

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14017-2 - The Complete Writings of Henry James on Art and Drama: Volume 2: Drama

Edited by Peter Collister

Frontmatter

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## THE COMPLETE WRITINGS OF HENRY JAMES ON DRAMA

Henry James's experience of drama began in the New York theatres of his 1850s childhood; in Europe he became familiar with the London theatre and the Théâtre-Français in Paris. He went on to experiment continuously with the 'scenic art' in his fiction, and to write plays himself. This complete collection of James's essays and reviews on drama discusses a range of theatre, including productions of Shakespeare, Tennyson, 'well-made' French plays and early performances of Ibsen. In addition, he characterizes some of the great performers of the day, including Irving, Terry, Kemble, Ristori, Coquelin and Salvini. Readers will find James's texts as they first appeared, with a wealth of editorial support, which evokes the colourful world of late Victorian theatre. Many of the items included have not previously been available in a scholarly edition. The editorial apparatus includes a general Introduction, Chronology, Textual Variants section and a biographical guide to actors.

PETER COLLISTER is the author of *Writing the Self: Henry James and America* (2007) and the editor of James's autobiographical volumes *A Small Boy and Others* (2011), and *Notes of a Son and Brother and The Middle Years* (2011). He has published a wide range of essays on nineteenth-century English writers and Anglo-French literary links in refereed British, European and American journals.

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AND DRAMA

VOLUME 1: ART

VOLUME 2: DRAMA

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Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10 and 12: Michael Meredith has very kindly granted permission to reproduce these images from his collection of Victorian theatrical prints and photographs.

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## A NOTE ON JAMES'S TEXTS

The essays, letters and reviews in this volume which cover performances, performers, theatrical memoirs and reviews of published plays first appeared in a variety of American and British newspapers and magazines. *A Bibliography of Henry James* (1982), by Leon Edel and Dan H. Laurence, revised by James Rambeau (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1999), proved invaluable in locating these items. Many pieces have been reprinted in *Henry James: The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama 1872–1901*, edited by Allan Wade (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1948; London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949) and *Henry James: Essays on Art and Drama*, edited by Peter Rawlings (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996). Others have been included in *Literary Reviews and Essays on American, English and French Literature by Henry James*, edited by Albert Mordell (New York: Grove Press, 1957), *Henry James, Literary Criticism: French Writers, other European Writers, the Prefaces to the New York Edition*, edited by Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York and Cambridge: Library of America, 1984), and *Henry James, Parisian Sketches: Letters to the New York Tribune 1875–1876*, edited by Leon Edel and Ilse Dusoir Lind (New York University Press, 1957). For this volume (of which only two items were not included in the collections above) I have returned to the original sources for my texts.

To provide consistency, I have made certain minor amendments in matters of presentation. These changes relate principally to 'accidental' features reflecting a particular publisher's house style; however, where it seemed to me a change might affect meaning, I have followed the original format. Such judgments cannot avoid, of course, a degree of subjectivity, but I explain my choices below.

In this edition phrases or words quoted in the body of the text are contained within double quotation marks. Punctuation is placed outside quotation marks (e.g. "An old theme ... with a difference",). When including longer quotations which are blocked or displayed, HJ often also includes quotation marks: these have been deleted. Italics are here used

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to indicate large-scale works (paintings, plays, novels) where the original versions may use double, single or no quotation marks, or capital letters or capital italicized letters throughout. Shorter works (sketches, poems, short stories) are given in double quotation marks. Though James sometimes places the names of people, both real and fictional, in quotation marks or italics, these have been deleted. Occasionally contracted words are separated in the original text (e.g. 'do n't', 'is n't') and these have been normalized (e.g. 'don't', 'isn't').

James published his work in both Britain and America and I have retained both British and American spelling as it occurs since it relates to the audience for which he was writing and may thus influence one's reading of the piece. The spelling of Shakespeare's name is inconsistent and I have preserved this feature since it reflects the period of writing. Obvious printing errors have been corrected with a note, and, indeed, on a number of occasions, especially earlier in his career, James laments the mistakes which have crept into his published journalistic work. Occasionally an alternative for a choice of word has been offered since slips arising from reading difficult handwriting during a process where there was no opportunity for an author to proof-read the final text certainly occurred. Such speculations have been noted but not incorporated in the text.

Some of the earlier pieces (for instance, those in the *Nation*) are prefaced by a reference to the writer and a placing of the text within quotation marks, e.g., "Having mentioned a few weeks ago", writes a correspondent from Paris, "that the winter season of the Théâtre Français promised to be 'lively' ... " I have retained this format since it seems to preserve the historical moment and contextualize the piece effectively.

James's essays, letters and reviews were signed unless otherwise indicated.

