

Henry James's houses: domesticity and performativity

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Henry James's Houses: Domesticity and Performativity

She liked a stage full of atmosphere – *things* to look at: love seats and painted screens; heavy drapings, oil lamps, someone carrying a samovar; or cobwebs and a broken window [...]
There were plenty of *things* in Henry James.ⁱ

Elizabeth Taylor, *The Soul of Kindness* (1964)

Henry James is the consummate novelist of the enclosed space: the drawing room, the carefully landscaped garden, the doorway that frames its entrants so poignantly. Within that space, achieved particularly brilliantly in James's late novels, we see his psychological dramas tentatively unfold under the scrutiny of their players and their settings, the latter mute commentators on the performances that they both witness and in part produce. As Nicky Gregson and Gillian Rose argue, 'a notion of performance is indeed crucial for a critical human geography concerned to understand the construction of social identity, social difference, and social power relations, and the way space might articulate all of these.' Furthermore, 'Space too needs to be thought of as brought into being through performances and as a performative articulation of power.'ⁱⁱ This symbiotic energy is fully realized by James in his novels and plays of domestic lives.

'Performativity', as we have come to understand the term in recent theoretical discourse, is, as we will see, nothing new. Its contemporary iteration developed out of the work of the philosopher J. L. Austin and his William James Lectures at Harvard in the 1950s, when he argued that a linguistic act is more than the sum of the words it contains. Rather than words simply recording or reflecting the world around them,

they actually perform within that world, and take upon themselves the quality of an action. From this founding premise, readings of the ‘speech act’ were developed that invite us to interrogate the performance of identity in the world, specifically gender identity, and which impinge upon understandings of performance more broadly, whether within a designated theatrical space, or other venues.ⁱⁱⁱ The connectedness of identity, utterance, appearance, gender and space which contemporary theorists have found so rich an area for exploration, is precisely the arena within which James works. This essay will explore the mode of performance in some of James’s work, examining its conditions, and its bases in the interactions between spaces – particularly domestic spaces, actors, spectators, and things.

James is a highly dramatic writer, whose works are imbued with the tensions of movement, shifting perspectives, the crucially telling use of props, and, above all, an awareness of the affect, politics, efficacy and the instinctive nature of performance. James shows himself and the late-nineteenth century to be perfectly adroit in their apprehension of performativity’s negotiations between performer, spectator, and space; between language heard and understood; and between speech acts and the residual violence that they often cloak. The Victorian period has become casually, reductively, known as an age of hypocrisy; it might with more justice be termed an age of performance, an age of audiences educated to apprehend the complexity of social appearances.

James came to term the world of drama ‘the scenic art’, a phrase since adapted for the title of a collection of his theatre criticism, and which usefully highlights the visual elements of the drama. That visual aspect is itself deeply dramatic, as James implicitly realized in his appreciation of the work of another Anglo-American, his friend, the painter and portraitist John Singer Sargent, many of whose most notable

paintings, such as his 1885 portrait of ‘Robert Louis Stevenson and His Wife’, operate within a highly dramatized domestic space. In James’s 1887 appreciation of Singer Sargent, he singles out for particular attention ‘The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit’, painted in 1882, and exhibited at the Paris Salon in the following year. In it, James found ‘the freshness of youth combined with the artistic experience, really felt and assimilated, of generations’, and ‘the slightly “uncanny” spectacle of a talent which on the very threshold of its career has nothing more to learn.’^{iv} Within the precocity of Singer Sargent’s achievement, James is particularly intrigued, as critics have been since, by the painting’s unconventionality, and its ability to convey suggestions of a deeply rich backstory. He describes the painting thus:

The artist has done nothing more felicitous and interesting than this view of a rich, dim, rather generalized French interior (the perspective of a hall with a shining floor, where screens and tall Japanese vases shimmer and loom), which encloses the life and seems to form the happy play-world of a family of charming children. The treatment is eminently unconventional, and there is none of the usual symmetrical balancing of the figures in the foreground. The place is regarded as a whole; it is a scene, a comprehensive impression; yet none the less do the little figures in their white pinafores (when was the pinafore ever painted with that power and made so poetic?) detach themselves, and live with a personal life. Two of the sisters stand hand in hand at the back, in the delightful, the almost equal, company of a pair of immensely tall emblazoned jars, which overtop them, and seem also to partake of the life of the picture; the splendid porcelain and the aprons of the children shine together, and a mirror in the brown depth behind them catches the light. Another little girl presents herself, with abundant tresses and slim

legs, her hands behind her, quite to the left; and the youngest, nearest to the spectator, sits on the floor and plays with her doll. The naturalness of the composition, the loveliness of the complete effect, the light, free security of the execution, the sense it gives us as of assimilated secrets and instinct and knowledge playing together ...[is] astonishing. ('Singer Sargent', 688)

