Subverting the Traditional Elements of Drama in Henry James's Fiction: Upturning the Spectacle and Boosting the Female Acting

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to reveal Henry James's subversion of the traditional order of the dramatic elements as defined in the main male literary canon, not in his plays but more interestingly in his fictional works which deal with the world of theater and acting. In his fiction, James questions the norms and reacts against the literary and cultural absolutes set by the same male authority symbols through his elevation of the status of the spectacle from which women should not be excluded. Aristotle seems to be replaced by a modern feminist counterpart who destabilizes the classical theory of drama by jumbling the order of its components in favor of the nineteenth-century emerging figure of the actress as a basic constituent of the spectacle. His new drama theory reserves a space for female performers and fosters woman's talent and artistic competency. James provides a positive image of actresses and shows that acting for women translates their commitment to a political quest for selfhood rather than an engagement with exhibitionism.

Keywords: Drama, theatre, performance, spectacle, actress

Introduction

The American writer Henry James is seen closer to literary modernism than to realism because of his break with the main literary traditions and violation of the major rules of the canonical literature. Critics mainly analyzed his innovative techniques in fiction but generally neglected his reform of the dramatic theory and his desire to revive the theatre. In fiction, James believes in the priority of the character and the workings of the human mind while discarding the traditional focus on the plot. Likewise, he disrupts the Aristotelian arrangement of the dramatic elements in the following order: theme, plot, characters, language, music, and finally spectacle; and reconstructs a new classification of those components. It is a new theory that can be extracted from his fictional works, especially those that take acting as their major theme. He deems the spectacle vital for the play and thinks that the actor is the chief constituent of drama and the first responsible for the success of the play. In parallel with his rejection of the classical dramatic rules, James brings to the fore the role of the female performer on the stage in a process of discarding the patriarchal ideology which excluded woman from the realm of art and deprived her of a fair public visibility.

James's subversion of the drama theory which is based on a hierarchical thought and set by the same authoritative Father who excludes women from literary production and artistic creativity goes hand in hand with his positive representation of the female performers in his fiction. James upends the order of Aristotle's hierarchy to invalidate the male standards of literature which was positioned as "'the norm' presented as if it were literature with capital 'L', somehow representative of all 'great writing'" (Goodman, 1996, p. ix). He reacts against the main literary canon, described by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1989) as "a long masculinist tradition that identifies female anatomy with a degrading linguistic destiny" (p. 82). His rebelliousness in the field of drama targets the Aristotelian theory which privileges the theme over the spectacle, the character over the actor, and certainly the actor over the actress. In order to reveal his objection to such a hierarchical thought which reflects the binarism that underlies the patriarchal ideology, James engages with a literary project that would demonstrate woman's artistic talent, display her skills and competencies and defy the commonly-held low opinion of actresses. He aims at sublimating the spectacle which can include the female presence, believing that it is the spectacle that breathes life into the plays and it is the actor who entices the audience to be a regular theatre-goer.

The theatre offers the space for women to express their desire for the desertion of their domestic cages and involvement in public life. Performance becomes a sign, a set of messages transferred to people, it is a means of interaction between actresses and their observers, an opportunity for women to show their artfulness, challenge their confinement and assert their dignity. For James, female acting becomes a journey of self-confirmation, a trip for self-discovery. He fashions a subversive image of the female public performer while representing her as active, intellectual, competent and conscious of the gender roles. In his fiction, the actress is a pragmatic philosopher who conquers the stage in order to deconstruct the inherent codes of culture. She shows up as emancipated, narcissistic in her love of herself, proud of her corporeality and powerful with her femininity.

James seems to be fascinated by female acting, for the protagonists and characters of a number of his works are actresses. This choice could refer to the fact that "acting was becoming a more acceptable, and certainly a more popular profession for women during the second half of the [nineteenth] century" (Sanders, 1989, p. 118). Miriam Rooth, the protagonist of *The Tragic Muse*, Blanche Adney in "The Private Life" and Violet Grey in "Nona Vincent" incarnate

woman's eagerness for cultural change through their invasion of the stage as a symbol of the public world and the antithesis of the home or the private world. In addition to its artistic function, the participation of women in public performances can bear a political dimension. The fact of having a woman present at the center of a public space, addressing a mixed audience and celebrating her emancipation can be a positive message. Goodman (1997) talks about the political use of the theatre as a space through which the actor can convey messages to his audience, claiming that: "[A] double consciousness is embedded in the process of theatre, 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" (p. 197). In the nineteenth century, the theatre was popular enough to appeal to outstanding talents and invite a large public.