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## CHRONOLOGY: HENRY JAMES'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

**15 April 1843**, birth of HJ, second of five children at Washington Place, New York City, into the wealthy family of Henry James Sr (student of theological and social issues) and Mary Walsh James. The family spends extended periods in Europe and live briefly in Albany, New York, and later New York City until 1855. They attend numerous theatrical productions, circuses and spectacles (including Barnum's American Museum) in these New York years. William (who would become a pre-eminent philosopher and psychologist) and HJ engage in domestic theatricals with neighbourhood friends, and the latter becomes 'addicted ... to fictive evocation': 'I cherished the "scene"' (*SBO*, p. 203).

**1855–8**, the James family live in Geneva, London, Paris, and Boulogne-sur-Mer (part of a 'sensuous education' planned by HJ Sr). HJ visits galleries and museums, and has an overwhelming experience in the Louvre's Galerie d'Apollon, recently decorated by Delacroix. He recognizes 'a general sense of *glory* ... not only beauty and art and supreme design, but history and fame and power' (*SBO*, p. 275). At the Collège Impériale, Boulogne-sur-Mer, HJ meets Benoît-Constant Coquelin, son of a local baker, who would become an eminent actor much admired by the novelist.

**Summer 1858**, having returned to the US, the family settle at Newport, Rhode Island. HJ forms important friendships with Thomas Sergeant Perry (scholar and writer) and John La Farge (artist).

**October 1859–July 1860**, Jameses return to Europe (Geneva and Bonn).

**October 1860**, the family returns to Newport. William James becomes a pupil of the artist, William Morris Hunt, joined briefly by HJ. HJ is encouraged to read French literature by La Farge, 'intensely among us but somehow not withal of us' (*NSB*, p. 73).

**April 1861**, HJ suffers an 'obscure hurt', possibly a back injury when helping to fight a fire in Newport. Neither HJ nor William enlist for the American

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Civil War, though their younger brothers, Bob (Robertson) and Wilky (Garth Wilkinson), are encouraged to join the Union Army.

**September 1862**, HJ enters Harvard Law School, but abandons course in summer 1863.

**January 1863**, HJ admires the acting of Maggie Mitchell in a review published in Boston's *Daily Traveller*.

**February 1864**, anonymous publication of HJ's first tale, 'A Tragedy of Error' in *Continental Monthly*.

**May 1864**, the family leave Newport for Beacon Hill, Boston. At this time HJ is encouraged in his writing by Charles Eliot Norton, and, in 1865, begins reviewing for the recently established *Nation*, edited by E. L. Godkin.

**Summer 1866**, HJ becomes friendly with W. D. Howells, novelist, critic and assistant editor of *Atlantic Monthly*.

**November 1866**, the James family move to 20 Quincy Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

**February 1869**, HJ leaves for Europe, staying in London and visiting Malvern to treat chronic digestive disorders. He meets, amongst others, Leslie Stephen, William Morris, George Eliot, Ruskin, Rossetti, Burne-Jones.

**Late summer 1869**, HJ arrives for the first time in Italy and is enchanted; he travels from Venice south to Naples before turning back to Florence.

**March 1870**, beloved cousin Minny Temple (who would inspire some of HJ's greatest heroines) dies, age 24, of tuberculosis.

**April 1870**, HJ leaves Europe, having had his first experience of Paris's Comédie-Française, and returns to the family home at Cambridge. Though nostalgic for Europe, he continues to write prolifically.

1871, publication of *Watch and Ward*.

**January–March 1872**, provides reviews of art exhibitions for the *Atlantic Monthly*.

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**May 1872**, leaves for Europe, accompanying semi-invalid sister, Alice, and Aunt Kate. They tour England (visiting the Royal Academy, the National Gallery and the British Museum in London), Switzerland, northern Italy; sister and aunt return to America in October 1872; HJ returns to Rome via Paris and mixes in American expatriate society; he meets Fanny Kemble in December 1872, becomes friendly with sculptor William Wetmore Story, meets Matthew Arnold in March 1873, and again sees Francis Boott and his daughter Lizzie (who later becomes Frank Duveneck's wife).

**September 1874**, HJ, after further travels in Europe, leaves England and returns to Cambridge.

**January 1875**, *Roderick Hudson* begins a twelve-month serialization in the *Atlantic Monthly*. HJ goes on to publish much of his dramatic criticism over the next fifteen years.

**November 1875**, HJ arrives once again in London to 'take possession of the old world', and, on 10 November, moves on to Paris for a year, where he meets Ivan Turgenev and a literary circle including Flaubert, Edmond de Goncourt, Zola, Maupassant, Daudet and Renan. Till August 1876 he writes Paris letters for the *New York Tribune*, an uncomfortable journalistic experience as expressed by the heroine of 'Broken Wings': 'I can't do them – I don't know how, and don't want to. I do them wrong, and the people want such trash. Of course they'll sack me' (quoted in *Henry James, Parisian Sketches: Letters to the New York Tribune 1875–1876*, ed. Leon Edel and Ilse Duso Lind (New York University Press, 1957), p. x).

