

HENRY JAMES'S DRAMATIC DRAMA: A CRITICAL ACCOUNT¹

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Abstract: The object of this paper is twofold. First, it seeks to offer a general assessment of Henry James's *dramatic drama* and of the biographic and artistic motives that lie behind his efforts to write for the stage. This assessment is in part an attempt to treat his theatre as a distinct pursuit from his *dramatic novel*, a metaphorical description which frequently conceals or distorts James's life-long, enthusiastic attachment to the stage. Second, it discusses the reasons –both textual and contextual– for his lack of success with critics and contemporary audiences.

Key words: Henry James, nineteenth-century British drama, dramatic novel.

Resumen: El propósito de este artículo es doble. Por un lado, pretende llevar a cabo una revisión general de la obra dramática de Henry James y de las motivaciones biográficas y artísticas que lo llevaron a escribir y a estrenar piezas teatrales. Esta revisión responde en parte a la necesidad de otorgar perfiles propios a dicha obra, diferenciándola de su *novela dramática* en tanto que denominación de carácter metafórico que a menudo oculta o distorsiona la prolongada y entusiasta dedicación de James al medio escénico. Por otro lado, se analizan y valoran las razones –tanto textuales como contextuales– que explican su falta de éxito ante los críticos y el público contemporáneo.

Palabras clave: Henry James, teatro británico del siglo XIX, novela dramática.

After ninety years of critical debate and analysis, it is quite commonplace to introduce Henry James (1843-1916) as the originator of the so-called *dramatic novel* in the Anglo-American literary world. This denomination, obviously founded on an overworked but felicitous metaphor, has been applied to his later novels and tales by a whole critical tradition commencing with Joseph Warren Beach and Percy Lubbock in their influential 1918 and 1921 books and continuing for decades in the works of countless critics and commentators.³ Even James himself very frequently resorted to the dramatic metaphor both in his notebooks and prefaces in order to describe his *modus operandi*, and any fond reader of his works recalls the obsessive injunction “Dramatise it, dramatise it!” (1984: 260) with which he used to exhort himself when deciding on the most appropriate development for one of his germs, *données*, or initial ideas.⁴ What is more dimly known, however, is that James produced a considerable body of dramatic works, in the non-metaphorical sense of

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³ Later works in the same tradition are those by Wiesenfarth (1963) and Isle (1968).

⁴ With slightly variant phrasing, this injunction is rife in James's prefaces to the New York edition of his novels and tales (see James 1984: 237, 239, 249, 251, 265, 267, 284, etc.).

the term, some of which were staged during his life-time while many others –to his distress– were only made public in periodicals or in book form because no theatre manager could bring himself to produce them. Some of these plays were entirely original and devised *ab initio* for theatrical production; others, however, were initially conceived, written, and even published as narrative works, and only through more or less complicated and lengthy processes of adaptation did they become suitable for the stage. The dramatic principle, therefore, presides over most of James's *œuvre*, and its crystallization either in *dramatic novels* or in *dramatic dramas* reminds one of an analogous phenomenon in James Joyce's works, for he wrote narrative prose deeply imbued with the features commonly associated with poetical language –e.g. the epiphanic passages of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or others equally remarkable in *Dubliners*, *Ulysses*, or *Finnegans Wake*– but also two collections of formal poetry which are less known and far less appreciated.

In comparison with the excellence and sweep of his narrative work, James's theatre is admittedly inferior and, in this respect, the parallel with Joyce's poetry entirely holds. Such subsidiarity not only informs the critical attention that has been bestowed on his plays, but, in many cases, even the phraseology used to refer to them. They are seldom studied in themselves as plays and, when they happen to be the alleged object of critical discourse, attention promptly wanders away from them and becomes focused on collateral issues such as their relation to James's later narrative phase, his highly disapproving stance on the contemporary English theatre as a social and cultural institution, his complex attitude to dramatic form and to the much wider phenomenon of theatrical experience –an attitude circumstantially ranging from ecstatic enthusiasm to utter discontent– or his problematic relationship with *fin-de-siècle* English audiences. Most of the time James's plays are simply looked upon as an instrument to gain better insights into his fiction and, occasionally, they are altogether ignored as when Francis Fergusson (1975), in full paradoxical fashion, derives his study of James's conception of the dramatic form *only* from his narrative works. Regarding phraseology, it is rather symptomatic that James's commitment to the theatre from 1890 to 1895 is consistently known among critics as his “dramatic adventure” and the resulting plays are usually referred to as “experiments”. Both labels bespeak dubiousness and provisionality, since both commitment and plays are considered unwanted deviations from a norm –in this case, his novelistic career– and also as many reasons to remonstrate with James over what he should have never done. As a rule, critics are reluctant to grant James's theatre full canonical status, simply because it would be as good as admitting that the Master had stooped to some embarrassingly poor work and also that he had adhered to mechanistic compositional procedures dangerously reminiscent of the “literary recipe” type, although this mechanistic bias is not at all absent from much of his narrative work –especially from his tales– and shows through very clearly in the methodological formulations of his prefaces.⁵

