Henry James's Reconsideration of the Female Theatrical Performance in his Fiction

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Abstract

The article shows the reforming dimension of Henry James's literary works in which he subverts the traditional order of dramatic elements by arguing for the primary importance of the theatrical performance. He defends the status of the female public performer amongst the hostile societal conditions of the nineteenth century. He emphasizes the importance of public performers in conveying the meaning of the play, re-instates the dignity of actresses and shows their engagement in a political quest for selfhood. The article analyzes the figures of actresses in James's lengthy novel *The Tragic Muse* and two short stories "Nona Vincent" and "The Private Life".

Key words: theater; performance; dramatic script; actress: public

James's obsession with drama was motivated by the rise of theater in the second half of the nineteenth century. That period witnessed "a serious attempt to raise the status of theater and to create a 'legitimate' and respectable stage divorced from the world of variety and music hall" (Gardner 7). James strives to revive the glory of theater and questions its former neglect as a genre. Not only does James enrich the period with his dramatic works and critical contributions, but also seems to convey his theories and attitudes about the theater and drama through his fictional works in which he deals with the dramatic elements which range from dramatists and scripts to performers, audience and the stage. He accords a great importance to theatrical performance as a public representation and explores the relationship between performers and observers, thinking that the stage is a proper public space for actors to utilize the material of plays to transmit indirect political messages. That is why he thinks that the female acting is a profession that includes political dimensions. Since "acting was becoming a more acceptable, and certainly a more popular profession for women during the second half of the century" (Sanders 118), James makes it a central theme in a number of his works. He shapes a subversive image of the female public performer while representing her as active, intellectual, competent and conscious of gender roles. In his fiction, the actress is a pragmatic philosopher whose meditation of the inherent codes of culture molds her secret plan of action. Her eagerness for cultural change makes her conquer the stage as a symbol of the public world and the antithesis of the home or the private world. If the theater in general is a public zone where social views and attitudes are transferred to the public, the participation of women in public performances carries a political message to the audience and to society as a whole. "[A] double consciousness is embedded in the process of theatre," argues Lizbeth Goodman, "to reach an audience the theatre 'text' becomes a public event mediated by a range of technological and social considerations, manipulating a larger public consciousness of the social function or 'role' of theatre" (197).

James gives a primary importance to theatrical performance as a way to revise the Aristotelian order of the dramatic elements. He redefines the dramatic principle by giving primacy to the spectacle in contradiction with Aristotle who thinks the spectacle is the least artistic of all the parts of tragedies and cannot be compared to the art of poetry. Although Aristotle recognizes the emotional attraction of the spectacle, he argues that the power of tragedy is not fully dependent on its performance and that the inner structure of the play rather than the spectacle is able to arouse pity and fear. The Aristotelian view is a part of a long tradition that sees theatrical representation as a supplement to the written text; it stresses the ontological primacy of scripts over the performance. Although James does not deny the importance of scripts, he believes that acting remains crucial and very artistic. As a reaction to that marginalization of performance, he presents a kind of a radical revision of the critical literary theory that has neglected theater as a genre and covered only drama, and tries to fight the old anti-theatrical prejudice by insisting on the role of the performer in the success of the play.

James was unique among his contemporaries in his belief in the importance of the role of the actor in the representation of the dramatic play. Unlike Howells[1], for example, who does not grant the actor a creative role in the process of representation and who thinks that acting is "a thing apart and a subordinate affair; though it can give such exquisite joy if it truly interprets a true thing" (Murphy 33), "James consider[s] the actor's art an integral part of the aesthetic process" (Murphy 33). James moves from the dictatorship of the author to the

[1] William Dean Howells (1837-1920) is an American realist writer and literary critic. His realistic fiction including *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and *Annie Kilburn* (1888) describes the daily life of middle classes and criticizes the social changes in America in the *fin de siècle*. He also writes plays, criticism, and essays about contemporary literary figures such as Henrik Ibsen, Emile Zola, and Leo Tolstoy.

collaborative work and from the prioritization of writing over speech and of script over performance to an integrated process of representation. He was an *avant-gardist* who called for the unification of effort between the dramatist, actor and director. That cooperative spirit was actually realized towards the second half of the twentieth century when "collaborative working methods replaced the hierarchy of dramatist-director-actors. No longer working in isolation, the author lost creative independence, and the notion of the text as the intellectual property of the writer was rejected as not analogous to class divisions, but associated with the male power of structure" (Innes 451). The decentralization of the author and the destruction of his authority constitute a sign of James's feminist pattern in negating the singularity of reign. That departure from the old aesthetic values which call for the domination of certain elements over others goes hand in hand with James's call for the equality between the sexes and translates his feminist thought.