**December 1876**, HJ returns permanently to London, though he will make frequent trips to mainland Europe.

**1877**, publication of *The American*. Meets Browning and the artist and illustrator George Du Maurier, among many others. Visits Paris and Italy in the autumn.

**1878**, essay collection *French Poets and Novelists* published in England. 'Daisy Miller' proves to be a great popular success. Now a part of London society, HJ becomes acquainted with Tennyson, Meredith, Whistler and Gladstone. *The Europeans* published in September.

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**1879**, much dining out in London; meets Edmund Gosse and Robert Louis Stevenson; publishes *Hawthorne*.

**1880**, meets Constance Fenimore Woolson; *Washington Square* published.

**1881**, publication of *The Portrait of a Lady*.

**November 1881**, revisits America after six years.

**January 1882**, mother dies; in May, HJ returns to London; in December, father dies as HJ journeys to the US.

**September 1883**, HJ returns to London.

**February 1884**, visits Paris, meets John Singer Sargent and persuades him to move to London; in November, sister Alice arrives in England, chronically ill.

**1884**, in May, develops friendship with Stevenson.

**1886**, publication of *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*.

**December 1886–July 1887**, HJ in Italy, spending time with Woolson.

**1890**, publication of *The Tragic Muse*.

**1891**, sees Elizabeth Robins performing in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. Though initially resistant, HJ comes to admire Ibsen's work and his critical writing becomes influential in promoting the playwright in this decade. His dramatization of *The American* is successful on tour and in London; Robins has taken the role of Madame de Cintré. Attempts unsuccessfully to offer stage comedies to theatrical managers.

**March 1892**, death, from breast cancer, of sister. She leaves a brilliant, trenchant diary.

**January 1893**, death of Fanny Kemble; HJ continually fails to get his plays produced commercially.

**January 1894**, probable suicide of Constance Fenimore Woolson in Venice; in December, death of Stevenson in Samoa.

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**January 1895**, failure of play *Guy Domville*, produced by George Alexander, and HJ abandons the theatre.

**October 1896**, death of Du Maurier. *Spoils of Poynton* serialized.

**1897**, *What Maisie Knew* published. HJ begins dictating his work because of wrist pain. Friendship with Joseph Conrad; takes Lamb House in Rye, Sussex, and many American friends visit.

**1898**, ‘The Turn of the Screw’ highly successful.

**1899**, publication of *The Awkward Age*. Meets sculptor Hendrick C. Andersen in Rome and embarks on a passionate friendship, one of a number with younger men.

**1900**, shaves off beard.

**1901**, *The Sacred Fount* published.

**1902**, *The Wings of the Dove* published.

**1903**, publication of *The Ambassadors* and *William Wetmore Story and his Friends*; meets novelist Edith Wharton.

**1904**, *The Golden Bowl* published. Tours America extensively.

**1905**, returns to England.

**1907**, *The American Scene* published.

**1907–9**, 24 volumes of the New York edition of HJ’s novels (extensively revised) published with elaborate prefaces. The reception is disappointing, both critically and commercially.

**1909**, meets members of the Bloomsbury Group. *Italian Hours* essays published.

**1910**, suffers depression; brother William, having suffered a chronic cardiac condition, dies. HJ had accompanied him back to America after a stay in Europe.

**1911**, returns to England in August.

**1912**, takes London flat, is ill for four months.

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CHRONOLOGY

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- 1913**, autobiographical *A Small Boy and Others* published.
- 1914**, autobiographical *Notes of a Son and Brother* published. Horrified at World War, visits wounded soldiers in London.
- 1915**, becomes British national; continues with charitable work.
- 1916**, honoured with the Order of Merit. Dies February 28, attended by William's wife, Alice. After cremation, his ashes are buried with other family members in Cambridge Cemetery, Massachusetts.
- 1917**, unfinished novels, *The Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past*, and incomplete autobiographical volume, *The Middle Years*, published posthumously, supervised by Percy Lubbock.