Any reader of *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother*, first and second parts of Henry James's autobiography, is acquainted with the fact that he entertained a life-long interest in the theatre beginning in his earliest years. Unfortunately, he had not much to choose from considering his locale –New York City– and, above all, the wretched state of

⁵ For a more extended discussion of this topic see Álvarez Amorós (1994).

drama in the Anglo-American world of the second half of the nineteenth century. The young Henry James mainly attended performances of Shakespearean works often adapted beyond recognition, spectacular music-hall shows, and crudely melodramatic productions. So it is not at all surprising that he developed a taste for melodrama which he hardly managed to avoid in most of his plays. He was first taken to the theatre at the age of seven and when he was about nineteen he submitted an appreciation of the acting of Miss Maggie Mitchell to an unnamed periodical whose answer was a "protracted silence" (James 1956: 448). In Europe, he continued his theatre-going, which he viewed as a way to grasp the civilization of the country he was visiting, for he firmly believed that the theatre –plays, acting, stage customs, audiences– was a faithful reflection of the society in which it occurred. Saturation with theatre gradually increased and by the end of the seventies he "thought of himself constantly as a playwright-in-the-making" (James 1990: 40). So the world of theatre on both shores of the Atlantic was one of the most compelling schools he ever attended and the one that left the strongest mark on him for the future.

The crucial question is why he deferred the performance of his first play until 1890 if he had been writing playlets and plays since he was in his twenties. To answer this question, however, one must work in the thorny field of personal motivation, never well mapped in the case of James. The key reason for this delay seems to be that the practical aspects of the theatrical enterprise put him off, though he kept making ill-founded excuses such as his immediate need for money, his inability to pursue a narrative and a dramatic career simultaneously, and the absence of opportunities (James 1990: 42-43). All of these, however, seemed to mask his authentic fear of "the practical odiousness" of the theatrical condition (James 1974-84: 3.29). He somehow felt that he had little to win, and much to lose, as far as reputation was concerned and was not prepared to seek approval of his works from *impresarios* and conceited actors. Furthermore, the theatrical career meant sharing with others the responsibility for his creations and placing them in the hands of people he did not fully trust. All of these factors seem to have originated a sort of mental block that prevented his earlier access to the theatre as a staging playwright.

Yet, at some point in time, the circumstances that had kept him away from the stage yielded to the motivation factors: either the latter had grown objectively stronger or simply managed to command his attention more effectively. This happened at the end of the eighties, a decade in which James's stature as a man of letters had risen in inverse proportion to the circulation and readership of his writings. His novels had forsaken the characteristic theme of the clash between American and European cultures and had attained a high psychological complexity that alienated many of his previous readers. So he decided to alter the course of his career and thought that the theatre might do well for a change. The justification that recurs in his writings with more conviction and explicitness is his urge to make money, which can also be invoked to explain his second assault on the theatre seventeen years later in the Edwardian period. Evidence of this urge can be easily culled from his notebooks and correspondence, especially from his 1891 letter to Robert Louis Stevenson (James 1974-84: 3.326, 3.337), though similar passages can be multiplied almost *ad libitum*. In a notebook entry dated May 12th, 1889, he vents his frustration in the following terms:

I had practically given up my old, valued, long cherished dream of doing something for the stage, for fame's sake, and art's, and fortunes's: overcome by the vulgarity, the brutality, the baseness of the condition of the English-speaking theatre today... I simply *must* try, and try seriously to produce half a dozen—a dozen, five dozen—plays for the sake of my pocket, my material future. Of how little money the novel makes for me I needn't discourse here. (James 1987: 52)

In this excerpt, James explains why he delayed embarking on his theatrical career and how material reasons finally encouraged him to work for the English stage. In his correspondence with Alice and William James he also tends to foreground economic profit. In an 1890 letter to Alice, he feels as if “there had been a triumphant première and... [he] had received overtures from any managerial quarter and had only to count... [his] gold” (James 1974-84: 3.285); in the same letter he complains of the “poverty-stricken condition of the English repertory” but nonetheless feels happy because it means that his plays will stand out more clearly and bring him “profit indeed, and an income to my descendants” (James 1974-84: 3.286). On January 9th, 1895, a few days after the *première* of *Guy Domville*, he writes to his brother William in a mood of ironic confession: “The thing fills me with horror for the abysmal vulgarity and brutality of the theatre and its regular public—which God knows I have had intensely even when working (from motives as ‘pure’ as pecuniary motives can be) against it” (James 1974-84: 3.508-509). It must be recognized, however, that the importance James gives to the monetary question may square well with the scorn he feels for his unsophisticated audiences, but is rather inconsistent, *prima facie*, with the spiritualized love he claims to profess for drama.