James denies neither the role of the dramatist nor that of the director, but he asks for a more comprehensive gratitude for the efforts of the actor. In their valuable book *The Theatre as a Sign-System*, Elaine Aston and George Savona argue that "everything which is presented to the spectator within the theatrical frame is a sign" (99). If the dramatist is the originator of the "linguistic sign-system" and the director is responsible for the "the theatrical sign-system" (Aston & Savona 100), "the actor is therefore shown to be a site for the transmission of auditive signs relating to text. . ., as principal site of visual signification" (Aston &Savona 106). Performance as a theatrical representation is a necessity for the dramatic script where the actor functions as a link between the dramatic and the theatrical. James's main theme in "Nona Vincent"[1] is drama's doubled status as text and performance in the process of representation. The short story describes the attempts of a dramatist to get his work staged and shows how he gets disillusioned with his own belief that the script of his play is the noblest and most important among the other dramatic elements. After facing the reality of the stage, Wayworth discovers the prominence of theatrical performance and recognizes the role of the actress who will play the heroine of his work: "He felt more and more that his heroine was the keystone of his arch" ("NV" 9). After his first experiments with the theater, he admits the vitality of the theatrical representation for the play, saying: "I can only repeat that my actress IS my play" ("NV" 13).

Nona Vincent, the female protagonist designed by Wayworth in his drama cannot remain a mere character in a script, but should be represented and concretized as a flesh-and-blood character on the stage. Wayworth becomes convinced that the visual sign produced by the performer is vital to make the work come to light. This idea obsessively haunts him that he is visited by the *living* ghost of his heroine: "Nona Vincent, in face and form, the living heroine of his play, rose before him. . . She was not Violet Grey, She was not Mrs Alsager. . ." ("NV" 17). The physical presence of the heroine in the dream stands for the necessity of concretizing her on the stage; the dramatist is delighted to see his imaginary character manifesting before him: "She filled the poor room with her presence, the effect of which was as soothing as some odour of incense. . . If she was so charming, in the red firelight, in her vague, clear-coloured garments, it was because he made her so . . . she smiled and said: "I Live-I live-I live" ("NV" 17). Nona Vincent uses all human senses to prove that she is living; she stimulates Wayworth by playing on his visual, auditory and olfactory senses; the same stimuli used by the performer on the stage to fascinate his audience. The reiteration of the phrase "I Live" reawakens Wayworth and shakes his mind about his arrogant theories on the singular effect of dramatic scripts. When he asks his landlady whether she saw a woman in his room, Wayworth shows a confusion between reality and dream, a (con)fusion which

[1]Hereafter referred to as "NV".

symbolizes the need of an artistic merger between the text as dream and performance as reality.

James attempts once again to deconstruct the Aristotelian order of the dramatic elements since he lays all the responsibility on the performer. When Aristotle places the character second in importance after the plot, believing that characters represent their moral qualities through the speeches assigned to them by the dramatist, he maintains the sovereignty of scripts and discards the role of the performer in the representation of the character. Contradictorily, "James believed that the actor, like any other artist, must be granted his donnée-in this case, his conception of the character he was to play. It was the actor's task to come up with a conception of the role that was actable" (Murphy 33). He even reverses the dramatic principle by situating performance on the top and argues for the ontological primacy of the actor over the character. In the nineteenth century, "the script tended to be so conditioned by the personalities of the particular performers that the roles became transferable" (Innes 451- 2). The fact that the dramatists "fitted parts to actors and not actors to parts" (Booth 145) was considered by some critics as weakness in the English drama and one of the major accusation against playwrights. In critical essays on the performers of the London theater, it is maintained that the author's "principal design in forming a character is to adapt it to that peculiar style of the actor, which the huge farces have rendered necessary to their existence" (qtd in Booth 145). When it comes to James, he thinks that the actor is a determining factor for the script and believes in the dependence of the dramatist on the actor and not the opposite. He even goes further when he sees the actor able to raise the status of the author the way that Violet Grey constructs the success of Wayworth's play and creates his fame. He places the actor in a superior position and shares the view that "the seemingly gross defects of the author are transformed by the magic of the theatre into the triumphs and glories of the actor" (Booth 153).