# ABBREVIATIONS

AS	Henry James, <i>The American Scene</i> , ed. Leon Edel (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1968).
CN	<i>The Complete Notebooks of Henry James</i> , ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (Oxford University Press, 1987).
EL	Henry James, <i>Essays in London and Elsewhere</i> (London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1893).
CLHJ	<i>The Complete Letters of Henry James</i> , ed. Pierre A. Walker and Greg W. Zacharias (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, ongoing): 1855–1872, 2 volumes (2006); 1872–1876, 3 volumes (2008); 1876–1878, 2 volumes (2012–13); 1878–1880, 1 volume (2014).
HJL	<i>Henry James: Letters</i> , ed. Leon Edel, 4 volumes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974–84), vol. 1, 1843–75; vol. 2, 1875–83; vol. 3, 1883–95; vol. 4, 1895–1916.
LC 1	<i>Henry James, Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers</i> , ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York and Cambridge: Library of America, 1984).
LC 2	<i>Henry James, Literary Criticism: French Writers, other European Writers, the Prefaces to the New York Edition</i> , ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York and Cambridge: Library of America, 1984).
NSB	Henry James, <i>Notes of a Son and Brother and The Middle Years: A Critical Edition</i> (1914, 1917), ed. Peter Collister (Charlottesville,: University of Virginia Press, 2011).
SBO	Henry James, <i>A Small Boy and Others: A Critical Edition</i> (1913), ed. Peter Collister (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>TMY</i>	Henry James, <i>Notes of a Son and Brother and The Middle Years: A Critical Edition</i> (1914, 1917), ed. Peter Collister (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).
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If we follow the premises of James's recollection of childhood composed in older age, *A Small Boy and Others*, drama and theatrical spectacle constituted some of his most profound and formative experiences. The family's visits to the entertainments available in New York City in the mid nineteenth century are recalled in considerable and evocative detail, ranging from plays by Shakespeare, Sheridan, Knowles, Boucicault, rough-and-ready adaptations of French plays,<sup>1</sup> of Dickens and other novelists, to visits to Barnum's American Museum and Niblo's Garden for sideshows and circuses with acrobats, dancers and pantomime artists.<sup>2</sup> The nature of the detail, the names of now-obscure plays and of performers both European and American, painstakingly and surprisingly accurately recorded, indicates a special commitment not only to the fabric of his childhood but also to a thriving and very mixed theatrical tradition, to the excitement of performance and the powerful agency of stage presence. The material for these recollections had been long stored: James's secretary and amanuensis, Miss Theodora Bosanquet, recalled how he dictated to her each morning the text for his autobiography and wondered at his fluency: 'no preliminary work was needed'.<sup>3</sup> His style by this time is quintessentially late James, yet the recollection returns to the absolutisms of a child's emotions, the unbearable suspense of the unraised stage curtain as he recalls not a specific play, but the anguish of anticipation: 'One's eyes bored into it in vain, and yet one knew it *would* rise at the named hour, the only question being if one could exist till then'.<sup>4</sup> And the suspension of disbelief which performance can bring about, the 'sweet deception' with

<sup>1</sup> Compare the incident in Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (a work often referred to by James) when, in chapter 23, the theatrical manager, Mr Crummles, hands over to the hero, the newest recruit to his company, a French play: "'There! Just turn that into English, and put your name on the title-page'".

<sup>2</sup> See especially *A Small Boy and Others*, ed. Peter Collister (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), chapters 9 and 12, hereafter *SBO*.

<sup>3</sup> *Henry James at Work* (one of 'The Hogarth Essays' (London: Hogarth Press, 1924)), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> *SBO*, p. 88.

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which the observer willingly concurs – even in unpromising circumstances – is an experience James movingly transfers to the young Hyacinth Robinson in *The Princess Casamassima*: ‘His imagination projected itself lovingly across the footlights, gilded and coloured the shabby canvas and battered accessories, losing itself so effectually in the fictive world that the end of the piece, however long or however short, brought with it something of the alarm of a stoppage of his personal life’.<sup>5</sup>

In revisiting his childhood and having acquired hindsight, James is compelled to reconcile subjective memory with contemporary evidence and historical truth. Having found ‘a copious collection of theatrical portraits’ illustrating ‘the old American stage’, he can only acknowledge disappointment, ‘so vulgar, so barbarous, seemed the array of types, so extraordinarily provincial the note of every figure’. The stars who had enjoyed their New York success, now victims of their own fragile celebrity, seem transformed in some grotesquely Dickensian configuration into one single and suspended face, ‘the histrionic image’, embodying failure, removed from the concealing glare of ‘artificial lights’, ‘fatigued and disconnected’, ‘reduced to its mere self and resembling some closed and darkened inn with the sign still swung but the place blighted for want of custom’.<sup>6</sup> In this sequence of multiplying tropes by which, paradoxically, light conceals and obscurity reveals, the emblematic building (like so many other houses of James’s imagination) contains multiple allegorical messages involving time’s irony in relation to purpose, aspiration and age. The sentiment is not simply the product of long experience, though, and, indeed, the sharp disjunction between reality and the glamour of illusion is a familiar irony in the commonly expressed acceptances concerning ‘show business’. James invoked a comparably bleak spectre forty years earlier on observing the human cost of the theatre for the veteran actors of Paris, ‘the grim and battered old comedians, with a life’s length of footlights making strange shadows on their impenetrable masks’.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 143–4.      <sup>6</sup> *SBO*, p. 86.