Other motivation factors have also been invoked by critics—mildly shocked at James's materialism—to tone down his constant craving for money. It is usually argued that James was comfortably well-off, and that his insistence on money was a sort of cover-up, created out of shyness, to justify his renewed desires to get his plays staged. According to this interpretation, James really turned to the theatre as a way to satisfy his yearning for acceptance, popularity, success, appreciation, and communication, which he considered seriously endangered in view of the reception his works had been afforded in the eighties. This is not contradictory with his desire for artistic freedom and independence, since what he actually wanted was to be appreciated *on his own terms*, without making concessions. Hence the cynical mood of disappointment and anger with which he met the necessity to compromise with the realities of the stage. He tried to obtain the acceptance of the general public by casting off the artistic aims that had characterized his novels of the late eighties and by adopting a set of dramatic conventions which he had seen at work in Paris and thought appropriate to the task in hand. As Leon Edel has pointed out, nobody can deny him his agonizing efforts at “meeting the stage on its terms and communicating to the audiences” even at the price of his own convictions (James 1990: 52).

The dramatic formula he chose also reveals another motivation factor: his long-felt desire to reform and civilize the English stage according to French standards. “As a drama critic”, writes Kossmann, “he rightly saw the virtues of the well-made play as contrasted to the exotic extravaganzas and gothic melodramas of his day” (1969: 12). James's reforming purpose conflicts, at least partially, with his more worldly design of making money out of

the theatre for the very simple reason that forcing a new type of play on an audience fed for decades on a different dramatic style is usually doomed to financial failure. It is likely that he believed audiences to be tired of poor plays and tasteless adaptations and that his imported dramatic skills along with some well-timed concessions would win the day. But he was mistaken because his plays were generally at odds –through deficient stagecraft– with their alleged civilizing purpose, although the French formula of the *pièce bien faite* would have made a good foundation for the kind of reform James sought if it had been handled more competently in questions of dialogue and characterization. As a third factor –apart from his alleged monetary needs– one can hypothesize, as Graham Greene has done, that “[h]e was challenged, as an artist, by a new method of expression; the pride and interest in attempting the difficult and the new possessed him” (Greene 1991: 3.347). In view of James's experimental contributions to the narrative genre, this factor remains true to his creative personality and should not be dismissed even if it seems inconsistent with his professed materialistic purposes.

From a cursory glance at his dramatic career, one may get the wrong impression that James concentrated his creative efforts in the very short period intervening between 1890 and 1895, that is to say, from the adaptation and staging of his first play, *The American*, to the dreadful first night of *Guy Domville*. This impression is probably based on the account of his dramatic trajectory given by Leon Edel in his biography of Henry James and in the essential introductory essay to the edition of his plays (James 1990: 19-69). I am not implying, of course, that Edel is not accurate or refrains from telling the whole story. The fact is that he managed to relate with such vividness the hectic six years which James devoted to writing and staging plays, as well as the *premières* of *The American* and *Guy Domville* –the one hopeful, the other distressing– that the rest of his achievement melts into the background and one tends to believe that only existed what has been enhanced by Edel's powerful narrative.

James's dramatic canon is made up of seventeen plays, which can be distributed in three creative phases. Only four were professionally mounted during his life-time and precisely these four never reached commercial publication in periodical or book form. Of the seventeen only *seven* were written or adapted in the lapse of six years between 1890 and 1895, and this fact should suffice to prove that his dramatic effort is far from confined to this period. His initial period comprises four plays –*Pyramus and Thisbe* (1869), *Still Waters* (1871), *A Change of Heart* (1872), and *Daisy Miller* (1882).⁶ It is the time of exploration and practice, his works yielding nothing but some interesting snatches of dialogue and a great deal of melodrama, especially in *Daisy Miller*. The middle period has been universally know as James's “dramatic years” since Edel unearthed and edited his plays. Anybody minimally acquainted with James's narrative knows, however vaguely, that he made a pause in his novel-writing between 1890 and 1895 and concerned himself with the theatre, an experience that somehow intensified the Modernist features of his later fiction. The plays in question are *The American* (1890), *Tenants* (1890), *Disengaged* (1892?), *The Album*

⁶ The dates given in brackets after the titles of plays indicate their approximate date of composition and not that of publication or performance since many of them were only made public in 1949 in Leon Edel's edition of James's complete dramatic works (James 1990). Occasionally, however, the bracketed years will coincide with the date of publication or performance.

(1891), *The Reprobate* (1891), *The Chaperon* (1893; unfinished scenario), *Guy Domville* (1893), and *Summersoft* (1895). The fact that he gave up novel-writing and devoted his talents to the theatre marks a veritable turning point in his career, but, contrary to his own assertions, his commitment to playwriting was not absolute. He kept preparing material for future novels –as attested in his notebooks– and wrote many short stories, especially his celebrated writer-hero tales, which reflect the growing mood of anxiety and frustration that overcame him as he struggled to find a middle course between what the theatre demanded from him and what he was prepared to sacrifice to his goal.

