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"You Must be as Clever as We Think You': Assessing Intelligence in Henry James's *A Tragic Muse*"

Word count: 9961; 11,563 (including endnotes)

In his 1913 autobiography, *A Small Boy and Others*, Henry James recalls how being bad at maths at school convinced him that he was stupid:

I recall strange neighbours and deskfellows who, not otherwise too objectionable, were uncanny and monstrous through their possession, cultivation, imitation of ledgers, daybooks, double-entry, tall pages of figures, interspaces streaked with oblique ruled lines that weirdly "balanced," whatever that might mean, and other like horrors. Nothing in truth is more distinct to me than the tune to which they were, without exception, at their ease on such ground — unless it be my general dazzled, humiliated sense, through those years, of the common, the baffling, mastery, all round me [...] Everyone did things and had things — everyone knew how, [...], just as they kept in their heads such secrets for how to do sums [...] Those who surrounded me were all agog, to my vision, with the benefit of their knowledge. I see them, in this light, across the years, fairly grin and grimace with it; and the presumable vulgarity of some of them, certain scattered shades of baseness still discernible, comes to me as but one of the appearances of an abounding play of genius. Who was it I ever thought stupid? [...] All of which, I should add, didn't in the least prevent my moving on the plane of the remarkable [...]; I was fairly gorged with wonders. [...] It was strange [that I was] so stupid without being more

brutish and so perceptive without being more keen.¹

It is easy to read this passage suspiciously. James's incapacity for calculation turns out to be a mark of election, a sign of a Romantic appetite for wonder that augurs his vocation as an artist. Where his classmates were presumably fit for a world of "ledgers, daybooks, double-entry", of doing things and having things, he was a beautiful soul. James reassures us that his type of incapacity had no negative class connotations — he was in no way "vulgar", "brutish", or "base" — and goes on to suggest that it was in fact so discreet that it escaped the attention of his teachers (129). More subtly, the passage encourages us to recognize that if the twelve-year old James was hopeless at maths, it was because he was a precocious philosopher; while his classmates calculated, he pondered the incalculability of other minds. But James's forms of self-aggrandizement here only reward so much suspicion: they are relatively overt, and predictable enough. Writing at the end of a long and distinguished career, James takes it for granted that the reader of his autobiography credits him with exceptional mental powers. More interesting is James's effort to convey that his celebrated perceptiveness had its origins in a hyperbolic childhood conviction of his stupidity. An acute sense of mental inferiority engenders a paranoid but also creative fascination with other people: it makes all other minds seem a store of troubling secrets, enviable knowledge, even when they are engaged in something as dull as schoolwork. James suggests that if his schoolboy self possessed any latent genius, it was because he "never thought anyone stupid".

As Mark McGurl has observed, the critical tendency to focus on the epistemological dramas staged so obsessively by James's late fiction — who knows what, how they know it, and the value of their knowledge — has tended to

obscure the extent to which James is interested in the evaluation of intelligence.² James's characters are typically preoccupied not just with the question of how and what other people know but how well they know; they are generally anxious to discover not just the contents but the calibre of other minds. For McGurl, this is because James is the master of the modernist art of making invidious distinctions: his formidably difficult late novels aspire to serve as an esoteric type of I.Q. test, sifting the "intelligent from the stupid" at the level of both character and readership (75). In McGurl's account, James's desire to adjudicate on the question of intelligence is his queasy reaction to a perceived blurring of social distinctions in the late nineteenth century; his anxieties about mass culture and social leveling inspire him to refigure and mystify volatile class distinctions as intellectual distinctions (65).

Tellingly, however, McGurl's account dwells much more on the intimidating effects of James's representational strategies upon the reader than upon how intelligence is represented through particular characters and conceptualized within James's fictional worlds. His claim that James is invested in "distinguishing the stupid from the smart" appears as part of a brief discussion of James's 1896 novella, *The Spoils of Poynton*. McGurl suggests that this work illustrates James's tendency to equip certain characters with quasi-authorial insight — the characters James calls his "centres of intelligence" — and to distinguish them from flat, dull-witted characters denied such authorial preferment (75). Yet despite and sometimes because of this kind of authorial favoritism, it is extremely difficult to determine who passes for intelligent in James's fiction; rather than establishing a clear hierarchy of intellect with its own formal difficulties at the apex, he makes the vexed nature of judgments about intelligence one of the cardinal difficulties of reading his work. Take for

example this brief passage from *The Spoils of Poynton*:

[Mrs. Gereth] had no imagination about anybody's life save on the side she bumped against. Fleda was quite aware that she would have otherwise been a rare creature; but a rare creature was originally just what she had struck her as being. Mrs. Gereth had really no perception of anybody's nature — had only one question about persons: were they clever or stupid? To be clever meant to know the marks.³

It is true that Fleda seems to be granted an authorial quasi-omniscience here. She is apparently so sensitive, so anxious to do imaginative justice to others, that she manages to take into account not just Mrs. Gereth's actually-existing complexities, but, circularly, the kinds of complexities Mrs. Gereth might have possessed had she exercised the same kind of moral imagination. Crucially, Mrs. Gereth's preoccupation with the question of whether other people are clever or stupid is not only a moral but an intellectual limitation, depriving her of the apparently more enlightened perspective of Fleda; James implies that to ask "is this person clever or stupid?" is to ask a stupid question, at least if it is your primary question. "Marks" here perhaps carries the connotation of a student's test results — a meaning the word acquired in the early nineteenth century (*OED*) — but the primary reference is to manufacturer's marks: the phrase underscores Mrs. Gereth's tendency to assess other people as if they were furniture and had a value determinable by aesthetic connoisseurship. The novella centres on Mrs. Gereth's obsession with her family's antique furniture — the "spoils" of the title — and her low opinion of the intelligence of her son, Owen, whom she fears will marry a "stupid" girl (111),

Mona Brigstock. Although James does not falsify Mrs. Gereth's estimate of her son in an obvious way — that is, by revealing that he has unsuspected depths of intelligence — he uses Fleda to underscore that Mrs. Gereth's intelligence index is itself stupid, a self-ratifying epistemological circle. As Fleda observes, Mrs. Gereth thinks the meaning of other people is exhausted by whatever obtrusive part of them her imagination happens to "bump" against; and as the phrase implies, her imagination mostly bumps against the question of material possessions. However, Fleda's assessment of Mrs Gereth's intelligence mirrors rather than transcends Mrs Gereth's presumption of intellectual sovereignty; rather than simply bestowing authorial omniscience on Fleda, James ironizes Fleda's aspiration toward it. Like Mrs Gereth, Fleda flatters herself that she "knows the marks of cleverness", and fetishizes Owen's "beautiful dense[ness]" as if his mental capacity were as palpably material as an item of furniture: she desires him precisely because she thinks him a "blockhead" (186), and would like to "contribute all the cleverness" to a marriage (40).

Pursuing this line of interpretation seems to lead to the conclusion that Fleda's and Mrs. Gereth's "cleverness" is an immoral exercise of social power, and that Owen is the victim of their "reifying aestheticism", to borrow Jonathan Freedman's phrase.⁴ However, there is no simple equation between "cleverness" and social power in *The Spoils of Poynton*. The novella as a whole can be read either as a satire on or a tragedy about the way two women draw upon discourses of aesthetics to construct a compensatory fiction of their "superior acuteness" (125), one that enables them to conceal from themselves their abjection in relation to patriarchy. The plot turns on Mrs. Gereth's elaborate efforts to outwit the custom of primogeniture, by which she stands to be dispossessed of her house and furniture collection as soon as her son marries.

Throughout, Owen's alleged "stupidity" can be read as a sign not of his victimhood but of his complacent power. In effect, patriarchal custom does his thinking for him and spares him what appears to be the exhausting, feminized labor of "cleverness" in this novella; he can afford to be ignorant of the women's baroque mental lives.

