1961


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THE LITERARY CAREER OF ESPY WILLIAMS:
NEW ORLEANS POET AND PLAYWRIGHT
(1852–1908).

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THE LITERARY CAREER OF ESPY WILLIAMS:
NEW ORLEANS POET AND PLAYWRIGHT
(1852-1908)

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

The Department of English

by

Patricia Kennedy Rickels
B.A., University of Washington, 1948
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1951
August, 1961
To Rick and Gordon
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT ........................................ iii
ABSTRACT ....................................................... v
INTRODUCTION ............................................ viii

CHAPTER

I BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE ...................... 1
II EARLY LITERARY ACTIVITIES ...................... 17
III APPRENTICESHIP IN THE DRAMA ................... 44
IV THE BEGINNINGS OF PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS ....... 68
V A DREAM OF ART AND OTHER POEMS ............... 91
VI A "NOTABLE OF NEW ORLEANS": 1893-1903 ........ 115
VII CONCLUSION ........................................ 148

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................ 166
APPENDIX ................................................... 185
VITA ............................................................ 193
ABSTRACT

Espy Williams was well-known in New Orleans in his own lifetime as a newspaper poet and the author of a volume of poetry (The Dream of Art, 1892). As a playwright he had a wider reputation. He wrote more than thirty plays, mostly heroic tragedies and romantic melodramas. Many were successfully produced, and some were performed all over the United States, as well as in Canada and England. A few years after his death, however, his work had been forgotten.

This study describes the conditions in New Orleans in particular and the American theatrical world in general which produced him, discusses his popularity on the stage of his time, and accounts for the rapid decline of his reputation. Unique materials for this research were provided by a collection of Williams' papers recently presented by his daughter to the University of Southwestern Louisiana. The collection contains, besides manuscripts of most of the plays in various stages of revision, a manuscript diary for 1874-1875, four unpublished essays on the drama, and letters from literary and theatrical people with whom he worked.
The New Orleans in which Williams grew up, despite the economic depression which forced him to leave school at sixteen and go to work, provided a sophisticated cultural atmosphere. He took advantage of the many opportunities to see good plays and great actors and to get visiting theatrical people to criticize his early work. He quickly learned that his literary ideals, formed by admiring study of the Elizabethans, especially Shakespeare, and the Romantics, especially Shelley, must yield to the demands of the commercial theater.

The stage was dominated by a generation of great actors who wanted starring vehicles tailored to suit their heroic and rhetorical style. Williams was commissioned to write for two of these: Lawrence Barrett and Robert Mantell. The popular taste demanded sensationalism, spectacle, violent, passionate, melodramatic action. These elements Williams undertook to provide, both in original romantic historical plays like A Cavalier of France and in adaptations for the stage of the popular novels of Wilkie Collins, Ouida, Bulwer-Lytton, and F. Marion Crawford. Because his theory of the drama demanded that a play be performance, he revised his works extensively to suit the demands of producers, with results unfortunate for his art and his
reputation. His most original and most thoughtful plays were either never produced (Eugene Aram, The Atheist, John Wentworth's Wife) or were so revised as to lose most of their value as literature (Parrhasius). The popularity of plays like Parrhasius and A Cavalier of France is an indication of the deplorable state of the American stage and of popular taste in the 1890's.

A decade after Williams' death, regeneration of the American drama had begun, with the growth of experimental theaters and the work of Eugene O'Neill and others. In the revolution that came with the New Theater, Williams and playwrights like him were forgotten even sooner than they would have been otherwise. In Williams' particular case, the limitations of his education and talent, and his distance from the center of theatrical activity in New York predestined him to oblivion. The study of his literary career is interesting not for the quality of his achievement but as a chapter of regional cultural history and as a contribution to the history of American drama.
INTRODUCTION

On August 29, 1906, the New Orleans Daily Picayune noted the death of Espy Williams, one of the city's prominent citizens. He was a member of a well-known family, active in social and civic affairs, and the managing officer of one of the most important financial institutions in the city. But it was another facet of his life which the obituary notice commemorated in the headline: "The South's Leading Dramatist."