Singer Sargent has painted a scene which we might recognize and describe anachronistically as deeply Jamesian, where light and the planes of vision, perspective and colour cohere only to suggest the potential incoherence of the lives within it. This is no conventional studio portrait of a happy family, but rather a staged moment in which narratives rich with complication are briefly suspended by the painter's brush. Perhaps James was also responding to an effect of the painting described by Bill Brown's as 'depict[ing]...an equation of humans and things that casts the human figures themselves as decorative objects among the Boit collection.'^v

It is James's receptivity to the creative tensions of the ways in which implications of a richer narrative exist both within and beyond the frame of the portrait that is demonstrated in his own pen paintings, which, unlike Singer Sargent's art, can of course move their subjects beyond their frozen moment on canvas. One such instance is given on the first page of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) in a scene in which we are introduced to three of its principal actors: Ralph Touchett, his father, and his friend Lord Warburton:

The shadows on the lawn were straight and angular; they were the shadows of an old man sitting in a deep wicker-chair near the low table on which the tea had been served, and of two younger men strolling to and fro, in desultory talk, in front of him. The old man had his cup in his hand; it was

an unusually large cup, of a different pattern from the rest of the set and painted in brilliant colours.

The attention to light and shade, to the suggestion of the moving shadows of the men walking as opposed to the angularity of those of the seated invalid, and the focus on the intense impact of the tea cup's brilliance, make this a visually arresting scene, the light conditions of which have already been established by James: 'Real dusk would not arrive for many hours; but the flood of summer light had begun to ebb, the air had grown mellow, the shadows were long upon the smooth, dense turf.'^{vi} As we watch, the dramatic possibilities of the scene open out before us, though it will be several more pages before the characters speak.

What is most notable here, as is the case in Singer Sargent's portraits, is the interplay of space and characters, and the artist's judicious playing on visual details to focus the scene, whether it be the massive Japanese vases of the Boit sisters' home, which bespeak the girls' own relative insignificance, or Mr Touchett's tea-cup, redolent of 'the ceremony known as afternoon tea', of nationality, custom, and comfort. In *The Comfort of Things* (2008), Daniel Miller writes of lives lived in some measure through objects, but not, as he explains, with the connotations usually accruing to abject materialism: 'We live today in a world of ever more stuff - what sometimes seem a deluge of goods and shopping. We tend to assume that this has two results: that we are more superficial, and that we are more materialistic, our relationships to things coming at the expense of our relationships to people.' This is arguably precisely what James explores in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), to which we will return, but, as Miller goes on, his research uncovered the opposite finding: 'that possessions often remain profound and usually the closer our relationships are with objects, the closer our relationships are with people',^{vii} for what concerns Miller and

James is not the fact of possession, the commercial transaction, but how it feels to live with things, to have them embody a life, and in the cases of James and Singer Sargent, to explore the representational potency of things, and specifically the ways in which they, as well as their owners, enact narrative and meaning.

In this respect, in the case of *The Portrait of a Lady*, James may well have been influenced by the drama which he was reviewing in the late-1870s and early 1880s for the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner's Monthly*, and the *Nation* amongst other publications. In 'The London Theatres', which appeared in *Scribner's* in January 1881, James gives an account, which ranges from Shakespeare at the Lyceum to Bulwer Lytton at the Haymarket, of the theatrical offerings of the time: it is not generally an encouraging picture. In it, he spends some time considering the successes of Mr and Mrs Bancroft, a popular management team best known for their work in popularizing the comedies of Tom Robertson, described here by James as 'among the most diminutive experiments ever attempted in the drama.'^{viii} These so-called 'cup and saucer' dramas were based in the realistic representation of drawing rooms on stage, and the mirroring of such domestic comforts in the body of the theatre itself. The plays were highly popular from the mid-1860s onwards, and formed the bedrock of the Bancrofts' popularity and success. So successful were they, that in 1880 they moved their company from the Prince of Wales's theatre to the more august and larger Haymarket. James writes of this move in terms that, despite his rather slighting attitude to the 'cup and saucer' drama, also ironically reveal his own fascination with it:

We are not sure that this humorous couple have bettered themselves with the public by leaving the diminutive play-house to which they taught the public the road. The Prince of Wales's is a little theatre, and the pieces produced

there dealt mainly in little things – presupposing a great many chairs and tables, carpets, curtains, and knickknacks, and an audience placed close to the stage. They might, for the most part, have been written by a cleverish visitor at a country-house, and acted in the drawing-room by his fellow-inmates. (*The Scenic Art*, 147-48)

The deviser of domestic tales is a figure that would enthrall James throughout his career, and surfaces most notably in the framing device of *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), but his fascination with domestic ‘things’, and the performative aspect of both them and the ‘actors’ who move amongst them, is ever-present in his writing.

James’s analysis of the Bancrofts’ work elides illusion and reality by acknowledging the power of the recognizable domestic thing on stage to suggest both its status as dramatic signifier and its domestic being. Bill Brown is interested in asking ‘why and how we use objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections (4). James’s fiction and dramatic criticism insist rather on the ineluctable performance of things themselves, almost irrespective of human agency and willing. ‘[C]arpets, curtains, and knickknacks’ are far more than stage decoration, rather working actively to conjure recognition, to bring the audience mentally and emotionally as well as physically up close, and to suggest the innately representational, performative activities that link the worlds of the stage and the drawing room. Actors perform, cups and saucers perform, so do their audiences and James’s characters, and so, as we will see, does language, eliding in itself too the on-stage/off-stage realities of performing, of appearing both in society and on stage.

The Portrait of a Lady announces its concerns with representation in its title, and maintains it through its treatment of the ways in which Isabel Archer will risk aesthetic commodification throughout this novel. Even Ralph Touchett, the most

sympathetic of those who love her, sees her advent in terms of something to display. As Michael T. Gilmore notes, Ralph Touchett sees having Isabel for a cousin as ‘like receiving “a Titian, by the post, to hang on my wall – a Greek bas-relief to stick over my chimney piece”.’^{ix} Isabel has of course later to resist the more sadistic commodifying instincts of her husband, Gilbert Osmond, and tries throughout to manage his demands of being seen to good effect, most notably in the home. From the moment Ralph and his family first see her, and the term is deliberately chosen, Isabel is framed for their viewing. Seen from the lawns of Gardencourt, she is a distantly perceived person ‘who had just made her appearance in the ample doorway’ (69). This anticipates a moment later in the novel when Isabel appears to Ned Rosier ‘framed in a gilded doorway’, and ‘struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady’ (418). The movement from ‘ample’ to ‘gilded’ speaks to the dangers of Isabel’s emotional and aesthetic journey through the novel. But these scenes also attest to James’s visual intelligence, to borrow a phrase from Ludmilla Jordanova, his commitment to the performative aesthetics of domesticity, and his acute awareness of his heroines’ own sense of the appropriate realization of their social, performative selves through their management of appearances, both their own and that of their homes.

In *The Spoils of Poynton*, Mrs Gereth’s desire to retain her ‘spoils’ is both the longing of the connoisseur and that of the woman whose diligent care has imbued her objects with her own being. In this novella too, we see the novelist’s attention to framing reflected in his character’s aesthetic sense of the home as a setting:

On the subject of doors especially Mrs Gereth had the finest views: the thing in the world she most despised was the meanness of the undivided

opening. From end to end of Poynton there swung high double leaves. At Ricks the entrances to the rooms were like the holes of rabbit-hutches.^x

Her son's proposal that Mrs Gereth remove from Poynton to the hutch-like Ricks does not just impinge upon her sense of self, but threatens to uproot it entirely, so dependent is she upon her things for her identity: as James writes, she had an 'almost maniacal disposition to thrust in everywhere the question of "things", to read all behaviour in the light of some fancied relation to them' (38). The 'fancied' comes from the fascinated, but still slightly appalled spectator-figure of Fleda Vetch, who comes, as do all the novella's characters, to realise the cost of such an investment in the material. In this sense, the novella plays out one of James's preoccupations in *The Portrait of a Lady*, where Isabel too feels the lure, both narrative and aesthetic, for herself and for others, of the things about her.