Thus far I have been echoing the novella's brutal binary of "clever" versus "stupid". This binary is in fact pervasive in James's writing, and is operative from the start: it is discernible in his first novel, *Roderick Hudson* (1875).⁵ James's characters often favor the word "clever" to "intelligent" or any other synonym for mental ability; and the concomitant ubiquity of the word "stupid" in his fiction tends to conjure a terrifying social world regulated by a stark distinction between cleverness and stupidity. On face of it, this is surprising; why does James, celebrated for his attentiveness to the nuances of consciousness and of social life, revert to such a crude, even childish vocabulary when capturing people's intellectual worth? Put another way, why does he persistently construct characters who, though often defined by their sensitivity and sophistication, have such an impoverished vocabulary for assessing the intelligence of others? These observations seem to support McGurl's argument that James sought to make the novel form the arbiter of a new kind of intellectual hierarchy. Yet this essay argues, at least in relation to James's 1890 novel, *The Tragic Muse*, that just the opposite is the case. In this comedy of English manners and of the theatre, the clever/stupid binary is invoked and worried over so incessantly by the characters that the terms acquire a dizzying range of implications and a deconstructive force. James's somewhat claustrophobic focus upon the meanings of "cleverness" in upper-class English life in *The Tragic Muse* enables him to unravel the contradictions and

anachronisms embedded in apparently modern conceptions of intelligence, professionalism, and merit.⁶ In particular, the novel's comedy persistently exposes the problematic aspects of the modern impetus to reify "intelligence" as a unitary, measureable phenomenon.

The rapid and controversial rise of intelligence testing in both Britain and America in the first decades of the twentieth century was the culmination of a more protean nineteenth century drive to establish the mainly innate and measurable nature of mental ability.⁷ This same impetus was central to the pseudo-sciences of phrenology, physiognomy, and craniometry that had flourished in both Britain and America; ; and from the mid-1860s, it gained fresh momentum from the work of Francis Galton.⁸ Galton's efforts to demonstrate the fundamentally heritable nature of intelligence through a mixture of statistics and biographical case studies first reached the public in the form of an essay, "Hereditary Talent and Character" in 1865, and were later elaborated in his book *Hereditary Genius* (1869), which galvanized debate in the popular press.⁹ Galton's theories of intelligence also received considerable publicity when his Anthropometric Laboratory was established first at the Royal Horticultural Society in South Kensington for the International Health Exhibition in May 1884 and then at the Science Galleries of the South Kensington Museum in 1888. Galton believed that sensory responses were a meaningful index of intelligence, and for this reason, the physiological tests he conducted upon thousands of people in his laboratories — between 1885 and 1889, he gathered data on nearly 20,000 individuals — may be regarded as the birth of the transatlantic mental testing movement.¹⁰ However, as Jennifer Ruth and Cathy Shuman have demonstrated in relation to Britain, the notion that examinations can disclose the truth of an individual's intelligence rose to

cultural prominence in the mid nineteenth century, and was entangled with the development of ideals of professionalism and meritocratic social mobility in the period.¹¹ As Shuman writes, "the mid-Victorian culture of testing helped to establish the flexible and powerful idea of an unspecific 'ability' or 'talent', from the first associated with aristocratic privilege, which was eventually to become 'intelligence'".¹² In what follows, I read *The Tragic Muse* as an intervention in the late nineteenth century reification of intelligence as a mainly innate, unitary, and testable phenomenon — in other words, in the nineteenth century genealogy of the concept of I.Q.

I. Acting Clever

Being called "clever" can sound like a backhanded compliment. This is firstly because, like most terms associated with the intellect, it can have a negative moral valence, and James's fiction often puts into play the traditional, Christian identifications of cleverness with corruption and ignorance with grace. Such identifications are ambiguously present in the *Spoils of Poynton*, for instance: Owen can be read as of one James's holy fools; both Mrs. Gereth and Fleda can be understood as "monster[s] of cleverness", to borrow Fleda's own phrase (111). As Matthew Sussman has recently argued, James's late fiction often spiritualizes "stupidity" in quasi-Christian terms, constructing it as a "palpable attitude toward experience, a positive expression of moral purity associated with self- or other-protecting ignorance".¹³ Although the sacred ignorance theme is crucial to how James problematizes the modern investment in evaluating "intelligence" in his late fiction, this essay will focus on another, more secular reason why "clever" can sound like a slight. "Cleverness" implies skillfulness —

etymologically, it means to be nimble or dexterous with claws or hands, expert at seizing things (*OED*) — and so to call someone "clever" without specifying what the person is clever at can have the effect of implying that his or her whole being is defined by or limited to his or her mastery of a particular skill or stratagem. At the very least, the adjective prompts the question: clever how? Applied to a person, the term elides distinctions between mental and physical acts, being and doing: how it is possible simply to be clever, abstracted from any particular skill or activity?

The perplexing and perhaps insidious effects of being judged "clever" are central to *The Tragic Muse*. As Richard Salmon has noted, this novel is the last in the series of long, panoramic, realist-naturalist novels that James wrote during the 1880s; it may be understood as the culmination of the 'middle phase' of his career.¹⁴ It has attracted scant critical attention, and primarily as a means of gauging James's ambivalent response to the aesthetic movement, especially to Oscar Wilde.¹⁵ Yet as Freedman has remarked, this novel is James's "most thorough treatment of the problem of vocation".¹⁶ It is essentially two *bildungsromane* braided together. Both of these vocation narratives focus upon the confusions that attend trying to "tak[e] the measure of aptitude", to borrow a phrase from the novel itself.¹⁷ One is the story of Nick Dormer, the second son of an aristocratic family expected to follow his father into a career as a Liberal member of parliament. He is, however, more attracted to the idea of being a portrait painter, and for much of the novel, he agonizes over whether he has sufficient talent to justify abandoning politics for the sake of art. The other is the story of Miriam Rooth, an aspiring actress who lives in genteel poverty with her mother. Miriam is apparently less conflicted in her ambition than Nick but unlike him must overcome other people's scepticism about her talent. Miriam is

only apparently less conflicted since, although she is the heroine of the novel, James never grants us access to her interior life. He here experiments with a strategy he uses much more extensively in *The Awkward Age* (1899): in James's own, somewhat disconcerting theatrical metaphor in his 1908 Preface to the novel, he declines to "go behind" Miriam, so we can only judge her by her words and actions, and by the impressions she makes on others ("Preface", 9). This enables James to pose the question "how does a person tell if he or she has talent?" in two obviously incommensurable ways: in the case of Nick, it is experienced primarily as an existential riddle, one that he attempts to solve mostly in private and by introspection; in the case of Miriam, it is presented as a matter of public performance and social judgment. Miriam's narrative concerns her effort to convince an audience of her talent; Nick's concerns his effort to convince himself of his. The juxtaposed vocation narratives enable James to raise a range of questions about the validity of aesthetic judgments; the distinctions between art forms; the relationship between public and private life; and the value of success in the marketplace. Crucially, however, talent is not a vexed question in the novel because the characters or the narrator treat it as an ineffable mystery. Although Romantic ideas about genius, imagination, and inspiration vaguely haunt the characters, artistic talent is persistently framed in terms of a much more worldly, and categorical discourse, shared by all the major characters, of cleverness versus stupidity.¹⁸ While many of the characters clearly wish to give this discourse an absolute, essentialist force, the novel does not naturalize it; on the contrary, James continually calls attention to its jarring effects, and its tendency to proliferate contradictory meanings.

