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still writing in 1917.¹⁴ On January 18, 1911, James wrote a warm letter to possibly the same "dear Elizabeth."¹⁵

[Telephone:] 2417 Kensington

21, CARLYLE MANSIONS,
CHEYNE WALK, S. W.

December 17th 1914

My dear Gosse,

I am very sorry that your kind invitation does find me, as it happens, definitely committed for Xmas night—when I am to owe my dinner to the benevolence of my next-door neighbor here, Emily Sargent (and her brother John.) Please express to Mrs. Nelly my melancholy regret for this *gaucherie*.

To make up for it a little I am writing to the young Elizabeth—who appears to have an impression of spacious times, or time, on the part of each of us, that her great original can scarce have attained to—that I *will* try to lash my extinct imagination into five minutes life for her sweet sake, and the cause's—and yours.

Yours all faithfully

HENRY JAMES



HENRY JAMES AND STEVENSON DISCUSS
"VILE" TESS

By DAN H. LAURENCE
New York University

HARDY's novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was the subject of discussion by Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson in 1892 and 1893. This fact is not news, nor is it news that the two writers did not approve of the novel. But it *is* news that the full text of their remarks has never been published, strange though that fact may seem. When the novel

¹⁴ Charteris, *Life and Letters of Gosse*, p. 409.

¹⁵ See the COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY, I (1943), 41.

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was first issued, James was in London, Stevenson was (as James put it) "in Polynesia": their discussion of Hardy was therefore carried on over a widely extended space. As far as the reading public is concerned, the correspondence has been similarly widely extended in time; for readers had to wait seven years to get at the Stevenson letter, and then had to wait twenty-one more years to get at James's reply. In 1899 Sidney Colvin edited *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson to his Family and Friends* and in 1920 Percy Lubbock performed the same function for *The Letters of Henry James*, but few readers of the 1920 volumes turned back to the volumes of 1899 to get at the other side of the correspondence; and even if they had turned back they would have found nothing in Colvin's pages to indicate that there had been any omission or suppression of remarks about Thomas Hardy in the letter to James. It is now high time to lift the veil.

Both sides of the correspondence are at last available in the same place—the Houghton Library, Harvard University—and we are now able to follow the discussion of the notorious novel without suppression or concealment. Henry James had led off by announcing (in his letter of March 19, 1892) to Stevenson: "The good little Thomas Hardy has scored a great success with *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which is chock-full of faults and falsity and yet has a singular beauty and charm. . . ."¹ James had long been in the habit of seeing "faults and falsity" in Hardy's work. He had reviewed *Far from the Madding Crowd* for the *New York Nation*, commenting on the novel in a way that established him beyond question as a hostile critic. Although he admitted that "Hardy describes nature with a great deal of felicity and is evidently very much at home among rural phenomena," James astutely placed his finger on one of the obvious faults of the novel—the artificiality of its plot

¹ *The Letters of Henry James*, selected and edited by Percy Lubbock, 2 vols., New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920; I, 190.

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—but he also, incredibly, found fault with “the use of an ingeniously verbose and redundant style”!²

In admitting to Stevenson that he recognized in Hardy’s *Tess* “a singular beauty and charm,” Henry James knew that he was talking to some one who had responded to Hardy’s charm for many, many years. In “A Humble Remonstrance” Stevenson had praised *A Pair of Blue Eyes* as one of the best dramatic novels of the day; in 1885 he had been one of the first to acclaim *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, had made a special pilgrimage to Dorchester to call on Hardy, and had requested permission to dramatize *The Mayor*; and in 1887, when he was preparing to sail for America, Stevenson had sent Edmund Gosse scuttling about London on a Sunday with the herculean task of procuring a copy of *The Woodlanders* for reading on the long voyage. Stevenson had thus marked himself as an avowed Hardy admirer.

James’s letter took a long time to reach Stevenson, but at last—on December 5, 1892—RLS was able to reply. Colvin prints the pertinent part of the latter as follows: “Hurry up with another book of stories. I am now reduced to two of my contemporaries, you and Barrie—O, and Kipling—you and Barrie and Kipling are now my Muses Three.”³ Not a thing to indicate the omission of 246 words! What Stevenson really wrote was this:

Hurry up with another book of stories. I am now reduced to two of my contemporaries, you and Barrie—O and Kipling! I did like Haggard’s *Nada the Lily*; it isn’t great but it’s big. As for Hardy—you remember the old gag?—Are you wounded, my lord?—Wounded, Ardy.—Mortually, my lord?—Mortually, Ardy.—Well, I was mortually wounded by *Tess of the Durberfields* [*sic*]. I do not know that I am exaggerative in criticism; but I will say that *Tess* is one of the worst, weakest, least sane, most *voulu* books I have yet read. Bar the style,

² *The Nation*, XIX (December 24, 1874), 423-424.