James believes that the characters are most of the time inspired by figures in the author's mind and designed according to the available actors; otherwise the role may fail by the failure of its representation given that the success of the work depends on the actor's understanding of the role. In "Nona Vincent", James focuses on Mrs Alsager as the woman who inspires Wayworth in the creation of his protagonist and shows how he pleads with her to act the role: "She has your face, your air, your voice, your motion, she has many elements of your being" ("NV" 6). All through the short story, there is a triple identification of the same woman who haunts Wayworth's mind. Nona is molded around the mysterious character of Mrs Alsager and Violet collaborates with Mrs Alsager to produce a successful representation of Nona. In the same vein, James deconstructs the singularity of the dramatic text and the fixity of its meaning. He makes it supple in the hands of performers who provide their own reading of the characters they will represent. Violet Grey or "the interpretress of Nona" ("NV" 12) gives her own interpretation of the heroine until Alsager visits her and leads her to a different reading. The difference between Violet the actress and the character of Nona is that the first "was terribly itinerant, in a dozen theatres but only in one aspect" while Nona Vincent "had a dozen aspects, but only one theatre" ("NV" 7).

James fights the singularity of meaning, believes in the multiplicity of interpretations and considers that performance is always a deviation from the original text. The performer's rewriting of the play within the process of representation becomes inevitable and thus sanctioned. Julie Rivkin confirms that "What drama with its performative supplement is emphasizing is that the artistic ideal can never live or be made present in any pure form but must instead depend on some medium of representation that necessarily deviates from it" (17). The idea of the performer's interpretation of his/her role is re-emphasized in *The Tragic*

Muse[1] when Gabriel Nash assumes that Madame Carré, the great actress, "had to interpret a character in a play, and a character in a play . . . is such a wretchedly small peg to hang anything on! The dramatist shows us so little, is so hampered by his audience, is restricted to so poor an analysis" (*TM* 50). As an artist, he insists on the inevitability of the rebirth of the text where the reader replaces the author and sets him apart: "What we contribute is our treatment of the material, our rendering of the text, our style" (*TM* 120). James's desire to deconstruct the authority of the text and decenter the authorship in the dramatic field goes hand in hand with his attempt to involve the reader in the process of writing. He shores up the connecting grounds of writer-reader interaction and encourages the reader's participation in his narratives.

The performer's interpretation of the character is considered by dramatists as a distortion of the original text. They think that their texts should be faithfully transmitted to the audience and they consequently lose their confidence in performers. They underestimate their renditions because they think that they cannot conform to the original script. The arrogance and dictatorship of dramatists create a kind of phobia from theatrical performance. Alsager who is the source of Wayworth's heroine, along with Wayworth, reckons that Violet is incapable of representing her: "She does what she can, and she has talent, and she looked lovely. But she doesn't SEE Nona Vincent. She doesn't see the type - - she she doesn't see the individual - - she doesn't see the woman you meant. She's out of it—she gives you a different person" ("NV" 16). Although James is convinced that the actor is required to understand the role, he objects to the belief in the oneness of meaning and thinks that the presence of the actor on the stage is significant. Wayworth is afraid that Violet may alter the image of his dramatic figure; he wishes to see Alsager in the role because Nona is a duplication of her: "Certainly my leading lady won't make Nona much like You" ("NV"10). James seems to recognize the difficulty of the performer's task to approximate the image of the character to the audience. Violet herself is nervous and afraid of the first performance: "She was even more nervous than himself, and so pale and altered that he was afraid she would be too ill to act" ("NV"103). Wayworth is aware of her fear; he"guessed, after a little, that she was puzzled and even somewhat frightened - - to a certain extent she had not understood" ("NV" 9). Violet knows the challenges of her profession and the difficulty of her task; that is why she keeps inquiring about the character: "She asked him [Wayworth], she was perpetually asking him" ("NV" 9). Because of her perseverance and refusal of failure, Violet ultimately succeeds in the role and proves that performance is crucial to the success of the dramatic work.