<sup>7</sup> No. 2, ‘The Parisian Stage’, 1873, pp. 6–7. As a young man in Boston, HJ chanced in the street upon Emily Mestayer, famed for her Shakespearean roles, and marks the cruel disjunction between her stage presence and her private self, the physical, objectifying cost of her avocation: ‘the very image of mere sore histrionic habit and use, a worn and weary, a battered even though

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Tawdry as New York's theatrical scene may now seem to James, it provided the opportunity for his initiation into the critical mode; he wishes to preserve the 'air of romance', despite the evidence, remaining loyal to the circumstances whose memory allows him to 'grope' for his 'earliest aesthetic seeds'. He records attending, in company with brother William, a number of productions of adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was immensely popular at the time and (in its original novel format) to exercise a powerful influence on American history and the civil war which lay ahead. Its importance for James was personal. In this somewhat ramshackle theatrical arena of mass-audience appeal, he acquired what he calls 'a canon to judge by – it helped conscious criticism, which was to fit on wings (for use ever after) to the shoulders of appreciation'.<sup>8</sup> In this same period, too, he experienced the pleasures of drama both as creator and practitioner, though now, by contrast, in a domestic setting, in scenes enacted in the spacious attics belonging to his mother's cousin, Helen Wyckoff Perkins, in New York City. The company is composed exclusively of neighbouring boys, engaged in staging 'comprehensive comedies', 'imagined' by brother William. The content of these theatrical experiments is absent from James's narrative and was subsidiary at the time, edged out by extraneous activities – 'more preparation than performance, so much more conversation and costume than active rehearsal'. The final recalled scene, with its verbal playfulness, is a correspondingly comical anticlimax of physical and dramatic impoverishment: 'We shivered unclad and impatient both as to our persons and to our aims, waiting alike for ideas and for breeches; we were supposed to make our dresses no less than to create our characters, and our material was in each direction apt to run short'.<sup>9</sup>

The tendency for a sense of precise content to defer to profuse and colourful material detail recurs in James's memories of his own early attempts at dramatic composition. 'Certain quarto sheets of ruled paper' were bought in Sixth Avenue, nearby, and he was grateful 'for the happy

almost sordidly smoothed, *thing* of the theatre, very much as an old infinitely-handled and greasy violoncello of the orchestra might have been' (*SBO*, p. 129).

<sup>8</sup> *SBO*, pp. 134 and 132.    <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

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provision by which each fourth page of the folded sheet was left blank', enabling him to add an 'illustration of what I had verbally presented'. This illustration, he conjectures, 'must have helped me to believe in the validity of my subject', and, indeed, aspiration seems to have outstripped more mundane necessities, as he confesses: 'I didn't at any moment quite know what I was writing about'. Nevertheless, the drama, and more specifically the idea of the scene in its formal unity, with a specialized terminology, and acknowledging traditional conventions, represented some early and natural predisposition. He sums it up (with an echo of Alexander Pope) as 'the scenic art': 'I thought, I lisped, at any rate I composed, in scenes . . . Entrances, exits, the indication of "business," the animation of dialogue, the multiplication of designated characters, were things delightful in themselves'.<sup>10</sup>

These selected moments from childhood illustrate an emotional and precocious commitment to theatre as spectator, performer, creator and critic. In later years, having been long exposed to its practical demands, and nurturing an ambition for success as a playwright, James continued to write about the medium. The earliest pieces reflect his life in America and Europe with reviews of drama staged in Boston and Paris, published plays and theatrical memoirs; he went on in 1875–6 to send back 'Letters' from Paris for readers of the *New York Tribune*; settling in London, he commented on the city's theatrical scene whilst keeping in touch with French performances and practices, and invoking the excellence of productions at the Théâtre-Français. Through to the turn of the century he continued to review plays, many of them productions of dramatists still familiar – Shakespeare, Sheridan, Boucicault, Sardou, Dumas  *fils*, Rostand and Ibsen – but he also wrote about many performances and occasions which, though now often forgotten, reveal a varied and colourful theatrical tradition. James was fascinated, too, by the great performers and practitioners, writing expansively and revealingly about two who were his friends, Benoît-Constant Coquelin and Fanny Kemble.

This material has served as a rich source for historians and critics, but embedded within these texts are strands of autobiographical detail which introduce a narrative dimension, part of the characteristically

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203. For a fuller consideration of a fictionalized representation of these themes, see Peter Collister, 'Henry James, the "scenic idea", and "Nona Vincent"', *Philological Quarterly* 94 (Summer 2015), 267–90.