Chronologically, we see Isabel first in the minutely conjured 'mysterious apartment which lay beyond the library' of her grandmother's house in the US. This is a curious space, a kind of theatrical props room, in which Isabel waits her turn to move upon the stage of her European adventure, and which is full of redundant furniture with which Isabel has 'established relations almost human, certainly dramatic' (78). It is explicitly conjured as a room in which to wait, a room whose papered-over windows and carefully bolted door prevent Isabel from seeing or being seen, but in which she is discovered by her aunt, who acts in this instance as an eccentric impresario figure, and made ready for her appearance. But it is also a room in which Isabel is rendered another form of prop or effect, another of the things in the lumber room which await their emergence into meaning through employment and through being seen into meaning by the other characters.

For the novel's purposes, Isabel's story begins at the moment that a European audience is conjured into being for her, but she needs to learn how to appear before that audience, and specifically how to act naturally for their exacting audiences. After meeting the Osmond family and their circle, Isabel begins her European education by watching the seasoned performers, Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle, negotiate their occupation of the exquisitely conjured domestic spaces which they inhabit, and in which they most self-consciously act. Initially, Isabel is their intrigued spectator:

Isabel took on this occasion little part in the talk; she scarcely even smiled when the other turned to her invitingly; she sat there as if she had been at the play and had paid even a large sum for her place. [...] It had all the rich readiness that would have come from rehearsal. Madame Merle appealed to her as if she had been on the stage, but she could ignore any learnt cue without spoiling the scene. (297-98)

The domestic spaces in which Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle are most at home are themselves compounded of a range of aesthetic artefacts and symbols, props which, along with the recourse to the metaphor of drama, represent to Isabel the limits of the possibilities envisaged for her by her husband and his former lover. Isabel's encounter with the performative possibilities of her life can be mapped through her relationship with Madame Merle, the woman who attracts most of the novel's theatrical metaphors, situations, and techniques, and is ultimately most subject to their ephemeral qualities, and to the dangers of performing 'naturally.' In chapter 20 for instance, she thinks in 'inaudible' reflections (258) which resemble stage asides. Madame Merle loses her power over Isabel once the latter recognizes the fundamentally oxymoronic nature of her being. Madame Merle was 'more than ever

playing a part [though] it seemed to her that on the whole the wonderful woman had never been so natural' (596). This was, for the Victorians, the ultimate theatrical illusion, and one that the most successful English actresses perfected.^{xi}

Madame Merle has throughout recognized society's demands as to the representation of her identity as involving an inherently theatrical process:

I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things*! One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive. (253)

Madame Merle fits herself out like a theatrical costumier concerned with the highest expectations of synecdochic verisimilitude.

Madame Merle is described by Mrs Touchett as 'one of the most brilliant women in Europe' (246), a phrase more appropriate in its scope perhaps to the great actresses who were also the most visible women in Europe. Isabel glosses that appreciation of achievement rather differently and more critically:

If for Isabel [Madame Merle] had a fault it was that she was not natural; by which the girl meant, not that she was either affected or pretentious, since from these vulgar vices no woman could have been more exempt, but that her nature had been too much overlaid by custom and her angles too much rubbed away. She had become too flexible, too useful, was too ripe and too final. She was in a word too perfectly the social animal that man and woman are supposed to have been intended to be; and she had rid herself of every remnant of that tonic wildness which we may assume to have belonged even to the most amiable persons in the ages before country-

house life was the fashion. Isabel found it difficult to think of her in any detachment or privacy, she existed only in her relations, direct or indirect, with her fellow mortals. (244)

That is, she perceives that there is no prior or anterior self to Madame Merle: she is her performed self, and hence increasingly an object of terror to Isabel. This analysis elides the heroine of the country house with the actress, both equally dependent on their relations with others for their being, and having none of that inner life, the moral privacy, that Isabel so relishes at this stage in the novel. On stage and in the domestic setting, James suggests, woman is ideally moulded to a purpose that excludes other, 'wider' possibilities. Scripted lives deny improvisation, and render privacy unnecessary, distracting.

James emphasizes the public nature of her life by only once allowing the reader to see her alone, when Madame Merle briefly reveals another self which the habits of performance and Osmond's disdain have rendered negligible: 'her face, which has grown hard and bitter, relaxed to its habit of smoothness' (571). The occasion is the aftermath of a cruel encounter with Osmond during which they discuss both their relationship and Osmond's marriage. The limits of Madame Merle's influence over him become clear in an exchange which is one of the most nakedly emotional in the novel, but which is nonetheless filtered always through reference to other modes of expression: to 'tragedy', 'sentence[s] in a copy-book' (571) and the image of a coffee cup which is one of 'the delicate specimens of rare porcelain' (570) with which Madame Merle's mantelpiece was covered. Osmond's attention to things and appearances never leaves him even in this most intense exchange, and he exudes

the sadism and control with which he taints all his relationships, remarking 'dryly' on the coffee cup that, 'It already has a wee bit of a tiny crack' (570).