Actresses are conscious of the difficulty of their mission; they believe that they are responsible for the success of the role and that the satisfaction of the audience is not easily attained. Like Violet who appears agitated in her first performance of the play, Miriam Rooth displays the same fear when she is first tested by her future coach Madame Carré: "She began to speak; a long, strong colourless voice came quavering from her young throat. She delivered the lines of Clorinde, in the fine interview with Célie, in the third act of the play, with a rude monotony, and then, gaining confidence, with an effort at modulation" (*TM* 89). Miriam and Violet do not succeed in their first representations of their characters because of their anxiety about success and obsession with the desire to convince. Miriam's attachment to her hopes for a great career makes her strive to convince Madame Carré; her only concern is to please the lady who can give her the epitome of her experience and teach her the principles of acting: "She had been deadly afraid of the old actress, but she was not a bit afraid of a cluster of *femmes du monde*, of Julia, of Lady Agnes, of the smart women of the Embassy" (*TM* 100). Miriam pays no attention to her bourgeois viewers but only manifests obsession with acting.

[1] Hereafter referred to as *TM*.

All what she demands is the satisfaction of her patroness who is her unique source of knowledge. The young lady "was always alive . . . She had a great deal to learn – a tremendous lot to learn" (*TM* 331).

That tendency to learn presents actresses as ambitious women in James's literary works. Miriam's surrender to Madame Carré, despite the latter's offensive stiffness, indicates her patience and solidity of purpose. The narrator insists on "the brightness with which she submitted, for a purpose, to the old woman's rough usage" (*TM* 134). The young apprentice draws her itinerary and sets her goal from the very beginning; she pointedly tells Peter: "I will, I will, I will . . . I will succeed-I will be great" (*TM* 110). The reader is able to perceive "the bright picture of her progress" (*TM* 375) from her debut till the fulfillment of her dream of playing Shakespeare. Miriam is in a perpetual quest; the secret of her success is that she never gets satisfied. Despite her glories, she still looks for better and new roles that publicly place her in a greater position: "Miss Rooth moreover wanted a new part . . . she had grand ideas; she thought herself very good-natured to repeat the same thing for three months" while she was playing the romantic drama *Yolande* (*TM* 329).

James insistently reiterates the same idea of the endless ambition of successful actresses in "The Private Life"[1] with Blanche Adney who is still in need of a greater part despite her advanced age. When she plans with the narrator to make an assault on the private sphere of Clare Vawdrey, the dramatist, she is motivated by her longing for a great script. The interdependency between scripts and performance always occupies James's thought: just as that Wayworth needs the right actress for his play, Blanche needs the right play to exteriorize her performing abilities. She "had the old English and the new French, and had charmed for a while her generation – but she was haunted by the vision of a bigger, chance, of something truer to the conditions that lay near her. She was tired of Sheridan and she hated Bowdler; she called for a canvas of a finer grain" ("PL" 107). Like Miriam, Blanche refuses to repeat herself for years; she is dynamic and ground-breaking. Her insistence and firmness of purpose make Vawdrey give her the part for which she has immemorially longed. Age is not an impediment for change: "She was forty years old- this could be no secret to those who had admired her from the first . . . It gave a shade of tragic passion – perfect actress of comedy as she was – to her desire not to miss the great thing" ("PL" 106). In her plan, Blanche shows a more vivid determination than the narrator who turns to be a loser. In the end, although she produces the play, "she is still [ ] in want of the great part" ("PL" 132). James insists that the actress, who evidently symbolizes the new working woman, is in a permanent search of herself as an essential part of society. In order to preserve her freedom, she should never step back into the ages of passivity and surrender.

Ambition and determination are more effective if they are joined with talent; if the actress trusts her artistic competencies, she is more eager to learn and succeed. James links ambition with talent in the character of Miriam; it is in Miriam's utterance "I want to play Shakespeare" (*TM* 94) that James shows the actress's two qualities by commenting on the histrionic manner by which she expresses her ambition: "Her voice had a quality, as she uttered these words" (*TM* 110). Miriam's ambition is validated by her talent in acting; her success is due to the interaction of these two values in her personality: "Miriam had her *ideas* or rather she had her *instincts*, which she defended and illustrated, with a vividness superior to argument" (emphasis added, *TM* 336). Her ideas are in harmony with her natural gifts; she resolutely defends her capabilities and confidently seeks progress in her profession. James endows his female performers with high qualities; they appear powerful, independent, and

[1] Hereafter referred to as "PL".

self-confident. He describes Miriam as "perfectly sure of her own" in the preface of *The Tragic Muse* (*The Art of the Novel* 94). In "Nona Vincent", the narrator highlights Violet's self confidence in her second performance: "She WAS in it this time; she had pulled herself together, she had taken possession, she was felicitous at every turn" ("NV" 18). With James, talented actresses prosper because they are aware of the value of their gift and feel determined not to get it wasted.