As the author of a volume of poetry and more than thirty plays, many of which were produced professionally in the United States, Canada, and England, he enjoyed a considerable local reputation in his own lifetime. His work as a poet and dramatist is described and discussed in such standard regional works as Alcee Fortier's Louisiana Studies (1894) and The Library of Southern Literature (1907). His reputation did not long survive him, however. He is not mentioned in either Arthur Hobson Quinn's History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day (1927) or John S. Kendall's Golden Age of the New Orleans Theater (1952). Those of his works which are not lost
altogether exist only in isolated copies scattered through rare book rooms in a dozen libraries.

As an episode in cultural history, Williams' literary career seems worth investigating, particularly with reference to the conditions which produced him, the nature of his popular success, and the reasons for his posthumous neglect. The materials for such a study have recently been made available through the industry of Paul T. Nolan of the Department of English, University of Southwestern Louisiana, and the generosity of Williams' daughter, Mrs. Phillips Endicott Osgood of Summit, New Jersey.

Professor Nolan has long been interested in the Louisiana drama. Mrs. Osgood, Williams' only surviving child, saw a notice that he placed in a New Orleans paper inquiring for information about Williams. She wrote him, supplying important details about her father's life and revealing that she had manuscripts of most of his works. These papers she presented in 1957 to the Stephens Memorial Library at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, where they form the Espy Williams Collection. This collection, described in the appendix, has provided the primary materials for the present study.
CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE

Espy Williams was born in 1852 into a distinguished and prosperous New Orleans family which, like so many others, fell upon difficult times with the coming of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Though he was a native Louisianian, he was not of Southern ancestry. His father, William Hendricks Williams, had been a lawyer in Cincinnati, Ohio, where his family traced their descent back to Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island. William Williams was trained in surveying as well as in the law, and was famous in the family for his adventurous disposition. In 1850 he left his home and his law practice and travelled to Louisiana to assist a brother-in-law, Colonel Caleb Forshey, a West Point engineer, who was conducting the Delta Survey for the United States government.¹

He never returned to Ohio but settled in

¹A letter from Mrs. Phillips Endicott Osgood, of Summit, New Jersey, Espy Williams' daughter, to Paul T. Nolan, Professor of English, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, Louisiana, dated April 30, 1957.
Carrollton, now a part of New Orleans, Louisiana, when the survey was completed. He abandoned the practice of law, for a career as an engineer and surveyor. The only one of his family ever to be attracted away from Ohio, he embraced his new home with enthusiasm and served his adopted community well, with some of the zeal of a civic reformer. For a number of years he was Commissioner in Charge of Surveying and Drainage of the city of Carrollton. In that capacity he acted both wisely and courageously in the face of hostile public opinion. The levee at Carrollton needed replacement. It was too low, too close to the river, and extensively patched. As town surveyor, Williams drew the plans for a new levee. Relying, no doubt, on his experience with the United States government survey team, he recommended an eight-foot levee with a sixty foot base, to be built well

Since the levee at Carrollton is the highest and widest on the Mississippi, the water level there is a criterion for all the lower river district; therefore the Mississippi River Commission and the U.S. Engineers have made Carrollton a base for many studies in river control. See New Orleans City Guide, Written and compiled by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the City of New Orleans (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1938), p. 334.

Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, April 20, 1957. He is listed in New Orleans city directories variously as surveyor, engineer, and civil engineer.
back from the river bank, on a piece of property covered with buildings, several of which belonged to influential men. The town council supported Williams' recommendation against the protests of these property owners. A number of important projects in paving and building also occurred during Williams' term of office. In 1876, two years after Carrollton was incorporated into the city of New Orleans, he wrote "The History of Carrollton," which was published in the *Louisiana State Register* in that year.

On a visit to Natchez, Mississippi, Williams met and married Lavina M. Pollard, herself only a visitor in the South. Her home was Philadelphia,

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5 Ibid., pp. 253-54.