On his departure, Madame Merle, 'went, the first thing, and lifted from the mantel-shelf the attenuated coffee-cup in which he had mentioned the existence of a crack; but she looked at it rather abstractedly. 'Have I been so vile for nothing?' she vaguely wailed' (571). That the wail is vague implies moral uncertainty at a moment when Osmond's cruelty has unavoidably pressed upon her, but also the insecurity of identity that occurs when she is alone, and when her commitment to, and confidence in, her performed self has been shaken. In a highly compacted moment, James rejects for her both the adulation of connoisseurship that she has accepted as the inevitable price of loving Osmond and the carapace of the spectacle. Madame Merle is thus left with the remnants of identification with a cracked coffee cup that stands, in its rarity, delicacy and display – this is not, like Mr Touchett's tea cup, an item to use and which can sustain, but to show – for the limitations and fragilities of Madame Merle's commitment to performance and to a man who lives as much in the public gaze as do the objects he craves.

Isabel's recognition of Madame Merle's public performances is part of a process whereby she has to come to terms with the performativity implicit in the world around her, with the importance of 'things' in that world, and the necessity of participating in a system she finds inimical, if not overtly damaging. Bill Brown's 'thing theory' sheds interesting light on Isabel's dilemma, and the conjunction of performativity and this theory itself might make us reflect anew on Brown's ideas. Eschewing what he describes as 'more familiar fetishizations: the fetishization of the subject, the image, the word', he concentrates attention rather on 'the ideological and ideational effects of the material world and of transformations of it [on] questions

that ask not whether things are but what work they perform – questions, in fact, not about things themselves but about the subject-object relation in particular temporal and spatial contexts.’^{xii}

These are questions highly pertinent both to James’s characters’ dilemma in a domestic world which privileges things of aesthetic value far above the human, and to Isabel’s maturing perception of the centrality of the theatrical mode, with its dependence on the material and actual as realized in a specific moment. Madame Merle, described by Brown as one of James’s ‘most notorious characters’ because of her apparent belief that ‘character[is] reducible to possessions’ (Brown, *A Sense of Things*, 140), epitomizes the risks of exposure within such a world, and specifically of the female dilemma it entails. In her bleakest moments, Isabel appreciates Madame Merle’s self-protecting strategy, her ability firmly to embrace a thing-like identity, though, as James is scrupulous in recording, Isabel cannot bring herself to behave in the same way:

Madame Merle had suppressed enthusiasm ... There were hours when Isabel would have given anything for lessons in this art ... She had become more aware than before of the advantage of being like that – of having made one’s self a firm surface, a sort of corselet of silver. (452)

Isabel recognizes, but rejects, the identity of self and ‘things’, the giving up of the constant mutation of identity for the fixed personation through an object or theatrical stock type such as that Serena Merle adopts:

‘I think I always look the same’, said Madame Merle.

‘You always *are* the same. You don’t vary. You’re a wonderful woman.’ (288)

Isabel rather maintains a fluidity which means that her performances, though dramatic, and often pictorial, can never be inscribed within the more fixed, public terms of the theatrical.

At the end of the novel of course, Isabel's exit from Gardencourt precisely defies a confident closing of the theatrical curtain, as the reader's mind pursues her imaginatively back to Rome, and thence who knows where. Within James's later fiction, the conjunction of female performativity and domesticity, domestic relations, was one that he continued to explore. In his final novel, *The Golden Bowl*, Maggie Verver enjoys 'the first surprise to which she had ever treated' her husband initially as 'a great picture hung on the wall of her daily life', but subsequently and more sustainedly as, 'a succession of moments that were *watchable* still; almost in the manner of the different things done during a scene on the stage, some scene so acted as to have left a great impression on the tenant of one of the stalls.'^{xiii} A few days later, sustained by the momentum of this first impression, Maggie finds herself acting before her father and his wife,

She felt herself going; she reminded herself of an actress who has been studying a part and rehearsing it, but who suddenly, on the stage, before the footlights, had begun to improvise, to speak lines not in the text. It was this very sense of the stage and the footlights that kept her up, made her rise higher (322)

In this supremely reflective book, the drawing room becomes a stage for Maggie when her familial expectations and confidences are disturbed by the dramatic elements of the relationship between her husband and her father's wife, a form of

theatrical backstory used by playwrights, such as Pinero in his *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1893), to good effect. In this domestic space, James finds the culmination of his intense interest in the drama, and the sublimation of its fascination in his heroines' performed, imagined selves.