Miriam's alleged stupidity registers in part as a conventional prejudice against the theatre in general and against actresses in particular — prejudices

that James's novel aims to interrogate. The idea that Miriam is stupid is first put into circulation by Gabriel Nash, an elusive trickster-aesthete figure generally acknowledged to be modeled on Oscar Wilde, though his avowed philosophical positions are in some respects closer to Walter Pater's than to Wilde's.¹⁹ Nash asserts that Miriam has no acting talent because she is "splendidly stupid", and then challenges the other characters to "judge" her stupidity for themselves (49). Like Wilde, Nash is given to at once dogmatic and paradoxical pronouncements, and his verdict on Miriam is actually unstable, blending contempt with aesthetic appreciation; it incites other characters to become invested in the question of Miriam's intelligence, rather than to dismiss her out of hand. Nash does not deign to justify his logic explicitly, but to the extent that it is manifest, it is obviously idiosyncratic: he seems to think Miriam is "stupid" because she is an aspiring actress rather than an established one. And indeed, it becomes clear that Nash despises professional ambition as such. As Richard Salmon has noted in relation to *The Tragic Muse*, nineteenth-century aestheticism as developed by Pater and Wilde centred on a polemical, and quasi-aristocratic, valorization of *being over doing*; for instance, Pater claimed that "the end of life is not action but contemplation — *being* as distinct from *doing* — a certain disposition of mind".²⁰ Nash considers Miriam's professional ambition stupid because it necessarily defers her desired identity to an uncertain future date and condemns her in the meantime to an undignified, subjunctive labor: trying to be. For instance, he sneers at the fact that she has adopted a stage name prior to having established herself as an actress: "[she] desires to be known by some *nom de guerre* before she has even been able to enlist" (49). Nash's aristocratic logic, or illogic — Miriam lacks the talent to be an actress because she is not a successful actress already; to aspire is to have failed in advance — captures a paradox of

professional identity that the novel is concerned to probe. As Ruth has argued, the Victorian novel often explores the confused temporality of professional ambition, itself born of a wider cultural confusion about the status of the professional and the nature of his or her labor:

If the professional suffers from contradictory class *locations* — neither in the capitalist nor the laborer's camps and yet both a (mental) capitalist and an (intellectual) laborer — then he is also subject to ambiguous [...] *temporalities* — neither born a professional, as the gentry is born gentry, nor self-made, like the Smilesian businessman, and yet both born (with certain aptitudes) and made (through mental effort). With a simultaneously pregnant and collapsed relationship to time, the professional putatively boasts mental "gifts" that anticipate his future (pregnant) but he simply becomes what he was always meant to be (collapsed).²¹

Such paradoxes mean that Miriam is continually subject to confounding judgments. Early in the novel, Miriam solicits the professional opinion of Madame Carré, a renowned French actress who has retired from the stage and now gives lessons. A range of major and minor characters witness Miriam's audition, and are also eager to assess if she has what one of them, Peter Sherringham, thinks of as the "mark of a vocation" (93). Significantly, however, the audition is framed less a test of Miriam's acting talent than of her general intelligence; Madame Carré asserts that if an actress has intelligence "she has every gift" (87). Miriam's intelligence test/acting audition is premised upon the idea that her ability can be objectively quantified: Madame Carré seeks to "count

[...] Miriam's "properties" in order to "measure" her "histrionic nature" (93). Perhaps predictably, however, her judgments about intelligence and its relation to acting talent are at once peremptory and incoherent. On the one hand, she dismisses the idea that acting ability is a matter of "education"; when Miriam's mother brags that her daughter can speak many languages, Madame Carré retorts that Miriam ought then to be a governess — "there is no education that matters" (86). Yet she is equally disdainful of the idea of "natural endowments" (94), and claims that real acting ability is a matter of "unremitting and ferocious work" (94); she prizes "the effects the actor had worked hard for, had dug out of the mine by unwearied study" (93). In the context, this is a bewildering position. The purpose of Madame Carré passing judgment on Miriam is that her long experience should give her an eye for spotting potential; if Miriam already possessed the sedimented knowledge of "unwearied study" — the achievement of a long career as an actress — she would not need to submit herself to Madame Carré's examination. In effect, Miriam is judged "stupid" because she does not yet possess the practical experience she is trying to prove her capacity to acquire. However, no less than Miriam, Madame Carré is caught in a bind produced by tensions that inhere in the ideal of the professional. As a venerable expert, Madame Carré predictably values accumulated experience over the idea of natural gifts; but her expertise is being called upon to adjudicate on the question of whether Miriam has natural gifts, or at least whether she has latent capacity to acquire the same type of expertise. She cannot declare that Miriam simply has "talent" without undercutting the authority by which she makes the statement.²²

James encourages us to perceive that the verdicts about Miriam's mental capacity are sieved through an array of prejudices. First, he opens up the possibility that Miriam is merely suffering from stage-fright, both in relation to

the acting audition/intelligence test and in relation to the complex theatricality of the upper-class social milieu she is trying to negotiate. Certainly Nick responds to Miriam's audition as a spectacle of class sadism: he grows distressed watching "a poor working-girl's struggle with timidity" (86). Yet the other characters persistently find Miriam "crude" (92, 110, 128), "vulgar" (129, 146, 147), and "coarse" (94, 127, 150). Her alleged "stupidity" is clearly at least in part a judgment about the spectacle of a *déclassé* woman whose need to establish a career makes her appear gratingly self-assertive to many of the novel's upper-class characters, despite the fact that several of them are also professionals. Later in the novel, Nash reflects that it was Miriam's ambition that initially made her appear stupid to him: she was so "hungry to adopt an overrated profession that he had not imputed to her the normal measure of intelligence" (259). Similarly, it is later clarified that Peter's perception that Miriam is stupid is partly produced by his suspicion that the acting profession demands a "vulgar [...] conscience" (147). In a play upon the word "acting" typical of the novel, however, James also highlights that Peter's prejudice is not actually specific to the acting profession, but is an aristocratic distaste for all professions, all "acting" or doing in the world: Peter reflects that any effort to convert ideas into action is necessarily a "vulgarisation" of the self (147).

Madame Carré's low opinion of Miriam's talent is explicitly a Gallic disdain for the English character, which she regards as too obsessed with "respectability" to be compatible with the artistic life (89). This judgment is also confusing, since the novel's English characters generally fail to recognize Miriam as English; by them, she is classified as a cosmopolitan Jew, though the novel repeatedly specifies that she is only part-Jewish and we later learn that she considers herself English, or at least that her mother considers her so (135).²³ It

is Miriam's Jewish ancestry that first leads Peter to suspect that she may in fact be "clever". Prior to having met her, he challenges Gabriel's assertion that she is stupid on the grounds that Jews are known to be of superior intelligence; Peter remarks that if Miriam turns out to be stupid, she will be the first known Jewish case (49).²⁴ While other characters' judgments about Miriam's mental capacity are often issued with dogmatic certitude, the fact that the subject provokes so much fascinated speculation, and is analyzed through a bewildering kaleidoscope of clichés and stereotypes, paradoxically serves to render it enigmatic and posit it as that which standard frames of social judgment are inadequate to capture. Moreover, the fact that other characters are assessing Miriam's intelligence by assessing her acting ability underscores the extent to which they conceptualize intelligence as a form of theatrical display.