6 Ledet, whose history of Carrollton relies heavily on Williams' history, credits him also with the authorship of an anonymous book entitled *New Orleans as It Is*, published in New Orleans in 1850 and again in Cleveland in 1885; however there is no evidence of his authorship. Ledet's bibliography to "The History of Carrollton" gives William H. Williams as the author of the book. In fact, the printer of the volume was a William W. Williams. William H. Williams is not known to have any connection with the work.

7 The families had apparently been previously acquainted, for a Josiah Espy was in business with Milo G. Williams, William Williams' brother, in Cincinnati. (Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, February 15, 1957).
where her family included Professor James Pollard Espy of the Franklin Institute, an eminent mathematician and pioneer in the science of meteorology, whose name and the sobriquet "the Storm King" were household words in America. As might be expected from her background, Lavina Pollard Williams, like her husband, had a good academic education, her special interest being Classical languages and literature.  

8The Williams family tradition is that Lavina was Professor Espy's daughter; however the Dictionary of American Biography (VI, 185-186) says that he and his wife, the former Margaret Pollard, whose maiden name he took as his own middle name at the time of their marriage, had no children. Espy Williams gave Pollard, not Espy, as his mother's maiden name. (Who's Who in America, 1901-1909). Professor Espy's will (August 24, 1857) contains the following clause: "I leave to Lavinia M. P. Williams, niece of my wife Margaret Espy, Two Thousand Dollars." (Florence Mercy Espy, The History and Genealogy of the Espy Family in America. Ft. Madison, Iowa: Pythian Press, 1902, p. 45).

9Edgar Allan Poe, for example, in a review of the poetry of Thomas Ward, said: "Instead of confining himself to the true poetical thesis, the Beauty or the Sublimity of river scenery, he descends into mere meteorology—into the uses and general philosophy of rain, etc.—matters which should be left to Mr. Espy, who knows something about them." "Literati," The Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Amontillado Edition (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1856), VII, 206.

10Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, February 15, 1957.
Their first child, christened Espy William Henricks Williams after Professor Espy and his father, was born on January 30, 1852, in his father's brick house, which is still standing on Carrollton Avenue, the street where he lived all his life and where he died.

The New Orleans of Williams' youth was in some ways a highly sophisticated city and in other ways hardly civilized. Edmund Wilson, reviewing a biography of George Washington Cable, Williams' senior by eight years, notes the cultural advantages which New Orleans offered:

New Orleans had a regional culture such as no other Southern city possessed. The New Orleanians loved theatre and opera, and there was a certain amount of literary activity (which had begun with early writing in French and was to continue in English through our twenties). Cable had for his

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11This is the date given in all sources except Thomas M'Caleb, The Louisiana Book: Selections from the Literature of the State. (New Orleans: R.F. Straughan, 1894), p. 473, where the year 1853 is given.

12Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, January 30, 1957.

13He had two younger brothers, Charles Milo and William Covington, both of whom became architects and designed a number of homes in the Audubon Park area of upper New Orleans, according to a letter to Nolan, February 15, 1957, from Mrs. Osgood.

associates. . . the Franco-Spanish Creole historian Charles Gayarré, of an older generation, and his near contemporary Lafcadio Hearn. The Picayune, for which he wrote, maintained a literary standard that was unusually high for the South. And the variety in New Orleans of religions, of races, and of nationalities, gave Cable a kind of international experience which he could hardly, in the pre-war period, have got anywhere else in the United States.\(^{15}\)

But there was a more primitive and less pleasant side to life in New Orleans. Five years before Williams' birth, an editorial in the New Orleans \textit{Daily National} denounced the local customs of dueling and lynching. A month later the paper noted deplorable health conditions in the city: filth in the streets, the stench of decaying hides on the levee, no provisions for quarantine. It pointed out that no other city of its size in the United States was without public health laws. The editor's protests proved justified, for later the same month the paper printed the names of twenty-two yellow fever victims.\(^{16}\) And in 1853, Williams' first year of life, the worst yellow fever epidemic in the city's history claimed 11,000 lives.\(^{17}\) The terror


\(^{16}\)September 15, October 12, and October 22.