With the failure of *Guy Domville* on January 5th, 1895, came the end of his middle phase, but *not* of his dramatic career, which extends well into the twentieth century. Rather unfairly, the adverse reception of the *première* of this play has become the popular image of the reception of *all* of his plays and this is far from the truth. Successive performances of *Guy Domville* were reasonably well received and even its first night elicited a favourable review from George Bernard Shaw (James 1990: 479-80). Apparently, however, James could not be persuaded to try again since at the end of 1893 he had already resolved to give up his theatrical adventure should he encounter further difficulties. His letter to William James dated December 29th, 1893 sounds final and even the vehemence of the language reveals a man at the end of his tether, though still concerned with material gain: “I mean to wage this war ferociously for one year more –1894– and then (unless the victory and the spoils have by that [time] become more proportionate than hitherto to the humiliations and vulgarities and disgusts, all the dishonour and chronic insult incurred) to ‘chuck’ the whole intolerable experiment and return to more elevated and more independent courses” (James 1974-84: 3.452). James was fortunate after all because he enjoyed the privilege of a second chance of much higher artistic significance. This he announced in his notebooks eighteen days after the failure of *Guy Domville*: “I take up my old pen again –the pen of all my unforgettable efforts and sacred struggles. To myself –today– I need to say no more” (James 1987: 109).

The theatrical experiences of the middle phase not only influenced James's conception of the novel from a technical point of view, but also brought about perceptible changes in subject and attitude in his narrative works of the transitional period between 1895 and 1900 as a kind of response to the ordeal he had suffered. He begins, for instance, to write about children –which he had never done before– in disturbing atmospheres of fear and corruption as in *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and “The Turn of the Screw” (1898); he explores psychologically disturbed young adults as the telegraphist “In the Cage” (1898) or the governess in “The Turn of the Screw”; he deals with violent murder in the narrative version of *The Other House* (1896); and he reproduces the plight of fellow writers unappreciated by the public in his numerous writer-hero tales dating from this period. Finally, there is a sudden surfacing of sexuality both in his fiction and in his letters that he had always managed to keep repressed. His correspondence features words such as “phallus”, “penis”, “bottom”, “*derrière*”, etc. (cit. James 1974-84: 4.xviii) and his treatment of promiscuity in *What Maisie Knew* leaves the reader in no doubt about his new, close attention to the physical aspects of the human body.

His later, or Edwardian, dramatic phase was a considerably more relaxed episode. He had already renounced his hopes of attaining success in the theatre but theatre came his

way and this fact, along with the little expectation aroused by the New York edition of his novels and tales, prompted him once more to write and adapt plays. To this period belong *The High Bid* (1907), *The Saloon* (1907), *The Other House* (1908), *The Outcry* (1909), and the *Monologue* he wrote for the American actress Ruth Draper in 1913. Twelve years had elapsed since he turned away from the theatre in 1895 and his renewed efforts were made against an entirely different social and artistic background. Ibsen, for instance, had already been assimilated into the dramatic mainstream and his proposals were no longer disturbing. Shaw and Granville-Barker, for their part, had demonstrated that the early twentieth-century audiences could be attracted with ideas, and that intellectual stimulation was not a hopeless utopia. In this context, James revived his international theme in *The High Bid* and *The Outcry*, but, above all, brought a diffident social outlook into his plays that no longer were the stark entertainment they had previously been, perhaps with the exception of *The American* –which had been a novel– and *Guy Domville* –which dealt with a psychological conflict. In *The High Bid* we are presented with a young radical hero more concerned with his advanced political ideas than with preserving the family estate; in *The Saloon* a young pacifist refuses to follow the militaristic traditions of his family and pays for his decision with his life in an eerie denouement; *The Other House*, James's most Ibsenian play, dramatizes a violent love triangle which involves the fulfilment of a death-bed promise; and, finally, *The Outcry* voices the contemporary unrest about the constant exportation of British art treasures to America.

James's dramatic production can be accommodated under the overall heading of the melodramatic comedy of manners based on the conventional structure of the well-made play, which implies clever plots, no loose ends, and characters taking a secondary role as mere precipitates of action and not the reverse. Some plays occasionally acquire a strong element of farce owing to the presence of caricature and absurd situations, *Disengaged* being a case in point. As can be expected, there are deviations from this general norm as well as frequent changes of emphasis. For sympathetic critics such as Susan Carlson, James's plays offer "a unique blend of comedy and culture" and can be said to hold a place "in the transformation of the turn-of-the-century British stage" (1993: 413, 408). Following Edel and Kossmann, James's drama used to be seen as the English progeny of French standards, but, more recently, its links with the tradition of the British comedy of manners have been underlined and its Ibsenian features highlighted, perhaps in an effort to find a creditable ancestor for his dramatic career.⁷ Other critics, however, belittle the influence of French dramatists and strongly qualify Ibsen's presence, but give no plausible alternative (Auchincloss 1975: 105-106). One may wonder why James did not choose to follow the Ibsenian wake rather than the example of the Théâtre Français, in particular when Ibsen worked at least formally within the tradition of the well-made play. The answer is twofold: on the one hand, James disliked the bitterness, gloom, and bourgeois atmosphere of his plays, and, on the other, the Ibsenian fashion only became relatively popular in the Edwardian period and