In her study of the rise of examination culture in nineteenth century Britain, Shuman emphasizes the theatrical dimensions of the examination scene, its "sense of disaster and drama".²⁵ Yet Shuman suggests the underlying assumptions of nineteenth century exam are aligned not with the theatre but with novelistic realism. The exam and the realistic novel both claim to fathom depths and to make interior worth available for fair evaluation.²⁶ It is often observed that James's fiction foregrounds the theatricality of everyday life, and, as one might expect, this is especially true of *The Tragic Muse*, his novel about the theatre.²⁷ More surprising is how the novel highlights the extent to which modern social life has the quality of a formal examination; or, more precisely, that it combines theatricality with the exam's promise to make interior worth justly assessable. The novel's imaginative conflation of the stage and the exam is clarified through the minor character of Basil Dashwood, an actor and ultimately Miriam's husband. Basil is said to have "gone on the stage" because he "tried for

the diplomatic service" but failed to "dazzle his examiners" (111). In this, Basil stands in chiastic relation to Peter, the rival for Miriam's hand, who is said to have been highly successful in the same civil service exam but who is also a theatre aficionado (66). Throughout the novel, we are encouraged to perceive an underlying equivalence between the theatre and the diplomatic service, and Basil's and Peter's contrasting experiences of the civil service exam and subsequent career paths highlight the nexus between acting ability and the performance of class identity. James keeps the social origins of Basil obscure; other characters question both his intelligence and his status as a gentleman (211, 215, 307), though it is not clear if this is simply another manifestation of prejudice against the theatre. By contrast, James emphasizes that Peter performed brilliantly in the civil service exam because there were "flattering prejudices in his favor" (66); the exam tested not his intellectual abilities but his class privileges and the aura of natural authority that they conferred upon him. From 1870, the civil service had recruited through open, competitive examinations — a reform that was widely touted as the displacement of an ancient culture of patronage and the enshrinement of a modern principle of merit. However, as James' characterization of Peter's exam experience registers, meritocratic recruitment overwhelmingly favored young men from the ancient public schools and universities — institutions which continued to instill an aristocratic ethos despite the fact that they had been infiltrated by the middle-classes by the late nineteenth century.²⁸ As Asa Briggs observes, the civil service exam was intended to test not simply ability but the "character" and "social rank of the candidate", and thereby ensure that he had been "brought into contact with influences conducive to the sentiments of a gentleman".²⁹ Here as throughout the novel, James emphasizes the extent to which a courtly ideal of *sprezzatura*

— that is, the courtier's obligation to maintain a mask of nonchalance and convey effortless superiority — haunts apparently modern ideals of merit and intelligence.³⁰

The one important exchange between Basil and Peter blurs the distinctions between theatrical technique and social performance. More important for my purposes, it highlights how the association of intelligence with aristocratic ideals of cultivated nonchalance and inscrutability has the effect of blurring the distinction between displaying cleverness and acting dumb:

"*Ars celare artem*", Basil Dashwood jocosely dropped.

"You must first have the art to hide", said Sherringham, wondering a little why Miriam didn't introduce her young friend to him [...]

"If you haven't any art it's not quite the same as if you didn't hide it, is it?" Basil Dashwood ingeniously threw out.

"That's right — say one of your clever things!" Miriam sweetly responded.

"You're always acting", he declared in English and with a simple-minded laugh, while Sherringham remained struck with his expressing just what he himself had felt weeks before. (218-219)

The classical maxim *ars celare artem* — it is art to conceal art; or, true art conceals its artfulness — is often identified with the courtly ideal of *sprezzatura*.³¹ It is also the key paradox that undermines the distinction between cleverness and stupidity in *The Tragic Muse*. As Avital Ronnell observes, James tends to equate intelligence with reserve and with the capacity for concealment: "unreserved, stupidity exposes while intelligence hides".³² In other words, intelligence tends to manifest itself as an absence or as something

that is only faintly perceptible — "subtlety" — and the comedy of *The Tragic Muse* often hinges on the paradoxes produced by this logic. As the dizzying exchange between Basil and Peter dramatizes, cleverness which conceals itself is always at risk of being read as stupidity; any artfulness that succeeds too well is in danger of seeming like artlessness. Basil's response to Miriam, "you're always acting", implies that he thinks that her remark — "say one of your clever things!" — is in fact insincere; she is playing the ingenue, and implying that Basil is a fool. Peter certainly seems to consider Basil a fool — the impression that Basil's laugh is "simple-minded" is apparently focalized through Peter — but the passage opens up the possibility that this is only Peter's obtuseness, or at least a sign of his exclusion; Basil's and Miriam's interchanges have so many tiers of paradoxical acting-clever-by-playing dumb that their real relationship is opaque to Peter (though perhaps not to the reader, who suspects that the play of irony between them discloses their deepening intimacy).

Miriam apparently succeeds as an actress because she masters the art-conceals-art paradox: Nick observes of her that she becomes the "performer who could even produce the impression of not performing" (265). By the second book of the novel, she seems to others to be "always acting" (126, 218); like the courtier who has perfected *sprezzatura*, she has disappeared into her mask. Yet the ironic effect of her becoming a successful actress is the apparently widespread perception that she is not an actress at all; that her "profession" entails no technique or mental labor but is simply her natural way of being in the world, or a matter of feminine instinct. For instance, Gabriel rhapsodizes: "you've stopped acting, you've reduced it to the least that will do, you simply are — you're just the visible image, the picture on the wall" (269). Peter meanwhile seeks to demystify Miriam's acting ability in Darwinian terms. Echoing Darwin

in *The Descent of Man* (1871), Peter reflects that women's intelligence is essentially intuitive and imitative, akin to the intelligence of "lower races" and inferior to the rational capacities more typically found in European men:³³

She had her ideas, or rather she had her instincts, which she defended and illustrated, with a vividness superior to argument, by a happy pictorial phrase or a snatch of mimicry; [...] she liked experiments and caught at them, and she was especially thankful when some one gave her a showy reason, a plausible formula, in a case where she only stood on an intuition. She pretended to despise reasons and to like and dislike at her sovereign pleasure; but she always honoured the exotic gift, [...] as if she had been a naked islander rejoicing in a present of crimson cloth. (315)

We are meant to recognize the compensatory structure of this colonial fantasy. James often implies that Peter's boorishness as a suitor — inseparable from his faith in his mental superiority and in the potency of his class privileges — means he is not much good as a diplomat, either. Peter lacks the finesse to conceal his will to mastery in his courtship of Miriam; he plainly imagines it as a civilizing mission of an exotic primitive. The extended joke of this thread of the narrative is that Peter is a bad lover and a bad diplomat because, despite his fascination with the theatre, he is a bad actor: his attempts at romantic diplomacy read all too transparently as acts of imperialism. As John Carlos Rowe has pointed out, Miriam proves herself sharply aware of the psychological link between Peter's efforts to woo her by treating her to an aesthetic education and his professional commitment to British imperial ambitions.³⁴ Later, seeking to convince Miriam to give up the stage in order to become an ambassador's

wife, Peter announces: "I shall be a great diplomatist [...] I'm infinitely cleverer than you have the least idea of, and you shall be a great diplomat's wife" (385). When this ludicrously undiplomatic speech fails to persuade Miriam, he leaves Europe for an undistinguished diplomatic post in an unspecified "little hot hole" in Central America.

II Hereditary Eminence

As has been suggested, Nick's narrative is the mirror inverse of Miriam's: he is assumed to be "clever" by virtue of his gender and class, and he comes to find his reputation for cleverness oppressive. On the most obvious level, this is because he associates it with the pressure to follow his father into politics when he would rather be an artist. However, the deeper logic of his narrative is that Nick has internalized modern, meritocratic ideals, and so recoils in disgust from the advantages conferred by his aristocratic status. Although Nick obviously has to win his seat as a Liberal member of parliament by campaigning, James emphasizes that the process is only superficially democratic: Nick really takes his seat by hereditary privilege and through a network of patronage, and this sours his faith in the Liberal cause and democracy in general.³⁵ His reputation for a general, innate "cleverness" engenders self-contempt, as well as contempt for others — "ah the idiotic clever! if he was clever, what fools other people were!" (198).