\(^{17}\)\textit{New Orleans City Guide}, p. 401.
that gripped New Orleans then and in the great epidemic of 1878, as music and churchbells were forbidden, business stopped, and thousands fled from the city, as bodies were carried in scavengers' carts to common graves, was described by George W. Cable in an essay entitled "Flood and Plague in New Orleans." So strong was Cable's memory of the horror of those days that they were "reflected in half a dozen of the books he wrote afterward."

On the other hand, Carrollton was probably a pleasant place to live. In its early days the town was separated by several miles of plantations and gardens from New Orleans proper. The atmosphere was quiet. Flower gardens and live oaks and other shade trees abounded. Carrollton Gardens, on the river, was a resort, famous for its hotel and its beautiful grounds. Thackeray entertained there in 1855.

The New Orleans schools were in deplorable condition. Established in 1833, they had only 500 students in 1848. A donation of $750,000 by John McDonogh in 1850 enabled the system to be expanded somewhat, but

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19 Turner, op.cit., p. 83.
in 1852, the year of Williams' birth, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, believing that Louisiana had made a mistake in endowing universities when there were inadequate primary schools, campaigned for the office of Superintendent of Public Education on a platform of common schools available to all, and lost the election.20

Yet the city supported a number of newspapers, including the French language paper, L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orleans, established in 1827, and the Picayune, established in 1837, followed by the Times, the Crescent, the Republican, the Democrat, and, in 1877, the Item. And the arts had always flourished in New Orleans. It was the first southern city to establish an opera company, and the opera became the focus of social life in the city. Many European artists performed there, and the French Opera House, built in 1859 at the corner of Bourbon and Toulouse Streets in the Vieux Carré, was the scene of the American premieres of a number of important European operas, by Saint-Saëns, Bizet, Gounod, Massenet, and others. For half a century, New Orleans was recognized as one of the leading music centers in the country.

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And the Crescent City was no less a theatrical than a musical center. The Roselawn little theater, built in 1891, was one of the earliest in the country, and years before that—at least as early as the 1840's—amateur productions had been staged by the Histrionic Association. But in Williams' youth the professional stage was the center of New Orleans theatrical activity. The French Opera House (1859-1919) was used for plays as well as operas. The American Theater (often called the Camp Street Theater) opened in 1824 and was famous all over the country. Every prominent actor and actress of the day appeared there. It was rebuilt in 1842 as the New St. Charles. There were also, in addition to a number of small theaters, Tom Placid's Varieties (1847-1870), the National Theater (1850-55), used mostly for German language plays, and a number of French Language theaters.

John S. Kendall notes that with the opening of the New Orleans theatrical season of 1820, "the English-language drama established itself in that city as a

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21 New Orleans City Guide, pp. 91-93, 130-35.


permanent intellectual and artistic institution. Thenceforth, for almost a hundred years, there was to be no interruption in the regular recurrence of the orthodox dramatic season.\footnote{Kendall, op. cit., p. 14.} The theater was not only a popular place of entertainment, but it was apparently considered an altogether proper place for ladies and children. Grace King, the very carefully brought up daughter of a prominent lawyer, attended the theater and the opera regularly as a child.\footnote{Grace King, Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters (New York: Macmillan Co., 1932), p. 46.}

The establishment of the English-language theater in New Orleans provides an example of the best and the worst aspects of life there. James H. Caldwell, who built the Camp Street Theater, had first tried unsuccessfully to revive the drama in Richmond, where all forms of theatrical entertainment had been forbidden since an 1811 theater fire, supposedly kindled by a wrathful Providence. Having been rebuffed in Virginia, Caldwell accepted an invitation from a group of New Orleans citizens to transfer his activities there, to "offset what they regarded as the cultural advantage
enjoyed by their Gallic fellow-citizens."\(^{26}\) The other side of the situation, and the contrasting aspect of New Orleans life, is shown in a letter Caldwell wrote in 1845 to his friend James Rees,\(^ {27}\) describing the incident: "New Orleans at that time was considered the birthplace of yellow-fever, and when I first mentioned to the company that the next town we played in was New Orleans, an almost universal expression of horror took place, and had nearly proved fatal to my attempt to establish the drama in the South."\(^ {28}\)

Williams was born in a period of growing North-South tensions, and on January 26, 1861, just four days before his ninth birthday, Louisiana seceded from the Union. A little more than a year later, Federal ships under the command of Admiral Farragut steamed up the Mississippi to New Orleans. Grace King, who was just Williams' age, and George W. Cable, who was a few years older, both described in later years the excitement of those days when schools were dismissed, fire bells were rung, mobs thronged the streets, many fled the city, and huge piles of cotton were dumped on the levee and

\(^{26}\)Kendall, op. cit., pp. 15-17.