Background

The reasons behind James's concern for the theater and female performance in his fiction were historical and cultural, especially that the contemporary era was one of extravagant staging with a new emphasis on the actor as celebrity and the director as a theatrical professional. Technological innovations on stage in the 1800s, 1820s and by mid nineteenth century contributed to the rise of the theater and the proliferation of the dramatic material. James's obsession with the theater made him develop a network of friendships and acquaintances with actresses, playwrights and actor managers. His connections included Elizabeth Robins, Ellen Terry, Fanny Kemble, G. B. Shaw, A. W. Pinero, William Arker, George Alexander, Johnston Forbes-Robertson, Edward Compton, Augustin Daly, and Harley Granville-Baker (Carlson, 1993, p. 409). His care for female genius on the stage made him admire and befriend the famous actress Fanny Kemble who had made her first début in 1829, fourteen years before his birth. He was engrossed by her art and fond of her as a person; he describes her as "one of the consolations of [his] life" (as cited in Karelis, 1998, p. 3). The appealing images of actresses in his fictional works were therefore inspired by his female acquaintances in the domain of theater.

James's deep interest in the theater made him an expert critic and efficient observer where his devoted play-going almost to the end of his life resulted in an adept spectatorship. He often theorizes about stagecraft and acting; he for example thinks that the architectural changes of the stage are necessary to sustain the illusion of reality. His study of contemporary theater gave birth to "a body of dramatic theory," as suggested by Allan Wade (1957, p. xxiv) who collected James's essays on theater in a book entitled *The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama 1872 – 1901*. As a critic and theorist, he wrote thirty-two essays on the English, French and American theater and on actors and playwrights from 1872 to 1901.

James appreciates male and female performances and develops a sharp critical eye for them, yet he gives more room to the criticism of the female recitations than to the male ones. His veneration for Mademoiselle Aimée Desclée, for instance, in one of his essays on the Parisian stage is obviously declared through his description of her as "the first actress in the world" and high evaluation of her rendition in *La Gueule du Loup*, when he says: "She has been sustaining by her sole strength the weight of [that] ponderous drama." (1957, p. 9). He wrote a whole essay about Madame Ristori in which he comments on "the abundance of her natural gifts [which] makes the usual clever actress seem a woefully slender personage, and the extreme refinement of her art renders our most knowing devices, of native growth, unspeakably crude and puerile" (p. 29). In another essay on the Parisian stage in the same book, he classifies Madame Judic as the favorite actress of the day before Céline Chaumont (p. 46). He calls

Mademoiselle Favart "a great talent" in *Le Théâtre Français* and states that she seemed to him "a powerful rather than interesting character" (p. 87). As far as Madame Plessy is concerned, he claims that she has "a certain largeness of style and robustness of art" (p. 90).

In London theaters, he prefers Mrs Kendal who is "the most agreeable actress on the London stage. This lady is always pleasing and often charming" (1957, p. 108). Ellen Terry appears to him an exception in her feminine side on the English stage; he claims that she has a "remarkable charm" and is "very natural" (p. 142). As a comedian, Mrs Marie Bancroft is described as a "delightful actress with an admirable sense of the humorous, an abundance of animation and gaiety, and a great deal of art and finish" (p. 149). The criteria of his judgment of female performance are related to the degree of cleverness, powerfulness, naturalness, charm and femininity. He cries out for an actress who unfetters her talents and stops bridling them for the sake of conventions and criticizes the actress who trivializes her skills in order to conform to the norms. He comments on London actresses, saying: "The feminine side, in all, the London theatres, is regrettably weak, and Miss Terry is easily distinguished … to represent the maximum of feminine effort on the English stage" (p. 142).

As a reformer and a feminist, James asks actresses for more enthusiasm, audacity and liberation for the representation of their own sex. This reformist spirit is made clear when he avers: "The actresses are classically bad, though usually pretty, and the actors are much addicted to taking liberties" (1957, p. 76). In his novel *The Tragic Muse* (1890), James may have aimed at creating the ideal actress through the portrayal of its protagonist Miriam Rooth as a successful celebrity and complete artist. He also appears to condemn the performers' destructive weakness and lack of determination when he makes the feeble Verena Tarrant, the heroine of *The Bostonians* (1886) bury by her own hands her oratorical gifts and performative power and consequently let her feminine charm be deluged by the flood of conventions.