The insistence with which other characters refer to Nick as "wonderfully clever" (155) or "immensely clever" (101) comes to register as glib and hyperbolic, and often has a clearly coercive dimension. For instance, Nick expresses qualms about marrying his patron, Lady Julia Dallow, to another of

his patrons, Mr. Carteret, on the grounds that Julia "thinks me cleverer than I am". Mr. Carteret responds: "You must be as clever as we think you. If you don't prove so — !" (194). The ambiguity of Mr. Carteret's statement — is it a declarative or an imperative? a reassurance or a threat? — epitomizes how judgments about intelligence in the novel often manage to be both dogmatic and unstable. On the one hand, Mr. Carteret takes Nick's cleverness for granted because Nick is the son of an aristocratic politician; it requires no proof because it is a matter of heredity and upper class enculturation. And yet the same logic that makes Nick's "cleverness" self-evident also renders it apocryphal: Mr. Carteret casts doubt on it in the very act of conferring it by fiat. Put another way, Mr. Carteret's statement typifies the unstable performativity of judgments about intelligence in this novel: Nick's 'cleverness' is not fixed attribute of his that others acknowledge and which qualifies him for professional life so much as a reality that others conjure into being.³⁶ The novel's tendency to compare all professions to the theatre heightens our perception of the performativity of intelligence and professional merit: like Miriam's status as a 'stupid' actress, Nick's status as a 'clever young man' registers as a stock role, a conventional form of make-believe that must be continually sustained by himself and others.³⁷ Mr. Carteret's 'you must be as clever as we think you' simultaneously highlights the extent to which the attribution of talent is a financial speculation; Nick has to "live up" to his aristocratic "essence" — to borrow Pierre Bourdieu's phrase — and thereby make good on other people's investment in his being what they speculated he was.³⁸ Nick's acute anxieties are produced partly by his recognition that his being called clever is not really a "compliment", because it is not freely bestowed; it is a form of credit or patronage that places him in the humiliating position of debtor or client.³⁹

Hereditary talent in the novel is not simply an old aristocratic ideal; the phrase had acquired a quasi-scientific freight by the late nineteenth century. It evokes Galton's claims for the fundamentally hereditary nature of mental ability in *Hereditary Genius*. Galton's book received considerable attention in the popular press upon its first publication, though it met with hostility as well as more measured scepticism at the hands of reviewers.⁴⁰ On the other hand, it was granted legitimacy by notable members of the scientific community: it was favorably reviewed by Alfred Russel Wallace, for example.⁴¹ Crucially, Galton also appears to have changed Darwin's mind about intelligence. Prior to reading *Hereditary Genius*, Darwin seems to have had a liberal, mid-Victorian faith in the rough equality of human capacity and in the gospel of work. Afterwards, however, Darwin wrote to his cousin: "You have made a convert of an opponent in one sense, for I have always maintained that, excepting fools, men did not differ much in intellect, only in zeal and hard work".⁴² Galton's riposte to this alchemizes the phenomenon of labor into proof of biological destiny: "Character, including the aptitude for hard work, is heritable like every other faculty".⁴³ In the *Descent of Man*, Darwin treats Galton's theory of intelligence as established science: "we now know, through the admirable labors of Mr. Galton, that genius tends to be inherited".⁴⁴

Galton's assimilation of hard work into the category of fixed biological inheritance captures the logic of his larger work on mental ability. Galton sought to prove the hereditary nature of intelligence by charting the genealogies of what he termed "eminent men" and generating statistics from that data. The validity of his data and his claims depended upon the premise that Britain was in the 1860s and always had been essentially, if imperfectly, meritocratic: "social hindrances cannot impede men of high ability from becoming eminent".⁴⁵ More

startlingly, he acknowledges that his effort to quantify intelligence depends upon the validity of his extending the logic of a metaphor: that of the examination. Galton's theory of intelligence rested on the plausibility of interpreting all of British history as a competitive, public exam after the pattern of the exam that really possessed his imagination, the mathematics tripos at the University of Cambridge:⁴⁶

High reputation is a pretty accurate test of high ability [...] I look upon social and professional life as a continuous examination. All are candidates for the good opinions of others, and for success in their several professions, and they achieve success in proportion as the general estimate is large of their aggregate merits. In ordinary scholastic examinations marks are allotted in stated proportions to various specified subjects [...] The world, in the same way, but almost unconsciously, allots marks to men [...] The metaphor of an examination may be stretched much further. As there are alternative groups in any one of which a candidate may obtain honours, so it is with reputations. (2, 6-7)

The metaphor of the exam expands imperiously in Galton's work. He loses sight of the fact that is a metaphor, and become absorbed in mathematizing reputation — "eminence" — and then proclaiming that the results disclose the truth of biological essence. Moreover, because Galton conceptualized intelligence as a unitary, biological trait he treated all vocations as if they were commensurable; in *Hereditary Genius*, the accomplishments of "statesmen", "literary men", "men of science" and "divines" are tabulated as manifestations of a single underlying phenomenon, natural ability. In this way,

Galton divested artistic genius of its quasi-mystical, Romantic status. The rise of such a model of intelligence in the late nineteenth century helps to account for the tendency of the characters in *A Tragic Muse* to discuss various vocations and forms of creativity — literature, painting, sculpture, acting, politics, diplomacy — as if they were all reducible to the same standard, "cleverness".

In an early scene of *The Tragic Muse* set in the sculpture floor of the Paris Salon, the annual exhibition of contemporary art, Nick discusses the nature of artistic talent with his sister Bidy, who is an aspiring sculptor. Nick and Bidy both appear certain that it is a matter of innate mental ability, but their dialogue reveals a shared, underlying confusion about the relationship between latent capacity and effort, being and doing:

"Don't you think I've any capacity for ideas?" the girl continued ruefully.

"Lots of them, no doubt. But the capacity for applying them, for putting them into practice, how much of that do you have?"

"How can I tell until I try?"

"What do you mean by trying, Bidy dear?"

"Why you know — you've seen me".

"Do you call that trying?" her brother amusedly demanded. (25)

On the one hand Bidy protests that the question of her talent remains open because she has not yet tried in earnest to become an artist; on the other, she suggests that her brother should be able to judge if she has "capacity" by having "seen" her, but it is not clear if she means that he has seen her "try", or that he might be able to judge the quality of her "ideas" simply by judging how she looks. Nick picks up on this ambiguity and makes a joke of it — he both implies

she has not tried in earnest and that she is taxing him with judging her talent by her physical appearance. This minor joke establishes the tendency of novel's characters to render absolute judgments about mental worth on the basis of outward appearance, and introduces one of the novel's key themes. The notion that a person's mental qualities can be read off his or her physical characteristics recurred in various forms in the nineteenth century: it was axiomatic to the pseudo-sciences of physiognomy, craniometry, and phrenology, as well as to Galton's anthropometric tests. As this scene suggests, *The Tragic Muse* is particularly attentive to how judgments about mental ability are often entangled with the mystifying discourses of aesthetic judgment. For instance, Bidy is convinced of Nick's mental superiority because he is able to make aesthetic judgments more quickly and authoritatively than she can:

His certainty of eye impressed her, and she felt what a difference there was yet between them — how much longer in every case she would have taken to discriminate. She was aware of how little she could judge of the value of a thing till she had looked at it ten minutes; indeed, modest little Bidy was compelled privately to add, "And often not even then" [...] She was mystified — Nick was often mystifying — but one thing was definite: her brother had high ability. It was the consciousness of this that made her bring out at last: "I don't much care whether or not I please mamma, if I please you".

"Oh don't lean on me. I'm a wretched broken reed — I'm no use *really*!" he promptly admonished her.

"Do you mean you're a duffer?" Bidy asked in alarm.

"Frightful, frightful!"

[...]

"A great talent — what's simpler than that?" [Biddy asked].

"One excellent thing, dear Biddy: no talent at all".

"Well, yours is so real you can't help it".