\(^{27}\)Rees, under the pseudonym "Colley Cibber," wrote dramatic history and criticism. His Dramatic Authors of America (Philadelphia: G.B. Zicher & Co., 1845), contains considerable information about Caldwell's activities in New Orleans.

\(^{28}\)Kendall, op. cit., p. 17.
set afire. Confusion reigned for five days, until the city was surrendered and occupied. 29

Williams' parents took no sides in the controversy. 30 Their loyalties were undoubtedly divided between their northern heritage, and love and loyalty for their adopted home. Their lack of regional patriotism and of strong political convictions is reflected in Williams' attitudes as expressed in later years. When he wrote on subjects connected with the war, as in his sonnets "Davis" and "Grant," it was in a spirit of moderation and quiet admiration for the good men on both sides. 31 All his life he resisted pressures to leave New Orleans and make his home in the theatrical center of New York, but he was never militantly southern. In his daughter's words, "My father's loyalty to New Orleans was simply because he had been born there and he had a constitutional aversion to change of any sort." 32


30 Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, February 15, 1957.


32 Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, February 15, 1957.
Probably the chief importance of the war for Williams was the chaos which came with Reconstruction and changed the course of his life. The most immediate disturbance, from a child's point of view, occurred in the school system. Carpetbag legislation provided for the instruction of Negro and white children together, and some Negro superintendents of schools were appointed. As a result, many white parents refused to send their children to school. Enrollment dropped to twenty percent of normal, and schools were disorganized. The public school system of New Orleans was not restored to normal conditions until the late 1870's.\textsuperscript{33} It was Williams' misfortune that all of his school years fell during the period of the war and Reconstruction. Such as the New Orleans public schools were, he attended them. He spoke of himself as having a grammar school education only, since he never finished high school.\textsuperscript{34} He was, however, within one term of graduation from New Orleans High School when he was forced to discontinue attendance.\textsuperscript{35} The following excerpt from a review of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{33}New Orleans City Guide, p. 74.
  \item \textsuperscript{34}Who's Who in America, 1901-1909.
  \item \textsuperscript{35}May W. Mount, Some Notables of New Orleans (New Orleans, Louisiana: Privately published, 1896), p. 57.
\end{itemize}
his play *Parrhasius* is typical of comments made about his educational background by biographers and critics: "He was educated in the public schools of this city. Early in life he assumed the burdens of wage earning from necessity—otherwise he might have adopted a learned profession more to his taste than the mercantile life he adopted—and he is a self-made man and a well-made, good man at that." 36 His daughter remarks, however, "My father had no formal education beyond sixteen years of age but was hardly to be called a self-made man," 37 growing up as he did in an atmosphere of education and culture. His father, educated in the law and as an engineer, not only had published historical works, but was interested in literature as well. A contemporary called him "a scholar and an excellent though severe critic." 38 His mother, perhaps through Professor Espy's influence, was something of a blue-stocking. Her granddaughter recalls: "My grandmother was a Greek scholar and I remember her only as an old lady in black, with a lace cap, surrounded by books,

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36 *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, September 15, 1893.
38 *Mount, op. cit.*, p. 57.
from which absorption she was occasionally disturbed by the necessity for extracting the pantry keys from her chatelaine so that the colored maid might have flour or sugar." Since Lavina Pollard Williams continued her scholarly pursuits into old age, we may suppose her intellectual interests to have been vigorous in young womanhood. Thus, although there is no evidence for the statement in the *Louisiana Book* that Williams was educated at home until he was thirteen years old, there is every indication that he could have been, and every reason to suppose that his public school education was considerably enriched and his literary aspirations encouraged by his parents. His reading, for example, was not that of the average schoolboy. "Before the age of sixteen he was familiar with the best works of English literature--particularly Shakespeare, the other Elizabethan dramatists, and dramatic literature in general."  

