

PARODIES



Henry James

(1843-1916)

INTRODUCTION

“Disastrous was the effect of letting him know that any of his writings had been parodied. I had always regarded the fact of being parodied as one of the surest evidences of fame, and once, when he was staying with us in New York, I brought him with glee a deliciously droll article on his novels by Frank Moore Colby, the author of *Imaginary Obligations*, 1904. The effect was disastrous. I shall never forget the misery, the mortification, even, which tried to conceal itself behind an air of offended dignity. His ever-bubbling sense of fun failed him completely on such occasions.”

Edith Wharton
A Backward Glance (1934)

from “In Darkest James” (1904)

Frank Moore Colby

There is no doubt that James’s style is often too puffed up with its secrets. Despite its air of immense significance, the dark, unfathomed caves of his ocean contain sometimes only the same sort of gravel you could have picked up on the shore. I have that from deep sea thinkers who have been down him...

If the obscurity of the language were due to the idea itself, and if while he tugs at an obstinate thought you could be sure it was worth the trouble, there would be no fault to find, but to him one thing seems as good as another when he is mousing around in a mind. It is a form of self-indulgence. He is as pleased with the motives that lead nowhere as with anything else. It is his even emphasis that most misleads. He writes a staccato chronicle of things both great and small, like a constitutional history half made up of the measures that never passed. And in one respect he does not play fairly. He makes his characters read each other's minds from clues that he keeps to himself. To invent an irreverent instance, suppose I were a

distinguished author with a psychological bent and wished to represent two young people as preternaturally acute. I might place them alone together and make them talk like this:

“If—“ she sparkled.

“If!” he asked. He had lurched from the meaning for a moment.

“I might”—she replied abundantly.

His eye had eaten the meaning—“Me!” he gloriously burst.

“Precisely,” she thrilled. “How splendidly you do *understand*.”

I, the distinguished author, versed in my own psychology--the strings of my own marionettes--I understand it perfectly. For me there are words aplenty. But is it fair to you, the reader?

Nevertheless--and this is the main point about Henry James--by indefinable means and in spite of wearisome prolixity he often succeeds in his darkest books in producing very strange and powerful effects.... Things you had supposed incommunicable certainly come your way. These are the times when we are grateful to him for pottering away in his nebulous workshop among the things that are hard to express. Even when he fails we like him for making the attempt. We like him for going his own gait, though he leaves us straggling miles behind. We cannot afford at this time to blame any writer who is a little reckless of the average mind.

from “A Magnificent But Painful Hippopotamus”

H. G. Wells

All art too acutely self-centered comes to this sort of thing. James’s denatured people are only the equivalent in fiction of those egg-faced, black-haired ladies, who sit and sit, in the Japanese colour prints, the unresisting stuff for an arrangement of blacks...

The only living human motives left in the novels of Henry James are a certain avidity and an entirely superficial curiosity. Even when relations are irregular or when sins are hinted at, you feel that these are merely attitudes taken up, gambits before the game of attainment and over-perception begins.... His people nose out suspicions, hint by hint, link by link. Have you ever known living human beings to do that? The thing his novel is about is always there. It is like a church lit, but without a congregation to distract you, with every light and line focused on the high altar. And on the altar, very reverently placed, intensely there, is a dead kitten, an egg-shell, a bit of string.... Like his “Altar of the Dead”....

Having first made sure that he has scarcely anything left to express, he then sets to work to express it, with an industry, a wealth of intellectual stuff that dwarfs Newton. He spares no resource in the telling of his dead inventions. He brings up every device of language to state and define. Bare verbs he rarely tolerates. He splits his infinitives and fills them up with adverbial stuffing. He presses the passing colloquialism into his service. His vast paragraphs sweat and struggle; they could not sweat and elbow and struggle more if God Himself was the processional meaning to which they sought to come. And all for tales of nothingness.... It is leviathan retrieving pebbles. It is a magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved at any cost, even at the cost of its dignity, upon picking up a pea which has got into a corner of its den. Most things, it insists, are beyond it, but it can, at any rate, modestly, and with an artistic singleness of mind, pick up that pea.

from “The Poets at a House-Party”

Carolyn Wells

A modern mortal having inadvertently stumbled in upon a house-party of poets given on Mount Olympus, being called upon to justify his presence there by writing a poem, offered a limerick. Whereupon each poet scoffed, and the mortal, offended, challenged them to do better with the same theme.

The Limerick

A scholarly person named Finck
Went mad in the effort to think
Which were graver misplaced,
To dip pen in his paste,
Or dip his paste-brush in the ink.

Henry James gives his version:

She luminously wavered, and I tentatively inferred that she would soon perfectly reconsider her not altogether unobvious course. Furiously, though with a tender, ebbing similitude, across her mental consciousness stole a re-culmination of all the truths she had ever known concerning, or even remotely relating to, the not-easily fathomed qualities of paste and ink. So she stood, focused in an intensity of soul-quivers, and I, all unrelenting, waited, though of a dim uncertainty whether, after all, it might not be only a dubiant problem.

from "The Involvular Club; or
The Return of the Screw"

John Kendrick Banes

The story had taken hold upon us as we sat round the blazing hearth of Lord Ormont's smoking-room, at Castle Aminta, and sufficiently interfered with our comfort, as indeed from various points of view, not to specify any one of the many, for they were, after all, in spite of their diversity, of equal value judged by any standard, not even excepting the highest, that of Vereker's disturbing narrative of the uncanny visitor to his chambers, which the reader may recall--indeed, must recall if he ever read it, since it was the most remarkable ghost-story of the year--a year in which many ghost-stories of wonderful merit, too, were written--and by which his reputation was made--or rather extended...[continuing a one-sentence paragraph that extends for almost two pages]...although it should be said that Miss Miller occasionally manifested a lamentable lack of regard for the objects for which The Involvular Club was formed by showing herself, in her semi-American way, regrettably direct of speech and given over not infrequently to an unhappy use of slang...

"Excuse me," said Mr. Tom Snobbe, rising and interrupting the reader at this point, "but is all that in one sentence...?"

from "The Mote in the Middle Distance"

Max Beerbohm

It was with the sense of a, for him, very memorable something that he peered now into the immediate future, and tried, not without compunction, to take that period up where he had, prospectively, left it. But just where the deuce *had* he left it? The consciousness of dubiety was, for our friend, not, this morning, quite yet clean-cut enough to outline the figures on what she had called his "horizon," between which and himself the twilight was indeed of a quality somewhat intimidating.