"We shall see, we shall see", said Nick. (26)

Tellingly, Biddy's suggestion that her brother's "talent" is a self-evident reality prior to any specific achievement and apparently floating free of any particular skill or vocation — it is hard to discern if the pair are discussing Nick's prospects as painter, or his prospects as a young man of general "high ability" — here induces one of Nick's characteristic paroxysms of self-loathing. Biddy's faith in her brother's "high ability" turns out to be far more precarious than it first seems; he only has to articulate self-doubt for her to be alarmed by the possibility that he is in fact a "duffer". Biddy simply takes her brother at his own estimation: when he condescends to her, she attributes "high ability" to him; when he disparages himself, her faith in him wavers too. There is also a more interesting instability here. The siblings offer contrasting but equally categorical judgments about each other's innate mental capacities; but ironically, both Nick and Biddy suspend judgment and invoke the criteria of time and effort when assessing themselves.

Nick's *bildung* entails his effort to escape the paralyzing effects of a reified, hereditarian conception of his own intelligence and to embrace an ideal of creative labor. At certain points James encourages us to read Nick's renunciation of his political career for the sake of art as an act of sublime masochism, the choice of a noble ascetic vocation over worldly success. However, James deprives Nick's choice of any obvious grandeur in that the

novel never clarifies whether Nick's paintings are any good. It remains pointedly agnostic on the question, but suggests that Nick might in fact be a mediocrity, precisely because other people are too ready to pronounce his work "clever". If there is dignity in Nick's choice, we are encouraged to feel that it is because he exposes himself to the risk of humiliation and failure:

There were moments when he felt almost angry, [...] when by the few persons who saw [the paintings] they were pronounced wonderfully clever. That they were wonderfully clever was just the detestable thing in them, so active had that cleverness been in making them seem better than they were [...] he thought he saw as in an ugly revelation that nature had cursed him with an odious facility and that the lesson of his life, the sternest and wholesomest, would be to keep out of the trap it had laid for him [...] He was at all events too clever by half, since this pernicious overflow had wrecked most of his attempts [...] (450)

Nick's "cleverness" is here posited as a fact of nature akin to a sexual impulse that must be sublimated for the sake of moral decency. Freedman notes that Nick's adoption of an artistic career is constructed as an "acceptance of the professional work ethic" (186), but this implies that the prevailing late nineteenth-century model of professionalism enshrined simply an ideal of virtuous slog, when in fact it tended to posit the professional as a mysterious interaction of latent ability and accumulated expertise.⁴⁷ Nick is always insisting that his desire to be an artist is perverse: he wants to be one because he thinks he has "no talent" at it (182), and it will therefore entail a properly radical form of self-mortification. This logic is framed partly in terms of the novel's pervasive

"rhetoric of testing":⁴⁸

The greatest time to do one's work was when it didn't seem worth doing, for then one gave it a brilliant chance, that of resisting the stiffest test of all — the test of striking one as too bad. To do the most when there would be the least to be got by it was to be most in the spirit of high production [...] Art was *doing* — it came back to that — which politics in most cases weren't" (393).

This representation of art as strenuous, ascetic doing calls to mind James Eli Adam's claim that the professionalization of literature in the Victorian period often prompted male writers to represent their own writing as a form of heroic self-discipline compatible with normative ideals of masculinity.⁴⁹ Yet it seems extremely difficult to read Nick's vision of art as a form of masochistic doing as a self-legitimizing gesture on James's part; if it is, it is an extraordinarily oblique one. Nick forfeits not just the idea of worldly success, but any compensatory Romantic ideal of the artist as suffering genius; he labors on not just in spite but because of the possibility that he has no talent. Nick embraces art because it grants him the opportunity to feel stupid, and as if he were condemned to a life of obscure, futile toil: he affirms "I must go and sit down in a corner and learn my alphabet" (398); and at the end of the novel, he fantasizes not about success but of "an eternity of grinding" (463). "Doing" art is simultaneously Nick's effort to escape what he experiences as the burden of hereditary intelligence. Nick half-facetiously tells Gabriel that he wants to be an artist in spite of the fact that it means divesting himself of hereditary advantage: he has checked his genealogy carefully, and found no examples of artistic "eminence" (122). It is telling that Nick uses Galton's favored term, "eminence", in this context, since it is the Galtonian model of hereditary eminence that haunts Nick and which makes the

artistic vocation seem to him an emancipation from "family, [...] blood, [...] heredity, [...] traditions" (122).

III. The Art of Getting Your Experience Fast

Thus far I have emphasized that Nick associates "cleverness" with his own class origins and with an aristocratic valorization of being over doing. However, the term "clever" also acquires a range of contrary connotations in the novel: it is associated with commercialism, publicity, and the temporality of modernity. As Ronnell observes, intelligence is often measured by a "technostandard": we assume that it is aligned with "quick-wittedness, speed of comprehension — in general, with the high velocity of mind of our modernity. The mind capable of quick comprehension may be a calculative mind, agile in performing mechanical operations that, however, are not interiorized or broken but smooth and unproblematic in terms of the results they yield".⁵⁰ It is frequently suggested that both Miriam's "genius" and Nick's "cleverness" consist of a capacity for rapid assimilation that thwarts their development of deep, private interiority — the traditional *telos* of the *bildungsroman* form — and makes them exploitable as slick commodities. (Both characters are extensively "stage-managed" by a range of patrons, mentors, and family members, and their degree of agency in their own careers is always questionable.) In the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, "intelligence", "genius", or "talent" is often the characteristic that justifies a protagonist's status as an exemplary hero or heroine and is associated with his or her capacity to cultivate an especially rich inner life.⁵¹ Yet in *The Tragic Muse*, the mental capacities of the two key protagonists are in apparent tension with the humanistic assumptions of the ideal of *bildung*: in the cases of both Nick

and Miriam, the attribute of "cleverness" threatens to empty out any kind of private inner life or sense of meaningful vocation. Nick's "talent for appearance", his "damnable suppleness" and "gift of immediate response" propel him to electoral success in age of expanding democracy, despite his utter lack of conviction and patrician disdain for his constituency (450). This is another source of Nick's self-contempt: he regards the political system as "humbuggery, hypocrisy and cant" (255) precisely because he manages to "get on fast" in it (399). The novel is structured to highlight the parallels between democratic politics and the theatre, and like Miriam's success on the stage, Nick's electoral victory entails "becom[ing] a spectacle to the vulgar" (169). Similarly, James often prompts us to wonder if Miriam's much-touted "genius" is really an aptitude for self-commodification. Other characters suggest that Miriam succeeds because she is a chameleon without any underlying character or substance, and is therefore a fitting muse for a shallow, distracted modernity. Peter reflects of Miriam: "to hear her you might have thought there was no cleverness anywhere but in her own splendid impatience" (314); he later remarks of her, "she learned so fast [...] Genius is only the art of getting your experience fast" (311). Like Nick, Miriam suspects that her success is meretricious and worries that it will undermine her capacity to take herself seriously as an artist (466). Although Miriam eventually triumphs in the role of Juliet, there is the repeated suggestion that she is essentially preoccupied with managing her celebrity and is more truly suited to "do[ing]" comic roles (314); she regards the "art of comedian" as the "most distinguished thing in the world" (232). This gives a bitterly ironic flavor to James's choice of title: James implies in an "age of publicity" (346), the idea of tragedy is an anachronism, or is at least likely to be eclipsed by "the Comic Muse" (363); there is little patience for high

seriousness and no real nobility in suffering. "You can't suffer for art", Peter observes to Nick at one point. "That grand romance is over" (397).

