast in the Jungle." That story is analyzed thoroughly from a queer perspective by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in what has become a seminal chapter from *Epistemology of the Closet*, "The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic." In her analysis, Sedgwick unpacks the novella as a story of a putative, unrequited heterosexual longing that has served as a mask for "man's desire for man—and the denial of that desire" (211).

Ford Madox Ford commented on James's ability to mask his unhappiness, noting that an "observer could at least guess that any part he chose to assume," he might assume (Donadio 54). Ezra Pound was of the opinion that James's genius was dependent on this inner turmoil, that he "emerged into greatness" "first by reason of [his] hatred of personal intimate tyrannies" (Donadio 7). James "did not think of himself a homosexual" or even as "living a divided life," yet he confessed to living "a secret life" (Kaplan 301). That he considered this secret life "his real life" betrays not only a divided self, but, given that his "real" desires must go unfulfilled, accordingly betrays a repressed self (Kaplan 301). His attitude toward men less erotically inhibited than him is further proof of a divided self. John Addington Symonds, a close friend of James, was said to have had an "aura of homosexuality that [James] was not yet ready to think about" (Kaplan

178). Regardless, they shared many passionate interests, not the least of which was writing. After Symonds published his essay arguing for the moral acceptability and aesthetic attractiveness of homosexuality, *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, in 1891, James called it “infinitely remarkable” (Kaplan 402). However, it was an example of the “vulgarity” he found inherent in homosexual desire, which often resulted in an “unwarranted” but very real tragic fall, like that of Oscar Wilde (an acquaintance of James, but “too vulgar” to be considered a friend). Wilde was persecuted under The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which was passed the year before *The Bostonians* was published; this legislation decreed that private, consensual sex between men was criminal and deserving of imprisonment and/or hard labor (403). Wilde was used as a scapegoat, according to James, as the “ghoulish public” watched and “gloat[ed]” (301). Yet, despite his sympathy for Wilde, James deplored the public display and, regarding Symonds and his essay, James “didn’t understand” Symonds’ “insurmountable public confidence,” which seemed to Symonds “almost insane” (Kaplan 403). Nevertheless, James envied Symonds’s lack of fear and confessed that Symonds was something of “an alter-ego,” capable of “self-exploration” and “self-revelation” (403). After Symonds’s death, James openly stated that “there ought to be a first rate article—a really vivid one—about him—he is a subject that would so lend itself” (403). He referred to him as the “poor, much-living, much-doing, passionately outgoing man,” and asked “for any circumstance about Symonds—or about his death,” but he would not consent to writing

about Symonds (403). As Kaplan speculates, “the devil of conventional inhibitions” prevented James from learning too much about Symonds’ homosexuality (402). Although James seemed drawn to and at times fascinated (as well as repulsed) by men who were open about their homosexuality, as Kaplan notes, he firmly believed that there were “aspects of the self that he did not feel not appropriate for explicit language, about things that were unspeakable in both the personal and public sense” (172).

In spite of his inhibitions, James also displayed an apparent readiness, in some cases eagerness, to speak on the subject of homosexuality, and certainly as critics, such as Eve Sedgwick and John Carlos Rowe have noted, to repeatedly depict the struggle for unspoken and unspeakable desire in his fiction. There is ample commentary made by James himself discussing the love of men in general, the homosexual relationships of men he was acquainted with, and, most revealing, his own homoerotic desires (Kaplan 401). However, he refused to write about them. That “difficulty indeed would be... insurmountable” (Kaplan 403). For James, the world of fiction approached what one might describe as holy, pure. The real world was “wicked” and too “grossly finite” (Kaplan 275). In the world of fiction he found “some truth” and would “live in the world of fiction” if possible (Donadio 275). The real world “had no value,” whereas in his work there was the “freedom to feel and say” anything he wished (Donadio 276). Apparently, this was not entirely the case. James’s struggle with homoerotic desires could be masked through his

depiction of his characters and their conflicts, such as the tortured relationship between Olive and Verna, but not openly articulated by James himself.