⁷ See Carlson (1993: 411) and especially her book *Women of Grace: James's Plays and the Comedy of Manners* (1985).

was a poor choice –at least in 1890– for a dramatist who had embarked on the theatrical career for pecuniary reasons.⁸

Generally speaking, James's playwriting skills reside in his capacity to dramatize particular situations, devise plot-oriented plays with farcical touches, and organize materials scenically with a keen eye for visual effect. But he fails in the creation of true-to-life dialogue and in fleshing out credible characters by means of the strictly limited methods the stage affords playwrights. He falters when he has to bring out individual identity, and so feels at ease with a full gallery of caricatured stock-characters including "imperious older ladies who order about young men and women; mock villains that candidly admit their wickedness; servants whose retorts reflect upon the inanity of their masters' demands", etc. (Auchincloss 1975: 107). Of special note are his female characters who, in agreement with the conventions of drawing-room drama, are placed in positions of power, though these positions, of almost carnivalistic quality, are later defused through marriage, as happens, for instance, in *The Reprobate* or *The High Bid*. One is also surprised by the abnormal abundance of widows cast in prominent roles –Mme. De Katkoff in *Daisy Miller*, Claire de Cintré in *The American*, Mrs. Jasper in *Disengaged*, Mrs. Freshville in *The Reprobate*, Mrs. Peverel in *Guy Domville*, Mrs. Gracedew in *The High Bid*, etc.– and the only explanation is that James found them convenient as experienced women, but without the taint of indecency about them.

Within its modest limits, James's playwriting was not static and his later plays exhibit a considerable improvement in stagecraft, though exclusively from a structural point of view. He attained a more mature handling of the mechanisms of the well-made play and did not resort to obtrusive asides and expository monologues so frequently as before, as though he implicitly acknowledged the growing influence of fourth-wall theatre. Yet he never managed to flesh out his characters by means of dialogue, which moreover became less dramatically viable as his celebrated later style encroached upon it and made it almost impracticable for the purposes of stage delivery.

In the initial, exploratory phase of his dramatic career, James wrote three original plays and an adaptation of a narrative work. *Pyramus and Thisbe* –published in the *Galaxy* in April 1869– is a short conversation piece dealing with the discovery of love by Stephen Young and Catherine West, a process which, unlike its classical precedent, ends happily. The plot is very tenuous and relies excessively on coincidence and error, as when bouquets and packages keep being delivered to the wrong apartments, but the dialogue is brisk, albeit too literary, and there is a certain amount of interaction between the two characters. *Still Waters* first appeared in the *Balloon Post* in April 1871. It is a one-act play which also deals with the discovery of love, but here the situation is more complex as there are three characters, Horace, Felix, and Emma, involved in a love triangle. The language is also too emphatic and melodrama seeps through, though the main weakness of the play is the excessive use of asides –thirty-two in all– as awkward substitutes for the kind of mental analysis James never managed to achieve through dialogue and physical gesture. Published by the *Atlantic Monthly* in January 1872, *Change of Heart* is already a well-made play in

⁸ More details about James's view of Ibsen's drama can be found in Álvarez Amorós (2008, especially 317-318).

miniature. However, Martha and Staveley's discovery of love –their change of heart– is too sudden and seems largely unmotivated, a problem inherent in the brevity of the one-act play that James had not yet solved. With *Daisy Miller* James effected the first adaptation of his dramatic career and, unable to have it staged, first printed it privately in 1882 and then published it in the *Atlantic Monthly* in April-June 1883.⁹ The plot of the play differs considerably from that of the narrative, especially in its melodramatic happy ending, for Daisy survives and marries Winterbourne instead of dying of malaria. The main virtue of this play is the adroit handling of several plots which operate simultaneously and are resolved in the denouement, i.e. a sheer technical achievement in the line of the French well-made plays. But *Daisy Miller* hardly stands on its feet owing to its melodramatic emphasis, its numerous asides, and its unfortunate display of a whole gallery of stock-characters taken from nineteenth-century melodrama.

After *Daisy Miller* James gave up playwriting for almost eight years and, when he resumed it in 1890, he produced the dramatic adaptation of *The American*. It was privately printed in September 1891, had its *première* at the Winter Gardens Theatre of Southport on January 3rd, 1891, and started its London run at the Opera Comique Theatre on September 26th, 1891.¹⁰ Both in Southport and in London the piece enjoyed a moderate success, being the only play to have brought James some money. It was nevertheless an utter simplification of the 1877 novel, full artistic disgrace being reached when, some time later, James agreed to give it a happy ending in the marriage of Christopher Newman and Claire de Cintré. Technical subtlety was lost and nothing came to replace it; characters and their motives were schematized to the point of caricature; and melodrama levelled the highly original complexity of the narrative work. Newspapers received it rather coldly and its only positive effect was to teach James that “his best theater would not grow from his fiction” (Carlson 1993: 414).