In contrast to what domestic novels plotted, James redefines woman's position in society through the characterization of competent and powerful female figures. In her book *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong surveys the history of the novel and studies the rise of the domestic woman in fiction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She claims that certain writings assumed that the ideal woman "had to lack the competitive desires and worldly ambitions that consequently belonged – as if by some natural principle - to the male" (59). In such fiction, one can see a culture in the process of rethinking, at the most basic level, the dominant aristocratic rules for sexual exchange. Most of these works were conduct books which reinstated the cultural rules and taught women the domestic economy. Armstrong shows that these authors produced the historical conditions that have made modern institutional power seem natural and humane, desirable as well as necessary. Within this bulk of domestic fiction in which the image of woman echoed a desire for what was called the Angel in the House, James emerged as a writer who privileged woman in his fiction and provided her with the qualities of which she had been deprived in other fiction. Rivkin thinks that "Nona Vincent" is "an old tale . . . for women to be comforted for their exclusion from various forms of artistic production with the line that their beauty is art incarnate" (20). The short story can be read as an allegory of the dependence of art on representation, and of men who were taken as the artists par excellence on women who were seen invalid in the domain of art. Mrs Alsager is the savior of Wayworth; she is portrayed as "even more literary and more artistic than he" ("NV" 1). She revises his work: "You must leave it with me, I must read it over and over," then encourages him to stage it: "And now - -to get it done, to get it done!" ("NV" 4). Alsager is sensitive to the dramatic art in particular; "she liked the theatre as she liked all the arts of expression, and he had known her to go all the way to Paris for a particular performance" ("NV"2). Contrary to the traditional archetype of woman produced in literature, Alsager "loved the perfect work- she had the artistic chord…she could understand the joy of creation" ("NV" 2). Her portrait changes the ideal of perfection from the angel ideology to art. She does not apply to the ideals of True Womanhood since she is liberated and childless; she fails in procreation but succeeds in making Wayworth creative in his dramatic art.

Yet, James distinguishes between the conception of the dramatic theory and the artistic talent. Mrs Alsager, for instance, "had not the voice – she had only the vision" ("NV" 2); she has an artistic taste but not the talent. When Wayworth regretfully tells her: "Oh, if YOU were only an actress!," she replies: "That's the last thing I am. There's no comedy in ME" ("NV" 5). James portrays Mrs Alsager and Violet as two female artists; the first has the vision and the second has the talent. Their portrayal takes us back to the character of Olive Chancellor in *The Bostonians* as a script designer and Verena Tarrant as an eloquent speaker. Meditating the gallery of the Jamesian female characters, we can draw a comparison, for example, between the talent of Verena and the faculty of Miriam. If Verena has the verbal power to convince, Miriam is able to change very flexibly from one character to another: "the plastic quality of her person was the only definite sign of a vocation" (*TM* 92). However, contrary to Verena whose performances are controlled by her script writer, Olive, Miriam goes towards "controlling her own performances" (Allen 114) to represent both vision and talent. She

perfectly manipulates her voice and articulates her intonation to fit for the role. What she mainly does in her second performance in front of Madame Carré is "reproduce[ing] with a crude fidelity, but with extraordinary memory, the intonations, the personal quavers and cadences of her model" (*TM* 132). The narrator describes her outstanding performing abilities on the stage, saying:

> the powerful, ample manner in which Miriam handled her scene produced its full impression, the art with which she surmounted its difficulties, the liberality with which she met its great demand upon the voice, and the variety of expression that she threw into a torrent of objurgation. It was a real composition, studied with passages that called a suppressed 'Bravo' to the lips and seeming to show that a talent capable of such an exhibition was capable of anything. (*TM* 226)

James highlights Miriam's talent in the text in a poetic manner: "She was beauty, she was music, she was truth; she was passion and persuasion and tenderness…And she had such tones of nature, such concealments of art, such effusions of life, that the whole scene glowed with the colour she communicated" (*TM* 455). By labeling Miriam "a muse", James uses a natural concept to describe her talent. He presents a subversive image of the female public performer by insisting that it is nature which endows women with extraordinary faculties contrary to what is stated by the sexual myth. Woman is not created to be uniquely a wife and a mother and should not be imprisoned by and within her own biology to obey the cultural manifesto.

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