The early pages of James's memoir, *A Small Boy and others* (1913), reveal that the theatre had figured as a significant presence in his life from his youngest years growing up in New York City. It shapes much of his social world, as well as the sensory world of the small boy, and, most intriguingly, it is introduced to the reader through the medium of the theatre poster, 'those founts of romance that gushed from the huge placards of the theatre.'^{xiv} The posters were not in themselves visually representational, rather consisting 'of vast oblong sheets, yellow or white, pasted upon tall wooden screens or into hollow sockets, and acquainting the possible playgoer with every circumstance that might seriously interest him' (100-101). However, the effect of these announcements upon James is best represented for him by likening it to an overtly visual aesthetic experience:

It engaged my attention, whenever I passed, as the canvas of a great master in a great gallery holds that of the pious tourist, and even though I can't at this day be sure of its special reference I was with precocious passion 'at home' among the theatres – thanks to our parents' fond interest in them.
(101)

The theatre poster frames James's memories - fifty pages later he is still under its thrall: 'I turn round again to where I last left myself gaping at the old rickety billboard in Fifth Avenue' (154) - and his acknowledgement of theatre's power. In reminiscing of 'the Smike of Miss Weston' and his 'sharp retention' of her

performance, he asks, 'who shall deny the immense authority of the theatre, or that the stage is the mightiest of modern engines?' (116-17). James also writes movingly of the ageing tragedian Miss Mestayer, who 'gave form to [James's boyish] conception of the tragic actress at her highest' (157). That this precedence is somewhat ironically bestowed in the light of the great actresses he had seen since, becomes clear as James's memories progress, but it is an important memory for tracing the genealogy of the novelist's subsequent depictions of tragic actresses, be they performers in domestic or theatre houses:

there was no one like her in the Boston time for cursing queens and eagle-beaked mothers; the Shakespeare of the Booths and other such would have been unproducibile without her; she had a rusty, rasping, heaving and tossing "authority" of which the bitterness is still in my ears. I am revisited by an outer glimpse of her in that after age when she had come, comparatively speaking, into her own—the sight of her, accidentally incurred, one tremendously hot summer night, as she slowly moved from her lodgings or wherever, in the high Bowdoin Street region, down to the not distant theatre from which even the temperature had given her no reprieve; and well remember how, the queer light of my young impression playing up again in her path, she struck me as the very image of mere sore histrionic habit and use, a worn and weary, a battered even though almost sordidly smoothed,^{xv} *thing* of the theatre, very much as an old infinitely-handled and greasy violoncello of the orchestra might have been. It was but an effect doubtless of the heat that she scarcely seemed clad at all; slippered, shuffling and, though somehow hatted and vaguely veiled or streamered, wrapt in a gauzy sketch of a dressing-gown, she pointed to my

extravagant attention the moral of thankless personal service, of the reverse of the picture, of the cost of ‘amusing the public’ in a case of amusing it, as who should say, every hour. And I had thrilled before her as the Countess in ‘Love’—such contrasted combinations! But she carried her head very high, as with the habit of crowns and trains and tirades—had in fact much the air of some deposed and reduced sovereign living on a scant allowance; so that, all invisibly and compassionately, I took off my hat to her. (157-58)

James’s compassion for the old actress is palpable and is generated by his respect for her former powers, and the very transience of those powers, but also by his apprehension of her as a ‘thing’ of the theatre (the original emphasis is his). We can hear in this judgement an element of James’s own adult distaste for the conditions of the theatre, if not for the entrancing possibilities of the dramatic form.^{xvi} But the language of things also, of course, echoes the fate of Madame Merle, Mrs Gereth, Maggie Verver, even Isabel Archer, and the plight of the domestic actress more generally.

James’s most sustained treatment of the actress, however, is fictional, and comes in his novel *The Tragic Muse* (1890), in which he contrasts the arts of acting and portraiture, and in which we meet Miriam Rooth, James’s professional actress-heroine who appalls her diplomat-admirer Peter Sherringham by the monstrosity of her lack of privacy:

A woman whose only being was to ‘make believe’, to make believe that she has any and every being that you liked, that would serve a purpose, produce a certain effect, and whose identity resided in the continuity of her personations, so that she had no moral privacy, as [Sherringham] phrased it to himself, but lived in a high wind of exhibition, of figuration – such a

woman was a kind of monster, in whom of necessity there would be nothing to like, because there would be nothing to take hold of.^{xvii}

In this respect, Rooth displays her genealogical links to Madame Merle and the publicity of her life, and enables James to examine in more detail the professional actress, and to plot alongside her development the story of the would-be portraitist and one-time politician, Nick Dormer.