Immediately after *The American* there followed four plays that appeared in two volumes since he met unexpected difficulties to have them staged. In 1894 James published *Theatricals: Two Comedies* comprising *Tenants* and *Disengaged*, and the next year *The Album* and *The Reprobate* were brought out under the title of *Theatricals: Second Series*. Curiously enough, the most interesting feature of these volumes is not the plays they contain, but rather their respective prefatory notes showing James's feeling of anger and anxiety at their publication “in a form which is an humiliating confession of defeat” (James 1990: 255), as well as his criticism of the state of the contemporary English theatre. As to the plays, they are contrived comedies –“little entertainments... experiments in the line of comedy” James calls them (1990: 255)– with trivial plots about love intrigues, practical jokes resulting in unwanted engagements, and gross misjudgements of character. They are generally well-constructed pieces but, once you have read round and past their technical subtlety, you are confronted with a fearful void. Characters are non-existent except as foreseeable types, action is restless, and denouements range from the melodramatic to the farcical. All four plays, but especially *Disengaged*, bear witness to the “sterility of the kind of playwriting he admired in a Scribe or Sardou” (Kossman 1969: 54).

⁹ For further details on the private printing of *Daisy Miller*, see Edel and Laurence (1982: 55).

¹⁰ See Edel and Laurence (1982: 77) for the private printing of *The American*.

As we already know, *Guy Domville* closes James's middle period as a dramatist but not his whole career. Privately printed in October 1894, this play obviously differs from anything he had done before in that it dramatizes a psychological conflict and develops the theme of worldly renunciation against a Catholic background.¹¹ Furthermore, it is a costume piece set in 1780 and, according to Edel, shows Ibsenian traits in the way its author "shaped [it]... for a handful of characters and chose a critical moment in the hero's history" (Edel 1985: 406). Its protagonist, Guy Domville, is James himself. Both were intended to follow demanding vocations like the church and the world of art; both deviated from their respective courses fascinated by mundane affairs such as becoming an aristocrat or a famous dramatist; eventually both failed and, having acquired a new maturity, resumed their original projects. The problem lay, of course, in the fact that *Guy Domville* ended in disappointment and subsequent seclusion and not in a successful marriage as prescribed by the rules of the genre for any comedy that developed along distinctly romantic lines. Edward Compton, actor and stage manager, called James's attention to this incongruity, but he refused to make further concessions and the play was enacted in its original form (Edel 1985: 403; James 1974-84: 3.412-13n). The failure of the *première* of *Guy Domville* is a crucial episode in James's life and the merciless booing and hissing that closed the performance left an indelible mark upon his consciousness. Precisely for this reason, his early complaint in 1875 that "the wholesome old fashion of hissing has in the English theatre fallen into disuse" (James 1948: 25) constitutes a cruel piece of unintended dramatic irony which he never managed to contrive for any of his plays.

Summersoft is placed astride the middle and the later phases of James's dramatic career because, though written in 1895, it was only staged in 1907 after having been subjected to a process of adaptation and expansion that resulted in a similar but much longer play entitled *The High Bid*. It was originally commissioned as a one-act curtain-riser for Ellen Terry, the American actress. But when she failed to produce it, James turned it into a tale called "Covering End" which he published, along with "The Turn of the Screw", in *The Two Magics* (1898). Almost ten years later, he extracted *The High Bid* from "Covering End" and the play was staged first in Edinburgh in 1908 and then in London the following year with a fairly good critical reception. The plot of this romantic comedy is simple and straightforward; the language is in character most of the time; melodrama is ingeniously kept under control in the final love scene; and some cautious touches of social concern link it with its context and prevent it from being an abstract piece of entertainment. *The Chaperon* only survives as an unfinished rough statement that partially dramatizes his previous story "The Chaperon" (1891), in which the daughter of a woman with a past anxiously watches her mother lest she should lapse into old sins. *The Saloon*, for its part, is the last play to have gone on the stage in James's life-time. It is a dramatic adaptation of his tale "Owen Wingrave" (1892) and was staged on January 17th, 1911. It presents a young aristocrat who refuses to go to Sandhurst for reasons of conscience and is presumed murdered by the ghost of one of his ancestors in a lurid closing scene.

None of the three remaining plays was ever mounted during James's life-time. *The Other House* originated as a dramatic scenario for a play called *The Promise* in 1893;

¹¹ For further details of its private publication, see Edel and Laurence (1982: 98-100).

later on, James availed himself of this scenario to write a novel, *The Other House* (1896), in implicit recognition that the dramatic methods suited his narrative projects very well. Twelve years later, he turned the novel again into a drama in a display of what could be aptly called “generic fluidity”. Whether in narrative or dramatic form, *The Other House* shows clear Ibsenian features: the setting is rural, the plot concerns a bunch of characters caught in crucial moments of their lives, the antagonist Rose Arminger reminds us of Hedda Gabler, etc. But James never attained Ibsen's intensity and stylistic economy and the play very quickly degenerates into melodrama, all the more so when a little child is murdered in the process. One of the reasons that has been posed for the unattractiveness of the piece is James's inability to bring out Rose's character in a convincing way. The motives for her evil nature are never sufficiently dramatized and her wickedness remains unexplained throughout the whole play as if this were no more than a mere appendage that only suits her in terms of plot development.

