

**Submission to:**

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**Title:**

"Caricature and Mrs Rooth's shawl in *The Tragic Muse*"

Henry James's readers have, on the whole, been impervious to the comic charms of *The Tragic Muse*. Contemporary reviewers described it as "heavily labored" (Gard 195) "thin, frigid and artificial" (Hayes 227), "stodg[y]", "the very dreariest production which has issued even from the pen of Mr. Henry James" (Gard 198), "monotonous" (209), "blottesque", "tedious", (206), "torpid" (218) and eliciting a "half-suppressed yawn" (203). While subsequent critical attention to the novel has been more serious, and more appreciative, James's readers have tended to focus on its representation of what James called "the conflict between art and 'the world'" (Preface to *The Tragic Muse* 1), but remain fairly stony-faced: recently, for example, Christopher Lane has called it "'stolid'" (739), and Victoria Coulson holds that it is a "surprisingly boring book" (69).

However, it might be argued that *The Tragic Muse* possesses a distinctly comic aspect that challenges the terms of its critics' disapproval. In the first place, the novel can (at least to some extent) be described as a comedy of manners, a commentary on which is often pithily provided in the witty, Wildean aphorisms of Gabriel Nash.<sup>i</sup> Second, James's makes shrewd and effective use of caricature in the representation of his minor characters: in the stern Lady Agnes's "tall upright black figure", for example, which "seemed in possession of the fair vastness [of Harsh] after the manner of an exclamation-point at the bottom of a blank page" (156); or in the often graceless Grace Dormer, who, participating in charades at Harsh, "dropped her *h*'s as with the crash of empires" (478). Caricature informs a key early moment in the novel: Peter fears that Miriam's overwrought performance in front of Madame Carré might be perceived by their hostess as a "designed burlesque of her manner, her airs and graces, her celebrated simpers, so extravagant did it all cause these refinements

to appear". The element of exaggeration (a essential component of caricature) is sustained when James describes Madame Carré's response: her "imitation of [Miriam's] imitation" is the "drollest thing conceivable", and causes Miriam to "[give] way to pleasure, to interest and large laughter" (128)

Perhaps the most effective use of caricature in *The Tragic Muse* can be found in James's representation of the irrepressible, ambitious, and doting actress-mother, Mrs Rooth, particularly in his animation of her "fluttering" (84) shawl as a metonymic figure for its owner's eccentricity. The comic potential of the shawl (and other bohemian accoutrements) is established in Bidly Dormer's first sighting of the remarkable Miriam Rooth and her mother at the Salon de l'Industrie:

One of them was an old lady with a shawl; that was the most salient way in which she presented herself. The shawl was an ancient, much-used fabric of embroidered cashmere, such as many ladies wore forty years ago in their walks abroad and such as no lady wears to-day. It had fallen half off the back of the wearer, but at the moment Bidly permitted herself to consider her she gave it a violent jerk and brought it up to her shoulders again, where she continued to arrange and settle it, with a good deal of jauntiness and elegance, while she listened to the talk of the gentleman. Bidly guessed that this little transaction took place very frequently, and was not unaware of its giving the old lady a droll factitious faded appearance, as if she were singularly out of step with the age [...] Both these ladies were clad in light thin scant gowns, giving an impression of flowered figures and odd transparencies, and in low shoes which showed a great deal of stocking and were ornamented with large rosettes. Bidly's

slightly agitated perception travelled directly to their shoes: they suggested to her vaguely that the wearers were dancers – connected possibly with the old fashioned exhibition of the shawl dance. (28–9)

The persistence of the shawl's reluctance to remain in place is underscored a short while later: "The elder of the strange women had turned her back and was looking at some bronze figure, losing her shawl again as she did so" (30); later, as Miriam and her mother walk through the streets of Paris with Nash, Nick Dormer and Peter Sherringham, we are told that Mrs Rooth's "sloping back was before them, exempt from retentive stiffness in spite of her rigid principles, with the little drama of her lost and recovered shawl perpetually going in" (98).