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Jamesian mode, observations made by a distinctive voice and a more general impression of personal circumstances. Some, engagingly inconsequential, record his habit of purchasing for lunch in Paris a small gâteau ‘dispensed to you by a neat-waisted *pâtissière*’, followed by later disappointment (and corresponding linguistic impoverishment) at the ‘big buns and “digestive biscuits” which adorn the counter of an English bakery’. The reader may occasionally glimpse his solitude, too, as he dines alone, for instance, on a Parisian Sunday evening with a copy of *Le Temps* for company. These disclosures occur in a long 1877 essay on ‘London Theatres’ which appeared in the short-lived *Galaxy* magazine. James may have been short of copy, of course, but there is little doubt that he preferred to contextualize his judgments, to recreate the circumstances in which he attended performances, to represent and interpret a wider social scene. He admits his nostalgia for France, his viewing of London with ‘continentalized’ or ‘Parisianized’ eyes, as he recounts scenes in restaurants, advertising slogans in the streets, the purchase of expensive theatre tickets, travel to the theatre, the social mixture in the foyer, the variety of ‘types’ in this crowd, and the prevailing conditions of urban life. The British audience is typically composed of mild-looking ladies, their rosy-cheeked daughters and their honourable-looking gentlemen. By contrast, Parisians had appeared cleverer, more cynical, more Bohemian.<sup>11</sup> Scanning the audience in an earlier essay on the Parisian stage, he had noticed ‘a great many ladies with red wigs in the boxes, and a great many bald young gentlemen staring at them from the orchestra’. And, in the audience at the Palais Royal, he had been ‘struck with the number of elderly men, decorated, grizzled, and grave, for whom the stage has kept its mysteries’, and who continued (he notes with irony) to level ‘their glasses paternally at the lightly-clad heroines of Offenbach’.<sup>12</sup>

Theatre-going conditions in Paris could, nevertheless, be unpleasant, as he confided to his sister, Alice: ‘The insupportably bad air of the theatres as the cold weather disappears, makes it a heavy penalty to enter them’.<sup>13</sup> The city of the 1870s still testified to its recent history of war, siege and

<sup>11</sup> No. 32, ‘The London Theatres’, 1877.      <sup>12</sup> No. 2, ‘The Parisian Stage’, 1873, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Letter, 24, 25 May [1876], *CLHJ* 1872–1876, 3: 119.

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political unrest – James himself records ‘charred ruins and finding in all things a vague aftertaste of gunpowder’,<sup>14</sup> yet the opulent and newly built Opéra stands as a more reassuring testimony to history: ‘it is not beautiful; but no one can deny that it is superbly characteristic; that it savors of its time; that it tells the story of the society that produced it’.<sup>15</sup> A dozen years later, fashionable London society, with its dilemmas and obligations, is regarded as damaging to theatrical life when Dorriforth, James’s mouth-piece in a four-way discussion of the visiting Théâtre Libre company, complains of its ‘grossness and brutality . . . its scramble, its pressure, its hustle of engagements, of preoccupations, its long distances, its late hours, its nightly dinners, its innumerable demands on the attention, its general congregation of influences fatal to the isolation, to the punctuality, to the security, of the dear old playhouse spell’.<sup>16</sup> ‘Theatre’, as constituted in James’s essays, then, can range far beyond the play and its *mise en scène*; it involves the physical features of the building, its decor, the choice of seats, fellow members of the audience, its operation within society. It becomes a circumscribed place of public interaction as well as stage action, within which that ‘dear old playhouse spell’ must strive to operate.

James was frequently writing for American readers and much of this commentary on broader, sociological matters may have been intended to familiarize them with European conventions. His early letters for the *New York Tribune* were trailed (with hyperbole) as written by an outstanding cultural commentator: ‘His thorough acquaintance with Europe, and his intuitive perception of the salient points of life and character, render him one of the best equipped Americans who have ever crossed the Atlantic’.<sup>17</sup> His material must have caused problems for editors and typesetters in New York, however, as he complained of the errors which crept into the final texts. Aside from the challenges involved in reading his handwriting, it seems likely that some mistakes arose because editors were unfamiliar with the names of such actors as Febvre or Coquelin. James is always

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>15</sup> No. 15, ‘Paris Revisited’, p. 116.

<sup>16</sup> No. 44, ‘After the Play’, p. 359. ‘In London fourteen new theatres opened between 1880 and 1900’ (Hugh Hunt, Kenneth Richards and John Russell Taylor, *The Revels History of Drama in English*, vol. 7, *1880 to the Present Day* (London: Methuen, 1978), p. 8).

<sup>17</sup> 11 December 1875.