James's dramatic criticism affected his fictional work not solely in the choice of his characters' occupations and structuring of their psychology, but also in the general use of the dramatic form in his novels (which often function as comedies and tragedies) and the specific use of the scenic method within his texts. James introduces the "dramatic scene" in the novel as related to the emotional development of the character. According to Stephen Spender (1987), James's dramatic style is a revolution with which "the novel has, of course, in the presentations of passions, never broken quite away from the tradition of the theater… in the description, we see the alignment of characters; in the scenes we witness the release of emotions, the expression of passion" (p.104). The theater allowed James to explore "the self as performance, to give himself up to what he called 'different experiences of consciousness'" (Wilson, 1998, p. 41). The Jamesian fictional works, from which a new dramatic theory can be extracted, transcend themselves the genre boundaries where the dramatic principle is injected into the fictional carcass. In *The Bostonians*, many big scenes mark the development of the action climaxing in the big theatrical scene of the conclusion set up in a theater while arousing the same theatrical emotional effect. In *Henry James and the Experimental Novel*, Sergio Perosa (1983) describes these scenes as "sensational, melodramatic scenes – coups de théâtre – rather than dramatic scenes" (p. 26). *The Tragic Muse* similarly contains intense and compressed scenes, articulating sequences and showing actions through dialogues. In *The Art of the Novel*, James (1984) describes its narrative method as follows: "the whole thing has visibly, from the first, to get itself dare in dramatic, or at least in scenic conditions" (pp. 89–90). He uses the dramatic method within the framework of the pictorial style; in *The Literature of the American People*, Clarence Gohdes describes the work as "a series of rich prose pictures of scenes" (as cited in Perosa, p. 21).

In the novels of the following decade, the narrative method will rely more and more on dramatic presentations of little actions and minor events. Preserving the dramatic style, James relies on the march of action through the application of limited point of view and scenic form aiming at "synthetic compression" (Perosa, 1983, p. 48). *The Awkward Age* (1899), for instance, is one of his avant-garde novels of that period; it is theatrically structured around dialogues and trialogues. It is modeled upon the play script where each of the "acts" is divided into numbered units or "scenes" which are evenly distributed among the ten-character-named books of the novel. James is so tempted by drama that he loses the genre motif in his writings and establishes what he calls a "contact with the DRAMA, with the divine little difficult, artistic, ingenious, architectural FORM that makes old pulses throb and old tears rise again" (Carlson, 1993, p. 411).

After instilling the dramatic techniques into his fiction, James moved to the writing of plays as a self-sufficient genre. Following his first period extending from 1865 to 1882 in which he discovered his cosmopolitan subject and developed his international theme, James shifted to realistic political themes as concretized in his two long novels: *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*. Then he closed this second phase with the world of art tackled in *The Tragic Muse*. The years between 1890 and 1895 are labeled by Leon Edel James's "dramatic years" in which he sought to revive his fortunes by turning to the theatre. James's disastrous attempt to conquer the stage brought into being seven plays which encountered public humiliation because of their overliterariness that led to their unstageability. Carlson (1993) classifies James's dramas into three clearly defined time periods, starting from *Pyramus and Thisbe* (1869) to his dramatic years when he wrote *The American* (1890) and *Guy Donville* (1893) for example, and ending with his later plays like *The Saloon* (1908) and *The Other House* (1908). Some plays are theatrical adaptations of his own fiction like *Daisy Miller, The American*. Others like *The Other House*, the scenario for the play preceded. However, if James fails as a playwright, he succeeds as a theorist by rebelling against the old rules of the game and delivering an innovative view towards drama theory through his fiction.

Highlighting the Spectacle

James gives a primary importance to 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 the 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, hence reinforces the authority of authorship and echoes the patriarchal hierarchical spirit. Even though James does not deny the significance 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 James, William Dean Howells, for example, does not grant the actor a creative role in the process of representation and 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, 1990, p. 33). James, on the other hand, "consider[s] the actor's art an integral part of the aesthetic process" (Murphy, p. 33). He moves away from the dictatorship of the author to the 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:

> [C]ollaborative 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, 1992, p. 451).

The decentralization of the author and the destruction of his authority constitute a sign of James's feminist pattern of 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 gender equality 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: A Semiotics of Text and Performance*, Elaine Aston and George Savona (1991) argue that "everything which is presented to the spectator within the theatrical frame is a sign" (p. 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, p. 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, p.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] (2001), originally published in 1892, 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 the 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" (James, "NV", p. 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", p. 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", 2001, p. 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

[1] Hereafter referred to as "NV".

as soothing as some odor of incense… If she was so charming, in the red firelight, in her vague, clear-colored garments, it was because he made her so . . . she smiled and said: "I Live-I live-I live" ("NV", 2001, p. 17).

Nona Vincent uses all the 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/her 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 symbolizes the need of an artistic merger between the text as dream and performance as reality.

James attempts once again to invert 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 thrusts aside 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, 1990, p. 33). He more interestingly 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, 1992, pp. 451–2). The fact that the dramatists "fitted parts to actors and not actors to parts" (Booth, 1973, p. 145) was considered by some critics as weakness in the English drama and one of the major accusations 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" (as cited in Booth, p. 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, p. 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", 2001, p. 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 denounces 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", 2001, p. 12) gives her own interpretation of the heroine until Alsager visits to 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", p. 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 (1996) 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" (p. 17). The idea of the performer's interpretation of his/her role is re-emphasized in *The Tragic Muse*[2] (1978), originally published in 1890, 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*, p. 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*, p. 120). James's desire to deconstruct the authority of the text and decenter the authorship in the dramatic field is in harmony 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 in the script is considered by the 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 of 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", 2001, p. 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", 2001, p. 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", p. 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", p. 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", p.9). Violet ultimately succeeds in the role and proves that performance is crucial to the accomplishment of the

[2] Hereafter referred to as TM.

dramatic work due to her perseverance, determination, tenaciousness and ambition.