In the midst of his own dramatic years, James turns to the theatre and to portraiture in order to,

‘do something about art’ – art, that is, as a human complication and a social stumbling-block – [which] must have been for me early a good deal of a nursed intention, the conflict between art and ‘the world’ striking me betimes as one of the half-dozen great primary motives. (‘Preface’ to *The Tragic Muse*, 1)

That conflict is played out in the romances of Miriam Rooth and Nick Dormer, who attract Peter Sherringham and his sister Julia Dormer, but whose relationships with them cannot flourish because of the artists’ devotion to the theatre and portraiture. Nick and Miriam are united by their sense of vocation, by their desire, as the aesthete Gabriel Nash puts it, to ‘recognize [their] particular form, the instrument that each of us – each of us who carries anything – carries in his being. Mastering this instrument, learning to play it in perfection – that’s what I call duty, what I call conduct, what I call success’ (252). This is seen to be inimical to the life of society, as represented by Peter’s diplomatic status, and Julia’s social standing and political ambitions, and both artists are deemed monstrosities and mountebanks, terms which here become almost

synonymous. Miriam in particular attracts the wonderingly horrified and fascinated attention of Peter who describes her twice as a Medusa, as having a face of ‘gutta percha’ (126), and as being ‘an embroidery without a canvas’ (138). He perceives her fundamental lack of a fixed identity, of something with which to engage, beyond the footlights.

The novel engages with a commonly recognized element of anti-theatricality in late-Victorian society, but James is also clear that the notion of performance goes far beyond the stage. Peter Sherringham too attracts the label of ‘mountebank’ from Miriam (362), for instance, and, as she tells him earlier in London, ‘if you only kept your eyes open nothing could happen to you that wouldn’t be food for observation and grist to your mill, showing you how people looked and moved and spoke, cried and grimaced, writhed and dissimulated, in given situations’ (314). This is not so much because she can learn from observation and then translate those observations into actions on stage, but because the life of society is itself inherently a performance. Whilst overtly eschewing Miriam’s theatricality, James’s characters recognize that they are performing for an audience. Grace Dormer’s embarrassment at Nick’s kissing their mother in public is assuaged when she realizes that ‘they had escaped’ notice (24). Similarly, after a devastating meeting with Nick, Julia Dormer, the character least sympathetic to Miriam and her vocation, shows her ever-present awareness of her audience: “‘Explain what?’” she asked, still very pale and grave, but in a voice that showed nothing. She was thinking of the servants – she could think of them even then’ (272). James’s characters are what they perform, what they seem to be; even for his least theatrical figures, performance lies at the root of their identity: it is, to borrow James Loxley’s term, ‘infrastructural’ (154).

Nina Auerbach has written in *Private Theatricals* (1990) of the ways in which the Victorians lived through and by theatricality in their everyday lives, despite the inherent suspicion with which they ‘shunned theatricality as the ultimate, deceitful, mobility.’^{xviii} What James is doing here, and throughout his oeuvre, is slightly different in that he distinguishes between the professional forms of theatricality and the domestic conditions that produce dramatic or performative behaviour. For James, theatricality is indivisible from its material conditions, damning as he perceived those conditions to be for the practice of art: ‘When I was younger [writing plays] was really a very dear dream with me – but it has faded away with the mere increase of observation – observation I mean, of the deadly vulgarity and illiteracy of the world one enters, practically in knocking at a manager’s door’ (quoted in Edel, 44), or, more succinctly: ‘I may have been meant for the Drama – God Knows! – but I certainly wasn’t meant for the Theatre’ (quoted in Edel, 53). Theatricality and the drama are set in fundamental opposition by James in his play-writing years, but operate with more productive synergy in his subsequent development of the ‘divine principle of the Scenario’ (quoted in Edel, 62). This blends dramatic, visual and narrative elements and is based in the material specificity of geographical and social space. Theatricality then, as made manifest in the professional space of the theatre, becomes a form of drama or performativity rather than its root.