This brings us to Wilde's place in the novel. The fact that the word "cleverness" in this novel does duty for old aristocratic ideals, on the one hand, and modern forms of self-commodification, on the other, has an intelligible logic when it is remembered that the personification of "cleverness" in this novel, Gabriel, is a thinly veiled Wilde. In a novel about artistic vocations, Gabriel is the only character with a decidedly literary bent: he is said to have written an "very clever" novel (31), but he claims to have renounced all literary ambition, and now appears to live as a kind of Socratic dandy who will only dispense his aphorisms *in propria persona*, as unscheduled, one-off performances. Like Wilde in the 1880s, Gabriel is essentially a professional talker: he lives to dazzle and provoke by his stream of perfectly turned phrases which at once draw attention to the theatricality of his own persona and, as Peter Brooks notes, the "staginess" of other characters.⁵² Shelley Salamensky has suggested that James's famous antipathy to Wilde can be traced in part to the fact that Wilde's repartee left him tongue-tied; James felt humiliated by one of Wilde's quips upon their first meeting, and thereafter distrusted Wilde's hyper-fluent talk, dismissing him as "fatuous fool, a tenth-rate cad".⁵³ The fact that Gabriel is the only literary figure in this novel about the arts and even he has repudiated writing in favor of "clever" talk — talk which entrances some of the characters, but which is found "fatuous" (113) by others — seems to encode James's fear that Wilde's career adumbrated the fate of the modern writer: the reduction of literature to clever slogans and of the writer to an amusing but ultimately marginal personality. The fact that Nick's portrait of Gabriel seems to Nick to fade mysteriously has been read as a sign of Gabriel's queer elusiveness, his capacity to resist conventional

representation and float free of the determinants of identity;⁵⁴ yet it may also be read in more pessimistic terms, as a symbol of the attenuation of the novelist in a debased, spectacle-driven culture.

At the end of the novel, Miriam, the poor, supposedly "stupid" actress, is fêted as a genius; Nick, the "clever" aristocrat, has embraced art because it enables him to feel like a "poor clumsy beginner"(420) and to experience a kind of imaginary *déclassement*. The fact that James tells their vocation narratives according to two incommensurable representational logics — one realist, one theatrical — deprives us of stable grounds for interpreting these ironic reversals; we cannot examine Miriam and Nick by a common standard. James's refusal to arbitrate among the cacophony of judgments about Nick's and Miriam's mental worth and clarify if either of them have genuine talent for their chosen vocations underscores the novel's wider project of interrogating the complicity of aesthetic discourses, including the *bildungsroman* form, in facile and potentially oppressive measurements of intelligence and merit.⁵⁵ In a novel in which most of the characters are in a rush to deliver summary judgments about the mental worth of others, it is a minor, apparently "stupid" character, Mrs. Rooth — Miriam's mother — who articulates the perplexity that the reader reasonably feels, and poses the question that we might wish to ask of James:

"Dear me, if he isn't clever you must tell us: we can't afford to be deceived!" Mrs. Rooth innocently wailed. "What do we know — how can we judge?" she appealed.

[Peter] had a pause, his hand on the latch. "Oh, I'll tell you frankly what I think of him!" (211-212)

As so often in this novel, the question of intelligence is a financially interested one here: Mrs. Rooth cannot afford to be wrong in her speculations about it. Yet this is apparently trivial moment is also charged with much more complex implications. James prompts us to entertain the possibility that Mrs. Rooth is herself talented actress and not in fact the vacuous stage-mother she is generally taken for: she might be playing dumb in order to trap Peter into exposing his overweening faith in his own intellect and thereby ensure that Miriam marries Basil, the person whose intelligence is in doubt. One way of reading the novel is that Mrs. Rooth manages her daughter's career and love life with consummate artfulness. On this reading, Mrs. Rooth only appears to be a peripheral, dim-witted character; she is in fact the ingenious architect of a substantial part of the plot. James gives us no good grounds for judging whether her stupidity is in fact artful, except for the fact that Mrs. Rooth is usually "in the wings" of any scenes in which Miriam appears and that she gets what she appears to want. This epistemological wormhole is comic, a counter-narrative briefly opened up but not explored. It nonetheless reflects James's larger effort to keep the question of the intelligence of every character — even the apparently minor, foolish ones — in play.⁵⁶

James, rather than seeking to make the novel form an instrument for adjudicating differences in intelligence, uses it as a means of staging the incalculable complexities embedded in such judgments. Although *The Tragic Muse* finds comedy in the hypocrisies and confusions generated by the modern preoccupation with examining mental ability, in James's "major phase" novels, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), the moral stakes of not thinking anyone stupid — of sustaining a paranoid agnosticism about everyone's intelligence — are much higher. James's

interrogation of late nineteenth century constructions of intelligence in *The Tragic Muse* is primarily a critique of the idea that true art conceals art — that is, that it conceals mental labor and projects easeful "cleverness". At the end of novel, it is far from clear that Nick will be able to sustain his ideal of art as a form of ascetic labor which resists not only the temptations of the marketplace but the temptations of "cleverness": we learn that he has exhibited a "noble" portrait of his former patron, Lady Dallow, which perhaps indicates that his art has been co-opted by the political establishment he sought to escape (491). Yet Nick's earlier model of art as masochistic, impotent doing in the absence not only of hope for success but belief in his mental gifts is the novel's only gesture toward fulfilling the promise of "tragedy" held out in the title.

¹ Henry James, *Autobiography: A Small Boy and Others, Notes of a Son and Brother, and The Middle Years*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee (London: W. H. Allen, 1956), 127-129.

² Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 75.

³ Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton* (London: Penguin, 1963), 126. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁴ Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism and Commodity Culture* (Stanford University Press, 1993), 160.

⁵ The word "clever" appears twenty four times and "stupid" ten times in *Roderick Hudson* (Oxford University Press, 1980). As in *The Tragic Muse*, "cleverness" is often used a term for artistic talent in this novel, but also as an unspecific trait, detached from any particular skill or activity though clearly associated with the glamor of wealth and refinement. For the former usage, see 157; for the latter, see 285.

⁶ I unfortunately lack space to consider how James's perspective as an American settled in England shaped his attitude to the evaluation of mental ability, though this subject will be addressed in a larger project provisionally entitled *The Measures of Intelligence: Mental Ability, the Meritocratic Ideal, and the Novel of Education in Britain and America, 1870-1920*. It is nonetheless legitimate to treat James primarily as an interpreter of British culture when appraising *The Tragic Muse*. It is the first of a series of novels he published in the 1890s — *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), *What Maisie Knew* (1897), *The Turn of the Screw*

(1898) and *The Awkward Age* (1899) — which focus on British society and do not include his famous "international theme" (that is, his preoccupation with the experiences of Americans in Europe).

⁷ For an account of the rise of intelligence testing in England, see Gillian Sutherland, *Ability, Merit, and Measurement: Mental Testing and English Education 1880-1940* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); for the history of American intelligence testing, see John Carson, *The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750-1940* (Princeton University Press, 2007). For a synoptic account, see Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).

⁸ For a history of the transatlantic cultural prominence of phrenology in the early nineteenth century, see Stephen Tomlinson, *Head Masters: Phrenology, Secular Education, and Nineteenth Century Social Thought* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2013). For an account of craniometry as a precursor to the rise of intelligence testing, see Carson, *Measure of Merit*, 102-109.

⁹ For an account of the popular reception of *Hereditary Genius*, see Emel Aileen Gökyiğit, "The Reception History of Francis Galton's 'Hereditary Genius' in the Victorian Periodical Press", *Journal of the History of Biology* 27 (1994): 215-240.

¹⁰ The phrase "mental testing" was coined by one of Galton's protégés, James McKeen Cattell. Cattell personally exported Galton's theories of intelligence to America via a mental testing program he established at the University of Pennsylvania in 1890. See John D. Greenwood, "Intelligence Defined: Wundt, James, Cattell, Thorndike, Goddard, and Yerkes", *Handbook of Intelligence: Evolutionary Theory, Historical Perspective, and Current Concepts*, ed. Sam Goldstein et al. (New York: Springer, 2014), 125-126.