Externalizing the Qualities of the Female Performer

Actresses, in James's fiction, are endowed with personal qualities that further their success in the theatrical field. Their talent twinned with ambition reflects their unflinching determination and proves their outstanding capability to reach their goals. They feel responsible for the success of the role and seem aware of the difficulty of satisfying the audience. Just like Violet who appears agitated in her first performance of the play, Miriam displays the same fear when she is first tested by her future coach Madame Carré: "She began to speak; a long, strong colorless 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*, 1978, p. 89). Miriam and Violet do not make good 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 her coach 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*, p. 100). Miriam pays no attention to her bourgeois viewers but only manifests obsession with acting. 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*, p. 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*, 1978, p. 134). The young apprentice draws her itinerary and sets her goal from the outset; she pointedly tells Peter: "I will, I will, I will… I will succeed-I will be great" (*TM*, p. 110). The reader is able to perceive "the bright picture of her progress" (*TM*, p. 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 gets never satisfied. Despite her glories, she still looks for better and new roles that publicly elevate her status: "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*, p. 329).

James insistently reiterates the same idea of the endless ambition of successful actresses in "The Private Life"[3] (1983), originally published in 1892. In the story, the actress Blanche Adney 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", p. 107).

[3] Hereafter referred to as "PL".

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. The 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", 1983, p. 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", p. 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.

Success, ambition and determination should be motivated by talent; woman's recognition of her artistic competencies fosters her desire for learning. James joins ambition and talent in the character of Miriam; it is in Miriam's utterance "I want to play Shakespeare" (*TM*, 1978, p. 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*, p. 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* [emphasis added] or rather she had her *instincts* [emphasis added], which she defended and illustrated, with a vividness superior to argument" (*TM*, 1987, p. 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 self-confident. He describes Miriam as "perfectly sure of her own" in the preface of *The Tragic Muse* (*The Art of the Novel*, 1984, p. 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", 2001, p. 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 (1987) 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" (p. 59). In such fiction, one can see a whole 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 (1996) 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" (p. 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", 2001, p. 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", p. 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", p. 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", p. 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", 2001, p. 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", p. 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*, 1978, p. 92).

However, contrary to Verena whose performances are controlled by her script writer, Olive, Miriam goes towards "controlling her own performances" (Allen, 1984, p. 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*, 1978, p. 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*, p. 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 color she communicated" (*TM*, p. 455). By labeling Miriam "a muse", James uses a natural concept to describe her talent. The positive image of the public performer provided in James's fiction is used at once as a tool to subvert the masculine dramatic traditions and question the cultural norms and to weaken the authority of authorship and of the patriarchal Father.

Conclusion

James strives to revive the glory of the theater and questions its former neglect as a genre. He contributes to "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, 1992, p. 7) in the nineteenth century. Although his plays were not successful, he could enrich the theatrical field by his dramatic critical contributions and his fictional works which unfold his theories and attitudes about the theater and drama. He accords a great importance to the theatrical performance as a public representation and explores the relationship between the performers and the observers, with a special focus on female performers. While subverting the male standards of drama in his narratives, he displays a fierce advocacy of actresses as independent, ambitious, talented and dignified women against the hostile societal view to them as ignoble courtesans and immoral women.

James presents a total revision of drama and culture in his fiction through the destruction of the authority symbols in literature and in society. In his fiction he revisits the classical theory of drama as a cultural form which contributed to the empowerment of the male authority and the exclusion of women. Despite his reactionary recovery of the spectacle as rudimentary in drama, he decentralizes the dramatic elements through his call for the collaborative interaction between the dramatist and the performer. In unison with that philosophy, He intends to destroy the patriarchal centers and defy the old notions of woman's incapability and incompetence in the public world. He rejects the collective thought by arguing for woman's artfulness, intelligence and intellect. He represents her as a substance, as a subject which acts, affects, manipulates and decides. When he focuses on woman's physical presence on the stage, he means to connect her materiality with creativity and not with sexuality. The female body becomes a crucial means of artistic expression. By questioning the masculine literary theories, James changes the female body from a source of humiliation to a magnanimous medium of art. He deconstructs the traditional view of woman's body as responsible for her suffering, inferiority and oppression and reconstructs it as a site for creativity, signification and liberation.

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