It is his analysis of the intimate relationship between space, that space’s things, and performance that James adds to our understanding of Victorian performativity, and which lies at the heart of the complex networks in *The Tragic Muse*. It is at the heart too of the language in this novel, where James knowingly, teasingly perhaps, plays with the idea of ‘houses.’ We have the theatrical house in which Miriam and her company play, and the house, that is, the audience, to which

they play and which can both ‘glow’ domestically with ‘rosy fire’ (423) when Miriam embraces them; the House of Commons (‘your terrible House’ (260) in Miriam’s words) in which Nick ‘has tried to play [his] part so beautifully’ (242); the houses in which Mrs Rooth fears her daughter will no longer be welcome should she take to the stage; the more public ‘first house in England’ (162) that could be Nick’s if he and Julia were to marry; and Mr Carteret, Nick’s would-be sponsor, who is likened to a house with ‘back windows opening into grounds more private’ (189-90). These spaces determine performance, and the selves of those who occupy them.

What is perhaps most notable about the multiple uses of ‘houses’ in *The Tragic Muse* is how they argue for the ultimate root of performativity in the house, the home, rather than in the public performance space which Auerbach would argue gives shape and form to categories of being in the nineteenth century. In *A Small Boy*, we may remember how James felt ‘at home’ in the theatre from an early age (see above), but his memoir also recalls the evening when the scenic art in all its dramatic richness and potential dawned on him. His small cousin was protesting about being told to go to bed, and her mother responds:

‘Come now, my dear; don’t make a scene—I *insist* on your not making a scene!’ That was all the witchcraft the occasion used, but the note was none the less epoch-making. The expression, so vivid, so portentous, was one I had never heard—it had never been addressed to us at home; and who should say now what a world one mightn’t at once read into it? It seemed freighted to sail so far; it told me so much about life. Life at these intensities clearly became ‘scenes’; but the great thing, the immense illumination, was that we could make them or not as we chose. It was a long time of course before I began to distinguish between those within our

compass more particularly as spoiled and those producible on a different basis and which should involve detachment, involve presence of mind; just the qualities in which Marie's possible output was apparently deficient. It didn't in the least matter accordingly whether or no a scene *was* then proceeded to — and I have lost all count of what immediately happened. The mark had been made for me and the door flung open; the passage, gathering up *all* the elements of the troubled time, had been itself a scene, quite enough of one, and I had become aware with it of a rich accession of possibilities. (185-86)

For James, the house, and more specifically the home, is the most potent stage, the root of performativity, of learned behaviour, and of the impulse to interpret and re-present the behaviour of others.

ⁱ Elizabeth Taylor, *The Soul of Kindness* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974; 1964), 147, 148.

ⁱⁱ Nicky Gregson and Gillian Rose, 'Taking Butler Elsewhere: performativities, spatialities, and subjectivities', *Society and Space*, 18 (2000), 433-453 (433, 434).

ⁱⁱⁱ For an excellent introductory account of performativity, see James Loxley, *Performativity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

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^v Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 140.

^{vi} Henry James. *The Portrait of a Lady* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984; 1881), 59.

^{vii} Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 1.

^{viii} Henry James, 'The London Theatres, 1880', in *The Scenic Art*, ed. by Allan Wade (London: Hart-Davis, 1949), 133-61 (148).

^{ix} Michael T. Gilmore. 'The Commodity World of The Portrait of a Lady', *The New England Quarterly*, 59 (1986), 51-74 (56).

^x Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton, with A London Life and The Chaperon* (London: Lehmann, 1947), 55.

^{xi} See Lynn M. Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004) for an excellent account of how a fascination with theatricality infiltrates the whole of Victorian culture.

^{xii} Bill Brown. 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), 1-22 (7).

^{xiii} Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (Oxford: World's Classics, 1983; 1904), 305.

^{xiv} Henry James, *A Small Boy and others* (New York: Scribner's, 1941; 1913), 100.

^{xv} C.f. Gilbert Osmond's initial perception of Isabel as 'smooth to his general need of her as handled ivory to the palm' in the New York edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1908), II, 11.

^{xvi} For a discussion of this tension in James's attitude to the theatre, see Leon Edel, 'Henry James: The Dramatic Years' in his edition of *The Complete Plays of Henry James* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949), 19-69. It is also this tension, and its manifestation in public responses to James's 1895 play *Guy Domville*, that provide the inspiration for David Lodge's *Author, Author* and Colm Toibin's *The Master* (both 2004).

^{xvii} Henry James, *The Tragic Muse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978; 1890), 130.

^{xviii} Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 4.