Of all his later plays, it is *The Outcry* that probably establishes the most obvious connections with contemporary social and cultural issues. It was written first as drama and then became a rather successful novel when its staging proved impossible. Along with *The High Bid*, it reintroduces the international theme, this time referred to the presence of wealthy Americans in London wielding their cheque-books and ready to ravage the art treasures of old Europe. In a notebook entry dated July 15th, 1895, he spoke of the “Americans looming up –dim, vast, portentous– in their millions –like gathering waves– the barbarians of the Roman Empire” (James 1987: 126). The basic theme of *The Outcry* is the conviction that art treasures truly belong to the nation within which they were generated and their legal owners only hold them in trust and have to answer for their conservation and security. The difficulty with this play is again its language: it is all too Jamesian, and of his later period at that, to be dramatically viable. All characters speak alike and their periods are so long, convoluted, and punctuated by parenthetical clauses that it was difficult to find actors capable of delivering them. In this connection, one may as well bring up the reference Shaw made to James's undramatic dialogue on the occasion of the posthumous *première* of *The Outcry*. “There is a literary language which is perfectly intelligible to the eye”, writes Shaw, “yet utterly unintelligible to the ear... At the last-mentioned performance I experimented on my friends between the acts by repeating some of the most exquisite sentences from the dialogue... but not one of my victims could understand me or even identify the words I was uttering” (1923: 339). In sharp contrast to the dialogic style of *The Outcry* is the *Monologue* written by James in 1913 for the American actress Ruth Draper. Though it is very short, its language remains consistently in character and discloses the energetic, domineering personality of the protagonist in a faithful and accurate way.

After this brief review of James's dramatic production, a final critical assessment is called for. It seems clear that, except for a few hits, his plays fall below the artistic standards he had set for, and sustained in, his fiction. The question is, of course, why he was unable to make the theatre his own territory as he had managed to do with the novel. H. M. Walbrook, a contemporary critic, recalls in 1919 that James used to read plays by novel-writing colleagues and point out their flaws in “pages of high and helpful illumination, putting his finger precisely on all the weak points, and showing how in a play the story must be a progression rather than a position...” (1991: 2.493-94). Walbrook, however, cannot explain

why James never managed to put his solid theoretical vision to practice and produceactable plays as other contemporaries of incomparably lesser talents constantly did. But the greatest problem of all is that James both failed as a popular dramatist and as a highbrow one, thus receiving the polite but firm strictures of learned colleagues as well as the indifference, if not the derision, of the public at large.

Four main aspects of James's stagecraft seem to account for his failure. First, his poor adaptation to the rules –both textual and contextual– of the new genre and, particularly, to its performance-oriented nature. “To produce his drama he has had to cease to be himself” (James 1968: 166), he said of Tennyson rather censoriously, but found himself in the same quandary some years later.¹² Narrative and dramatic texts exhibit obvious structural differences, as well as a whole set of textual devices that cannot be carried over from one to the other owing to the performative nature of drama. In my view, James's fundamental difficulty lies in the fact that he never succeeded in finding suitable substitutive devices to convey to the spectator the aspects of the fictional world usually expressed by the frame text or narrator's discourse in novels. So he could never effect a smooth transition between what Kossmann calls “[t]he successful picture of psychological realism” and “the palpable and audible reality” of his plays (1969: 131). Likewise, he never managed to instate in the structure of his drama any valid replacement for narrative mediation and point of view.

This affects another aspect of his stagecraft that has been found defective –the construction of character. Character is a fundamental component of drama but, on the stage, it must be created out of dialogue and physical gesture, i.e. by means of scenic and not of pictorial methods, according to James's own terminology (1984: 298, 322-323). The existence of narratorial amplifications or even explicit mental analysis is thus inhibited. James felt this absence acutely and, in a desperate effort to make up for it, turned to an overwhelming use of stage directions that seems as cumbersome as it is parasitic. At times, they fulfil the same roles as the much-missed narrative frame text and the following passage taken from *The Saloon* bears this out quite conclusively:

(... She wears it, as she wears three or four quaint ornaments, of no great value beyond their picturesqueness, a necklace-chain of Oriental beads, several times wound around, and sundry other effective trinkets with a certain conscious assurance, a slightly amused though also a slightly desperate defiance: all of which things mark her as a distinctly striking and original and not at all banal young person, who will be sure to take in all connections and on all occasions a line and a tone of her own; with the full, and not at all unbecoming or ungraceful, confidence of being able pretty well to keep them up). (James 190: 653)

Up to “banal young person” James is giving exceedingly elaborate but genuine stage directions, though phrases such as “with a certain conscious assurance, a slightly amused though also a slightly desperate defiance” may rather sound as novelistic description of

¹² Quite revealingly he adds: “But the writers in prose or in verse are few who, after a lifetime spent in elaborating and perfecting a certain definite and extremely characteristic manner, have at Mr. Tennyson's age suddenly dismissed it from use and stood forth clad from head to foot in a disguise without a flaw” (James 1968: 167). This applies, word for word, in the case of James.