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careful, though, to signal cultural and linguistic difference, especially in more colloquial registers, commenting, for example, of the playwright Augier, that ‘he “goes in”, as they say in England, for the importance of the domestic affections’,<sup>18</sup> and, of the Haymarket Theatre, that it ‘has been “done up” . . . with great magnificence’.<sup>19</sup>

Though the immediate social circumstances to which James draws attention in his essays form a context for critical judgment, in discussing French theatre he appears to regard the genre itself as representative of national culture at a more general level, constituting ‘a copious source of instruction as to French ideas, manners, and characters’. His enduring touchstone for performance was, of course, the Théâtre-Français where he first rapturously encountered ‘Such art, such finish, such grace, such taste, such a marvellous exhibition of applied science’.<sup>20</sup> Though he hints that its ‘golden days’ may be over,<sup>21</sup> it remains an example of the value of traditions, ‘preserved, transmitted, respected, cherished, until at last they form the very atmosphere, the vital air, of the establishment . . . something consecrated, historical, academic’. He admires the level of preparation whereby even the most trivial gestures and business have been considered, where the production values are consistent, where diction and overall ‘finish’ are perfect, so that ‘you never observe an awkwardness, a roughness, an accident, a crude spot, a false note’.<sup>22</sup> The audience, an object of the critic’s observation once again, seems to contribute to this heightened sense of tradition and performance as he overhears two old gentlemen, ‘classic playgoers, who look as if they took snuff from boxes adorned with portraits of the fashionable beauty of 1820’, murmuring ‘ecstatically’ as the curtain falls on the actors Bressant and Plessy, “*Quelle connaissance de la scène . . . et de la vie!*”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> No. 34 [Review of Augier’s *Fourchambault*], p. 233.

<sup>19</sup> No. 37, ‘The London Theaters’, p. 263.      <sup>20</sup> No. 2, ‘The Parisian Stage’, 1873, pp. 3, 4.

<sup>21</sup> No. 18, ‘The Parisian Stage’, p. 130.

<sup>22</sup> No. 31, ‘The Théâtre Français’, p. 188. In the production of his own plays, James evidently found the renunciation of control over aesthetic or dramatic effects particularly disturbing, and was relieved, in some way, after the failure of *Guy Domville*, at being able to retreat to the comparative practical simplicities of novel writing.

<sup>23</sup> No. 2, ‘The Parisian Stage’ 1873, p. 7.

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The excellence of the Théâtre-Français lay too in the training offered by the Conservatoire Dramatique, whose best graduates became members of the company. There was no comparable institution in Britain; as early as 1882 James was talking of a proposed drama school in London, but it would be 1904 before the Academy of Dramatic Art was finally established.<sup>24</sup> For all its occasional, incidental virtues, without any training system, the British stage could not compete. In an 1879 essay he complains that ‘The world is being steadily democratized and vulgarized’, that England suffers from ‘an enormous class of people who have nothing in the world to do’, and so the keen amateur may aspire to become a professional performer. James himself has been subjected to ‘Recitations, readings, private theatricals, public experiments by amateurs who have fallen in love with the footlights’.<sup>25</sup> In adhering to the discipline of the Théâtre-Français, he values ‘the art of finished and beautiful utterance – the art of speaking, of saying, of diction, as the French call it’, and, advocating such technical achievement, he is one of the few critics of the time consistently to find fault with the most eminent of contemporary actors, Henry Irving. He admires him as a theatre manager and producer, but, in James’s eyes, the actor relies on effects, lacks vocal technique, and indulges in ‘peculiarities and eccentricities of speech’.<sup>26</sup> ‘an artistic education has had little to do with the results that he presents to the public’.<sup>27</sup> His performance of Macbeth is dismissed as ‘the acting of a very superior amateur’.<sup>28</sup>

James would go on to dramatize the art and discipline of acting in the mentoring of Miriam Rooth by Madame Carré in *The Tragic Muse*, but his values emerge clearly in the essays of this volume. He responds to individual performances, to tangible effects achieved within a company, regarding ‘the actor’s art’ as a ‘mystery’ (a skill as well as anything more romantic), ‘a thing of technical secrets, of special knowledge’, requiring

<sup>24</sup> Its ‘Royal’ status was conferred later; see No. 38, ‘London Pictures and Plays’, pp. 283–4.

<sup>25</sup> No. 35, ‘The London Theatres’, 1879, p. 236. The theme of the aspiring, untrained actress is quite common in the fiction of the time: for instance, Miriam Rooth in *The Tragic Muse*, Isabel Bretherton in Mrs Humphry Ward’s *Miss Bretherton*, Gwendolen Harleth in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*. Biographies of nineteenth-century actors reveal similarly haphazard means of reaching the professional stage.

<sup>26</sup> No. 35, ‘The London Theatres’, 1879, p. 237 and No. 37, ‘The London Theaters’, 1881, p. 255.