¹¹ Jennifer Ruth, *Novel Professions: Interested Disinterest and the Making of the Professional in the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), and Cathy Shuman, *Pedagogical Economies: The Examination and the Victorian Literary Man* (Stanford University Press, 2000).

¹² Shuman, *Pedagogical Economies*, 9.

¹³ Matthew Sussman, "Henry James and Stupidity", *Novel* 48 (2015), 48.

¹⁴ Richard Salmon, "Aestheticism in Translation: Henry James, Walter Pater, and Theodor Adorno", in *Translating Life: Studies in Transpositional Aesthetics*, ed. Shirley Chew and Alistair Stead (Liverpool University Press, 1999), 283.

¹⁵ In addition to Freedman, *Professions of Taste* and Salmon, "Aestheticism in Translation", see for example Richard Dellamora, *Friendship's Bonds: Democracy and the Novel in Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 153-177; Andrew Eastham, *Aesthetic Afterlives: Irony, Literary Modernity, and the Ends of Beauty* (London: Continuum, 2011), 73-80; Eric Haralson, *Henry James and Queer Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); Michèle Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); and S. I. Salamensky, "'The Man of the Hour': Oscar Wilde, Performance, and Proto-Modernity in Henry James's *The Tragic Muse*", *Henry James Review* 32 (2011): 60-74.

¹⁶ Freedman, *Professions of Taste*, 182.

¹⁷ Henry James, *The Tragic Muse*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Penguin, 1995), 307, hereafter cited parenthetically.

¹⁸ The word "clever" appears 103 times and the word "stupid" 31 times in *The Tragic Muse*.

¹⁹ As David Garrett Izzo suggests, James's Gabriel is "Walter Pater as interpreted by Oscar Wilde". See Garrett Izzo, "A Pair of Afterwords", in *Henry James Against the Aesthetic Movement: Essays on the Middle and Late Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 229.

²⁰ Walter Pater, *Appreciations* (London: Macmillan, 1889), 61, and Salmon, "Aestheticism in Translation", 289.

²¹ Ruth, *Novel Professions*, 4-5.

²² The instability of Madame Carré's assertions is also produced by what Harold Perkin identifies as the essentially "fiduciary" nature of professional expertise: "the professional is [...] offering a service that is [...] esoteric, evanescent, and fiduciary — beyond the layman's knowledge or judgment, impossible to pin down or fault even when it fails, and which must therefore be taken on trust". See Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London: Routledge, 1989), 117.

²³ For analysis of the unstable significations of Miriam's Jewishness, see Sara Blair, *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 123-157.

²⁴ For analysis of the nineteenth-century currency of the stereotype of Jewish intellectual superiority, see Sander L. Gilman, *Smart Jews: The Construction of the Image of Jewish Superior Intelligence* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

²⁵ Shuman, *Pedagogical Economies*, 3.

²⁶ Shuman, *Pedagogical Economies*, 88-89.

²⁷ For a recent discussion of James's preoccupation with the theatricality of social life, see Maya Higashi Wakana's *Performing the Everyday in Henry James's Late Novels* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

²⁸ For analysis of the elitist bias of the civil service examinations in the nineteenth century, see Simon Szreter, *Fertility, Class, and Gender in Britain, 1860-1940* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 163-165.

²⁹ Asa Briggs, *Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes, 1851-67* (University of Chicago Press, 1975), 160-161.

³⁰ For a discussion of how the courtly ideal of *sprezzatura* survived in the nineteenth- and early twentieth century conceptions of gentlemanliness, see Christine Berberich, *The Image of the English Gentleman in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 16-17.

³¹ Though often attributed to Ovid or Horace, the origin of "*ars celare artem*" is unknown. For the link between the tag and the ideal of *sprezzatura*, see Heinrich F. Plett, *Rhetoric and Renaissance Culture* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 424.

³² Avital Ronnell, *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 10.

³³ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: Penguin, 2004), 629.

³⁴ John Carlos Rowe, *The Other Henry James* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 84-85.

³⁵ Richard Dellamora's reading of the novel helpfully situates it in relation to the ideological fragmentation of the Liberal party in the late nineteenth century. See Dellamora, *Friendship's Bonds*, 153-177.

³⁶ The appositeness of J. L. Austin's concept of performatives and of speech act theory more broadly (particularly as it was developed by Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler) to reading James's fiction has been established by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and J. Hillis Miller. See Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 35-66; and J. Hillis Miller's *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

³⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Miller highlight the complex links between the concept of 'performatives' in speech act theory and performance in the theatrical sense in their introduction to *Performativity and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1995), 8.

³⁸ Bourdieu writes, "Aristocracies are essentialist. [But] the same essentialism requires them to impose on themselves what their essence imposes on them — noblesse oblige — to ask of themselves what no one else could ask, to 'live up' to their own essence". See Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2000), 16.

³⁹ I am indebted here to Ruth's analysis of the relationship between financial speculation and the emerging nineteenth-century conception of intelligence as an innate capacity that can be detected by written examinations. See Ruth, *Novel Professions*, 63, 68-70.

⁴⁰ See Gökyiğit, "Reception History".

⁴¹ Alfred Russel Wallace, "Hereditary Genius", *Nature* 1 (17 March 1870): 501-503.

⁴² Charles Darwin to Francis Galton, December 3, 1869. Quoted in Galton's autobiography, *Memories of My Life* (London: Methuen, 1908), 290.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 46.

⁴⁵ Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An inquiry into its laws and consequences* (London: Macmillan, 1869), 41. Galton acknowledges the influence of forces such as nepotism, but suggests that their distorting effect on a "natural" social hierarchy based on mental ability is slight; see 42.

⁴⁶ Galton suffered a mental breakdown before he sat the mathematics tripos at Cambridge in 1845. It is often suggested that this helps to account for the prominence of the mathematics tripos as a measurement of intelligence in *Hereditary Genius*. See Sheldon Rothblatt, *The Modern University and its Discontents: The Fate of Newman's Legacies in Britain and America* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 206, and *Hereditary Genius*, 19-24.

⁴⁷ See Ruth, *Novel Professions*, 3-5.

⁴⁸ I borrow this phrase from Ronnell; see *Stupidity*, 95-163.

⁴⁹ James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995). See especially 107-148.

⁵⁰ Ronnell, *Stupidity*, 300.

⁵¹ As Christiane Gannon observes, the protagonist of the *bildungsroman* is often an artist or a genius who is capable of developing an exceptional kind of private interiority. See Gannon, "Walter Besant's Democratic Bildungsroman", *Narrative* 22 (2014): 372-394, 377.

⁵² Peter Brooks, *Henry James Goes to Paris* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 81.

⁵³ Quoted in Shelley Salamensky, "Henry James, Oscar Wilde, and 'Fin de Siècle Talk': A Brief Reading", *Henry James Review* 20 (1999), 275.

⁵⁴ See Haralson, *Henry James and Queer Modernity*, 74-76.

⁵⁵ As Anne-Julia Zwierlein has argued, nineteenth-century British *bildungsroman* often reproduce the assumptions of the age's anthropometric sciences and thereby naturalize class and gender hierarchies. Zwierlein concentrates on the class-based delineation of physical differences in such novels, but the stratification of mental ability is also crucial to the *bildungsroman* in the period. See Zwierlein, "The Biology of Social Class: Habit Formation and Social Stratification in Nineteenth Century British *Bildungsroman* and Scientific Discourse", *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 10 (2012): 335-360.

⁵⁶ My thinking is influenced here by Alex Woloch's theorization of how the "distribution" of attention among major and minor characters structures our experience of narrative. Woloch suggests that nineteenth century realist novels often highlight the anti-democratic implications of their granting psychological depth to a particular protagonist at the cost of consigning other, perhaps equally worthy protagonists to the status of "minor", flat characters. See Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 30-32.