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The "Interminable Dramatic Daisy Miller"

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Abstract

Henry James dramatized his story "Daisy Miller" as *Daisy Miller: A Comedy* (1882), but the play has never been produced. Published (1883), it received mostly negative reviews but did, according to publishers' records, achieve modest sales and royalties over the next thirty years. Reviewers and critics have attributed its flaws mainly to James's infatuation with the French well-made play. Eleven other adaptations of the story for radio, TV, film, and stage, 1934-2005, by Allen, Bogdanovich, Greene, Keller, and others, have fared better critically, but none has supplanted the original. Although essentially literary, James's "Daisy Miller" has proved insistently dramatic.

The “Interminable Dramatic Daisy Miller”

By William Wortman,
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Although Henry James’s own dramatization of “Daisy Miller” was never staged, received generally negative reviews upon publication, and has attracted little positive critical attention, it did in fact achieve a degree of success. The play garnered several favorable reviews and comments when it was published, has had a surprisingly long and profitable life in print, and seems to have had some presence in readers’ minds, at least as late as 1918. Theatrically unsuccessful though James’s play was, it has attracted readers, and his story itself has continued to attract dramatizations for stage, screen, radio, and television. “Daisy Miller”—the “interminable dramatic Daisy Miller” as he self-deprecatingly described its three-part serialization in the *Atlantic* (CM 81)—seems to be inherently dramatic in ways worth exploring here.

Authorship

James’s journal and letters of 1882 and 1883 chronicle the composition, failure to win production, and publication of *Daisy Miller*. In December 1882 he declared himself ready to write plays, and living in Boston just after his mother’s death he wrote *Daisy Miller* but failed to find a producer in New York or Boston. He did read it to Mrs. Isabella Gardner in her Boston home on two separate evenings in the spring. On his return to London in May and then throughout the year he continued to seek production, having had eighteen copies printed by Macmillan in July (DM1), perhaps the better to shop it to producers. He offered it to the *Century* but then in the spring of 1883 had it published in the *Atlantic* (DM2), followed by book publication in mid-1883 by James R. Osgood (DM3) after Houghton, Mifflin declined it. Following Osgood’s May 1885 bankruptcy first Ticknor and then Houghton, Mifflin continued to issue the play, the latter printing additional copies and keeping it in print into the 1920s.

In turning his story into a three-act play, James added multiple plots and additional characters, created humorous stage business, removed Mrs. Costello’s dignity and made her a pompous figure of fun, and moved Mrs. Miller offstage entirely. The

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