<sup>27</sup> No. 35, ‘The London Theatres’, 1879, p. 237. <sup>28</sup> No. 13, ‘[Henry Irving’s Macbeth]’, p. 105.

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'training,' 'a school, a discipline, a body of science'.<sup>29</sup> That scientific, disciplined 'art', a product of tradition, is palpable, he claims, in the building which houses the Comédie-Française, embodying the past, and transcending both time and death: 'Even if I had never seen Rachel, it was something of a consolation to think that those very footlights had illumined her finest moments, and that the echoes of her mighty voice were sleeping in that dingy dome.'<sup>30</sup> His living exempla of dramatic art are, predictably, French. The retirement of Madame Jeanne Arnould-Plessy in 1876, for instance, is regretted principally because she represents a disappearing tradition of expression and gesture: 'She was the perfect great lady of high comedy, as high comedy was possible before the invention of slang. She represented certain instincts and practices which have passed out of manners'. Her 'great art' gathers value because it is uniquely of the past and at risk.<sup>31</sup> That historic attachment, felt at a more personal level, becomes even more influential in James's extended essay on Fanny Kemble (who also had French family connections). Her name immediately places her in a distinguished line reaching back to the Romantic past – her aunt had been Sarah Siddons (Sir Joshua Reynolds's 'Tragic Muse'), her father Charles Kemble, and she had 'figured in the old London world'.<sup>32</sup> Her short acting career was over too soon for James, but she had been pointed out to him on horseback in New York when he was a child, and he would go on to hear her celebrated readings of Shakespeare on his boyhood visits to London.

Though James's portrait conveys a strong sense of Mrs Kemble's personality (he had known her well for some years), her strength as a performer is less fully represented. Other essays, however, more precisely characterize the personal qualities and imaginative insight which inform the greatest acting. 'First of living actors', Edmond Got had played a wide range of roles at the Théâtre-Français, and is praised as 'a *philosophic* actor. He is an immense humorist, and his comicality is sometimes colossal; but his most striking quality is . . . his sobriety and profundity, his underlying element of manliness and melancholy, the impression he gives you of having a general conception of human life and of seeing the relativity, as

<sup>29</sup> No. 35, 'The London Theatres', 1879, p. 237.      <sup>30</sup> No. 31, 'The Théâtre Français', p. 190.

<sup>31</sup> No. 25, 'Parisian Topics', pp. 161, 162.      <sup>32</sup> No. 48, 'Frances Anne Kemble', p. 399.

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one may say, of the character he represents'.<sup>33</sup> Such a strong presence suggests intelligence, discipline, a preparedness and inwardness, insight into the relative dynamics of performance – a seriousness which applies as much to comic as to tragic roles. James's admiration for Coquelin is based on similar attributes. The man whom he first knew when they were pupils at the same *lycée* in Boulogne is distinguished for his 'delivery of verse' and for the intensity of his commitment to a role, such as Le Duc de Septmonts in Dumas' *L'Étrangère*. It is composed 'all of fine shades and minute effects, all appearing to the finest observation as well as displaying it, which reminds one of the manner in which the writer of a "psychological" novel ... builds up a character ... M. Coquelin is really the Balzac of actors'.<sup>34</sup> Such an informed and meticulous approach to characterization seems to have been rare; Tommaso Salvini, another of James's favourites, admittedly without the training of the Théâtre-Français, is admired at a more subjective, less technical level: 'His generous temperament is contagious; you find yourself looking at him, not so much as an actor, but as a hero'.<sup>35</sup>

Whatever the individual qualities of these actors – and in James's assessments they sometimes seem resistant to any summary of specific attributes – the performing conventions and conditions of the time, the pace and emotional dynamics of events onstage, the sense of a physical, performing presence emerge very clearly. One of Salvini's great roles was Othello, and James, noting the actor's 'Italian imagination', recalls approvingly a performance which, to modern judgment, might seem melodramatic. In the scene of Desdemona's murder, with 'tiger-like pacing', he 'strides to and fro, with his eyes fixed on her and filled with the light of her approaching doom'. On her death, 'he falls into a chair on the left of the stage, and lies there for some moments, prostrate, panting, helpless, annihilated, convulsed with long, inarticulate moans'. Nevertheless, the scene has not fallen into 'excess': it retains 'the tremor of a moral element'.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> No. 31, 'The Théâtre Français', p. 196.      <sup>34</sup> No. 42, 'Coquelin', pp. 328, 333.

<sup>35</sup> No. 39, 'Tommaso Salvini', p. 293.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* This might be regarded as 'the grand style' (as opposed to 'realistic' acting) which 'did not die out in the 1880s and 1890s but continued to reinvent itself up through the twentieth century' (Joseph Donohue, 'Actors and Acting', *Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. Kerry Powell (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 20).