In spite of James's repressed personal life he is able to portray the physical and psychological state of his characters through his method of "accumulation." This sheer amassing of words resulted in something beyond his mammoth contribution to American fiction. His body of work and his reputation for extensive verbiage appear to be the output of a man intent on expressing every single human emotion, every human act, except his essential and unspeakable secret: his love of men. Kaplan describes James's body of work as an attempt to "access [the] mysterious erotic intersection in literature between feelings and language... the absolute fact of his body and his own awareness of it" (385). It is this attempt that shaped James's style, this "accumulation" of verbiage, in effect surrounding and muffling James and his "secret," his "kernel" of "truth." As Todorov notes, "Much of the complexity of James's style is due to this tendency to 'self-embed'" (905). James's style and structure "depends on this 'constructive principle,'" the "quasi-absence," "the domain of the hidden" (905). The text itself "organizes itself around the search," around the existence of the "essential secret... something not named" (905).

As Kaplan notes, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, associates the "un-nameable secret" with the "less mysterious but equally un-nameable 'love that dare not speak its name'" (Kaplan

592). Kaplan and Sedgwick point out that the secret is, like John Marcher's in "The Beast in the Jungle," in reality two secrets. There is the belief in Marcher's "specialness, which he shares only with May" Bartram, the woman who is his confidante and apparent love interest; and second, "the nature of that specialness, a mystery to everyone including Marcher" (Kaplan 592). Sedgwick calls it "the secret of having a secret" (205). Marcher's is "not a closet in which there is a homosexual man." Rather, his closet is "the homosexual secret—the closet of imagining a homosexual secret" (205). We might view James's work as an attempt to articulate that secret without ever stating what's hidden. This was a secret profoundly mysterious to James, unavoidable in its presence, yet something that must be avoided. The paradoxical evidence of the silenced secret: an obsessive and therapeutic outpouring of words, manifested in his fiction, and in *The Bostonians* metaphorically by characters whose words, as speakers arguing a then-radical cause, are simultaneously verbose and merely suggesting the true nature of the force that compels them.

The closet metaphor, now virtually synonymous with reticent homosexuality, has similarities to "the prison metaphor." Although "the closet" suggests an enclosure that might be opened simply by the subject's willingness to do so, this was not a viable alternative in the late nineteenth century. James's closet was a locked one, prison-like, by societal norms, and made no less an obstacle by James himself. James's fictional style was a physical expression of his

psychological state; it is based on confinement. "As usual I am crowded," stated James when asked about his current projects, implying not only a fertile imagination, but a mind both divided and constrained (Kaplan 415). James often unconsciously conveyed this state of psychological confinement, even his preference for it. After leaving London, "a small city of barricades," for the town of Point Hills, he found himself satisfactorily "steeped in work" (422). It was there that he wrote on an elevated terrace with limited access, which in his letters he affectionately called the "opera box... in which I eat, sleep and live" (qtd in Kaplan 422). He referred to his new home as a "small country hole" (Kaplan 423). His proclivity toward small space and confinement metaphors even extended to his belief in life after death and his readiness to leave the "laboratory brain" (Donadio 132). According to James, life should be lived "toward the tomb;" that in the end, "it is really good enough to be a kind of little becoming, high-doored, brass-knocked façade to one's life" (James qtd in Kaplan 427). This does more than suggest his tendency toward the distanced, closeted life, but it brings us full circle back to the metaphor in question: James is behind the door, and James is the door.

Much critical debate and interpretation has revolved around what James called the "most appalling... nightmare of [his] life" (Buelens 302; Kaplan 33; Young 313). The nightmare is one in which James is "defending [him]self against an unknown figure on the other side of [a] door," an "awful agent, creature, presence... whatever he was...

trying to open the door” (Kaplan 32). James then “force[d] the door outward and fled” (32). Speculation usually leaves James metaphorically beating the “presence.” Oddly, this leaves the closet empty. One can easily imagine James’s divided mind as the two figures present—James on one side of the door, and James on the other, but embodied by his erotic, threatening desires. By fleeing the scene, James is not victorious, but the very opposite. Subsequently, James’s entire career was devoted to confining this “presence” behind a voluminous wall of words that paradoxically call the reader’s attention to what is silent and secret in his characters and in James himself. Characters like Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant provided James the opportunity to explore ways to adumbrate the silenced desire of the turn of the century homosexual. Meanwhile, James was prisoner to his own desires—the door and doorkeeper of his own closet. ©

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