

# Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor. The authors of articles discussed will be invited to respond.

---

## James as Playwright

To the Editor:

It is a boon to Henry James scholarship to encounter a critic like Julie Rivkin, who values James's years in the theater as a playwright. Yet in reading "The Logic of Delegation in *The Ambassadors*" (101 [1986]: 819–31) I wasn't entirely clear about what this valuation was as the context of Rivkin's discussion.

Rivkin notes, "James's interest in a thematics of delegation developed when he was writing for the stage, no doubt because of the often painful substitutions necessary to dramatic representation" (830n1). I wish that Rivkin had elaborated what she means by "the often painful substitutions necessary to dramatic representation." I take it that she refers to James's chronic complaints about the lack of control a playwright has over a production. In the 1891 London staging of *The American*, this lack of control may have been why James could not deter the actor Edward Compton from wearing a garish overcoat that one newspaper reviewer said, "recalls rather the garb of a travelling showman than the costume of an American millionaire." This is but one example of the problems in dramatic representation that faced the fastidious James, but it is not altogether clear what kind of "painful substitutions" Rivkin would connect to the development of a thematics of delegation.

Since Rivkin further sees James's opening night debacle with *Guy Domville* as "paradigmatic" of James's experience as a playwright, it might have helped to learn precisely how it could be considered so. James did have successes on the stage, and even *Guy Domville* went on to a respectable run of five weeks. And, of course, contrary to Rivkin's statement, James never truly abandoned the stage, for not only does the theater play an important role in *The Ambassadors* and most of James's other mature works, he also returned to playwriting in 1907.

But I seek less to set straight the record of James's playwriting career than to crystallize the connection between his theater work and the logic of delegation in *The Ambassadors*. This is all the more important since Rivkin's analysis offers a way of explaining rather than explaining away Strether's final decision not to take any gain for himself.

Using Rivkin's reading as a basis, I am now able to draw a much more explicit connection, for one example, between *The Ambassadors* and *Guy Domville*. That any ambassador must inevitably stray from authority is beyond question, but what makes Strether's logic so

compelling—and connects it, by direct contrast, to James's play—is his refusal to profit from his betrayal. The ambassadorial logic in *The Ambassadors* is exactly the opposite of that in *Guy Domville*, even though the plots are identical: an aging male emissary (Strether in *The Ambassadors*, Lord Devenish in *Guy Domville*) is sent by a matriarch whom he hopes to marry (Mrs. Newsome, Mrs. Domville) to retrieve a son (Chad, Guy) in order that the young man may assume his responsibility for advancing the family interests. *The Ambassadors*, therefore, is a reworking of the theme and subject of ambassadorship, which James first presented in his play *Guy Domville*. The difference between the two treatments—as James discovered—is that on the stage the logic of delegation for a character can never be resolved without profit or loss since an ambassador like Lord Devenish must be invested with an externally visible motivation. Lord Devenish must either win his game or lose it, but unlike Strether he cannot take satisfaction, let alone victory, in the mere experience, because the playwright James could not make Lord Devenish's psychological processes available to the audience. The novelist James, however, could indeed make Strether's consciousness available, and this makes it possible for a reader to observe Strether's movement toward personal freedom. James recognized that a stage ambassador must always be a flawed ambassador who could never adhere to the logic of delegation. Ambassadorship as a theme in *Guy Domville* must always be for profit or loss (just as writing for the stage was in James's day). This discovery caused James to return to the novel and shape a new form of that genre, which enabled him to develop the same theme of ambassadorship by which Strether "breaks even."

MARK WILLIAM ROCHA  
*University of Southern California*

*Reply:*

I would agree with Mark Rocha that different representational media give prominence to different features of representation, but I would disagree with his claim that drama is exempt from the delegational logic that operates in fiction. Indeed, if anything, drama emphasizes that logic, and James derived the delegational method of narration used in the later fiction from his experience in the theater. Drama underscores the dependence of the text on supplementation by performance. But the performance is always as much a deviation from as an enact-