In foregrounding Mrs Rooth's shawl as an index of her character, James is deploying a familiar Victorian literary motif. Suzanne Daly has demonstrated that Indian Kashmir shawls "function [in mid-Victorian domestic novels] at once as a marker of respectable English womanhood and as magical and mysterious 'oriental' garments" (238). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, their fashion had waned – a fact that Bidy seems well aware of when she observes that Mrs Rooth's shawl is one that "no lady wears today". By the 1890s onwards, Daly notes, shawls are more likely to be referenced (by Oscar Wilde, for instance, in *A Woman of No Importance*), as a form of comic shorthand for the outdated and old-fashioned (Daly 252). James, then, might justifiably expect his readers to be versed in the general social significance of Mrs Rooth's shawl. But in addition to his *general* interpolation of the cultural value of shawls, James seems also to be referencing three *particular* sources.

The first can be found in a passage from Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*, in which is recorded a performance of a "grand Sicilian shawl-dance" by "fourteen young ladies" (241) at Signor Billsmethi's dancing academy: "Such ladies! Such pink stockings! Such artificial flowers! ... As to the shawl-dance, it was the most exciting thing that ever was beheld: there was such a whisking and rustling, and fanning, and getting ladies into a tangle with artificial flowers; and then disengaging them again!" (242). While James does not make explicit reference to *Sketches by Boz* in his discussions of Dickens, he records in his autobiography a thorough and wide-ranging childhood familiarity with Dickens's work (*Small Boy* 86–103). Certainly, the very close correlation between shawls, shawl-dances, flowers and stockings in this passage and in the one describing Bidley's first impression of the Rooths suggests that James is making a direct, if unacknowledged, reference; in doing so he rather craftily bestows upon Mrs Rooth and her daughter the keen visual vividness of Dickensian caricature.

A second source for James's caricature is a selection of letters by the actress Rachel Felix,<sup>ii</sup> *Rachel d'après sa Correspondance* (1882), edited with commentary by Georges D'Heylli, a copy of which was housed in James's library at Lamb House in Rye (Edel and Tintner 29). In a letter to her mother from Moscow, Rachel writes: "La grande-duchesse Hélène m'a envoyé un magnifique châle turc. Ah! Madame ma mere, comme ce châle-là fera bien sur vos épaules!" ("The Grand Duchess Helen gave me a magnificent Turkish shawl. Ah! Mother, how good this shawl will look on your shoulders!"; D'Heylli 198). We are reminded that Mrs Rooth's shawl is of the type worn "forty years ago"; Rachel's letter was written in 1854, when the actress visited Russia – not quite, but almost, forty years before the 1888 serial publication of *The Tragic Muse* in the

*Atlantic Monthly*.

A shawl with similarly aristocratic associations also makes an appearance in *Memoirs of Rachel* (1858) by Madame de B- (A. de Barrera). While there is no firm evidence to suggest that James had read this book, there is something uncanny about a detail in Madame de B-'s description of Rachel's presentation to Victoria, Queen of England, in 1841. The Duchess of Kent, noticing that the actress appeared to be cold, "is said to have covered her shoulders with a magnificent yellow Indian shawl of her own. This shawl was afterward taken possession of by mother Felix [sic], on whose shoulders, had it been gifted with consciousness, the magnificent production of the Indian looms must have been rather astonished to find itself" (81). Mrs Rooth's shawl is, we recall, "embroidered cashmere" – typical of what Madame de B\_ describes as the "magnificent production of Indian looms". And Madame de B's personification of the Duchess of Kent's shawl – "gifted with consciousness" it would be "astonished to find itself" bedecking Madame Félix's shoulders – is strikingly akin to James's comic characterization of Mrs Rooth's "fluttering" garment that seems forever to be attempting an escape. Of course, the gift of the shawl in Madame de B-'s account takes place in the British court, and not the Russian (as recorded in Rachel's letter); the benefactors are also different. Either Madame de B- has confused her British and Russian royal families, or this type of presentation was not especially unusual in such circles; whatever the truth of the matter, it certainly seems as if James seized the opportunity to use the moment described in either or both of these sources to satirical effect in his caricature of Mrs Rooth, and to lend a refreshing, comic touch to his otherwise serious, weighty novel.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The parallels between Nash and Wilde have been discussed by, amongst others, Oscar Cargill, J. Hillis Miller, Shelley Salamensky, Michèle Mendelssohn, Jonathan Freedman (167–201) and Eric Haralson (54–78).

<sup>ii</sup> Rachel was one of the main sources for James's characterization of Miriam Rooth, as he makes clear in his *Notebooks* (28) and in the novel itself (94, 135, 220, 225, 229)

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