³ The words quoted are in the fourth paragraph of the letter. See Sidney Colvin, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson to his Family and Friends*, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899; 2 vols.; II, 330-31.

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it seems to me about as bad as Reynolds—I maintain it—Reynolds: or to be more plain, to have no earthly connection with human life or human nature; and to be merely the ungracious portrait of a weakish man under a vow to appear clever, as a rickety schoolchild setting up to be naughty and not knowing how. I should tell you in fairness I could never finish it; there may be the treasures of the Indies further on; but so far as I read, James, it was (in one word) damnable. *Not alive, not true*, was my continual comment as I read; and at last—*not even honest!* was the verdict with which I spewed it from my mouth. I write in anger? I almost think I do; I was betrayed in a friend's house—and I was pained to hear that other friends delighted in that barmicide feast. I cannot read a page of Hardy for many a long day, my confidence [in him] is gone. So that you and Barrie and Kipling are now my Muses Three.⁴

This letter reached James in London two months later, and now that we have the whole text before us we are at last—after sixty years!—in a position to understand why James replied as he did. On February 17, 1893, he wrote to Stevenson:

I grant you Hardy with all my heart. . . .⁵ I am meek and ashamed where the public clatter is deafening—so I bowed my head and let “Tess of the D's” pass. But oh yes, dear Louis, she is vile. The pretence of “sexuality” is only equalled by the absence of it, and the abomination of the language by the author's reputation for style. There are indeed some pretty smells and sights and sounds. But you have better ones in Polynesia.

James's statement, “I grant you Hardy with all my heart,” might, without our possession of the full text on both sides of the correspondence, be read as a defense of Hardy—it *has* been so read. But we are now able to fill in the gap left by Percy Lubbock—a gap made, presumably, in deference to Hardy's feelings—and James's full statement leaves us in no doubt about his position. What he wrote to Stevenson was: “I grant you Hardy with all my

⁴ Copied from the original autograph at Harvard; published by special permission of Harvard College Library.

⁵ The hiatus indicated by these dots is not the present writer's but the work of James's editor. See *The Letters of Henry James*, selected and edited by Percy Lubbock, 2 vols., New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920; I, 199-201.

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heart *and even with a certain quantity of my boot-toe*" [italics mine]. Now that Hardy is dead, he won't feel James's kick and there is no further excuse for its suppression; and as far as Colvin's omission of Stevenson's angry spewing of *Tess* from his mouth is concerned, there is irony in the fact that all the subterfuge and dishonesty was of no avail, for Hardy *knew* the truth! Two years after the publication of *The Letters of Henry James*, Hardy was asked to contribute to a compendium designed to raise funds for the Stevenson Club. He thereupon sent a brief comment on RLS in which he reported his receiving Stevenson's letter of 1885 concerning the dramatization of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Then Hardy added:

I think I may say that to my vision he dropped into utter darkness from that date. I recall no further sight [of] or communication from him, though I used to hear of him in a round-about way from friends of his and mine. I should add that some years later I read an interview with him that had been published in the newspapers, in which he stated that he disapproved of the morals of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which had appeared in the interim, and probably had led to his silence.⁶

Whatever may be the implications of Hardy's word "probably" as far as Stevenson is concerned, there can be little doubt about Henry James's position. He continued to the end with a basic lack of sympathy for Hardy's work. The attitude taken by James in writing his 1874 review of *Far from the Madding Crowd* did not undergo any appreciable later change. Two years after the correspondence with Stevenson on the subject of *Tess*, James wrote to Mrs. Humphry Ward, in a letter dated May 8, 1895: "I think the tale⁷ very straightforward and powerful—very direct and vivid, full of the real and the *juste*. I like your unallegorized rustics—they are a tremendous rest after Hardy's...."

⁶ Rossaline Masson, ed., *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*, Edinburgh, W. & R. Chambers, 1922; pp. 271-273.

⁷ Mrs. Ward's "village tale" entitled *Bessie Costrell*. See J[anet] P[enrose] Trevelyan's *Life of Mrs. Humphry Ward*, New York, 1923; p. 112.