Kate Julian's bearing. From this point onwards, however, James *generalizes* and, instead of giving instructions so that the text can be enacted, he begins to speculate about Kate's presumed behaviour in other circumstances as he would have done in any of his novels. He never developed techniques to reveal character through dialogue and visual strategies, and only very occasionally did he manage to communicate individual essence to his creatures by endowing them with a distinctive idiom. Besides, character in his plays is second to plot, much to the contrary of what happens in his later novels which can be considered painstaking psychological pictures of gifted individuals. Being merely pivots on which the action turns, James's characters can hardly be recalled independently of the plots they participate in. Under the circumstances, one is reminded of folktale actants and of the type of functional analysis Vladimir Propp performed on them in his classical *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928). James constructs his characters from without, mechanically, as mere conveniences for plot development, and in the process of fitting them to this Procrustean bed they are deprived of dramatic attractiveness and human relevance.

Dialogue is another weak point of James's stagecraft. He never seemed to grasp the fact that the burden of theatre falls almost entirely on this and so that it must be comprehensible, attractive, and –in the kind of realistic comedy he cultivated– becoming to the speakers, i.e. verisimilar. Otherwise, as has been argued above, it is impossible to flesh out characters appropriately, in particular when there is no narrator's discourse ready to supplement explanations or provide mental glimpses to prevent an important nuance from being overlooked. But instead of simplifying his dialogue and adapting it to its new responsibilities, he allowed his later style to intrude upon it with the following result:

COYLE. (*Changing his posture; just a trifle dryly and pedagogically.*) Let us hope so! But I'm not "new", as a matter of fact –after two such intimate and interesting, two such happy seasons of him– to any of poor Wingrave's scruples, doubts, discoveries: beautiful high convictions on matters no one else –no one ever, before *him*, in the flower of his youth– has happened to think off. (James 1990: 652)

This dialogue is quite simply unactable, on account of the sheer lack of performers capable of delivering such unnatural lines with any amount of naturalness. And even if suitable actors were found, there still remains the problem of the audience, who would have a difficult time following these meandering sentences and their successive parenthetical clauses –in particular when going backwards and reading them again was manifestly impossible.

In the last place, I would like to mention James's absolute indifference towards finding his own organic voice as a dramatist, that is to say, a voice stemming from his experiences as a keen observer of reality and as a conscientious man of letters. What he did was simply to look round, pick out a set of dramatic rules he liked and deemed successful, and apply them unflinchingly in the face of failure and widespread criticism. And moreover he came to choose precisely the most mechanic and rule-ridden subgenre available at the time, the *pièce bien faite*, with its insistence on well-formed plots to the detriment of individual character. From this perspective, it seems an ironic inconsistency that James should have spent years complaining of the "theatrical strait-jacket" (1990: 348) imposed on his plays by unappreciative managers when, of his own accord, he himself was forcing an even tighter

one on them. Thus he drained his drama of the complex characters and moral issues with which he was populating his novels and seemed quite satisfied with the human sterility of plays exclusively founded on clever plots and irrelevant subjects. By no means did his *modus operandi* go unnoticed at the time and, as evidence of this, the writer of one of the reviews received by *Theatricals: Second Series* concluded that James's work would be better "had he allowed himself to be guided by his own instincts" (en Carlson 1993: 416).

In addition to these four aspects of James's stagecraft, which lie at the root of his middling performance as a dramatist, one can also find secondary problem areas such as the triviality of his themes, the persistence of melodrama in his plays, his hesitant attitude towards the quality standards that befitted his work, and his disabling ambivalence towards the whole theatrical endeavour which I have discussed elsewhere (Álvarez Amorós 2008). At least until his Edwardian phase, James's choice of subject-matter eschewed everything that was not wholeheartedly directed at amusing the audience. So his earlier plays are only based on love triangles or love intrigues set in well-to-do atmospheres that exclude any reference to social questions. In fact, none of his seventeen plays fails to exhibit a love affair in a prominent position of plot and theme, perhaps with the exception of *The Saloon*. As to the quality standards, James never managed to make up his mind whether he wanted to be popular with the average theatre-goer or respected by the intellectual coterie. At times, he bows to the audience and agrees to change the fourth act of *The American*; at times, he refuses to do the same with *Guy Domville* and the play sinks on its first night. Apparently, he always inhabited an odd no man's land spread out between the dictates of his artistic conscience and his earnest aspirations to leave his seclusion and meet the other, whatever the cost. But even when he sacrificed his principles, risked the disapproval of his peers, and was thoroughly ashamed of his own condescension, he was still unable to "realise the sort of simplicity that the promiscuous British public finds its interest in" and felt "as much 'out of it' as ever, and far above their unimaginable heads" (James 1974-84: 3.413n).

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