Nevertheless, it was a great disappointment to him not to be able to continue his formal education.

As the oldest son in the difficult times of Reconstruction,

39 Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, February 15, 1957.
41 Mount, *op. cit.* , p. 57.
he was needed as a wage earner. Business conditions in New Orleans were almost unbelievably bad. Property was worth only half its former value, interest rates were from thirty to sixty per cent, since almost no capital was available.\footnote{42} Charles Gayarré, prominent Creole historian, told Edward King, author of a series of articles on "The Great South," published in Scribner's Monthly Magazine in 1873, that "among his immense acquaintance, he did not know a single person who would not leave the state if means were at hand."\footnote{43} So, in 1869, when he was seventeen, Williams went to work as a clerk in the New Orleans office of the Phoenix Mutual Insurance Company of Hartford, Connecticut.\footnote{44} Henceforth, for all the rest of his days, "business was the duty of life, literature was its recreation."\footnote{45}

\footnote{42}{Turner, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 52.}

\footnote{43}{Ibid.}

\footnote{44}{Edwards' \textit{Annual Directory to the Inhabitants, Institutions, Incorporated Companies, Manufacturing Establishments, Business, Business Firms, etc. in the City of New Orleans for 1870} (New Orleans, Louisiana: Southern Publishing Co., 1869), p. 632.}

\footnote{45}{Mount, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 57.}
CHAPTER 2
EARLY LITERARY ACTIVITIES

Though disappointed, Williams was by no means discouraged by the necessity of leaving school and going to work. He was a young man of more than usual energy and ambition, who had no intention of allowing adverse circumstances to rob him of a chance to excell. The story of his rise from youthful poverty to wealth and success in the business world is the old American dream come true. He used his position as insurance company clerk as a training school in commercial subjects and learned the business of finance so well that in 1885 he was able to establish his own building and loan company. By the time of his death he had amassed a considerable fortune, was executive officer in one of the city's major financial institutions, and had something of a national reputation in banking circles.

Yet, throughout the years when he was working hard for success in the business world, there was another kind of success which he held even higher. He had begun in childhood to write poetry and plays. His reading and study of literature increased his desire to be a writer, and when he had to leave school prematurely, he
became all the more eager to fulfill these aspirations in spite of all difficulties. He read and wrote not less but more during these busy years. Not the turmoils of Reconstruction nor the humiliation of poverty, not the excitement of love and marriage nor the monotony of daily drudgery dulled his enthusiasm or sapped his energy for writing. His literary output during this period is remarkable for both amount and variety. It reveals both vitality and ambition, if not unusual ability or originality.

Williams began to write poetry very early. His first publication was a short poem in the New Orleans Times. Mark F. Bigney, the editor, was himself the author of a volume of poetry, The Forest Pilgrim and Other Poems, published in 1867, and was known in New Orleans as an "enlightened patron of literature." He took a friendly interest in young Williams and in later years Williams said that he had always looked upon this kindness "as his first step toward success, for it was Mr. Bigney's encouragement which stimulated him to persevere."

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1 Mount, op. cit., p. 57.


3 Mount, op. cit., p. 57.
By the time he was seventeen, Williams had published some poetry outside the New Orleans papers and had even begun to be paid something for his work. Among his papers the following letter is preserved:

N.Y. Mercury Office
Oct. 26, 1869

Espy W.H. Williams,
Carrollton, La.

Enclosed please find seven dollars ($7) for "Mina."

Yours,
Cauldwell S. Whitney

On the bottom of the letter Williams made the notation:
"The second money I ever earned by my pen—the first was $5. for a sketch entitled "My Somnambulist"—written 1869 (aged 17)."

Another proudly preserved note reads:

Dear Sir

"Lost at Sea" accepted with thanks

Very earnestly
Godey's Ladies Book
Phil. Aug 25/72

Espy Williams Esq.

But the New Orleans newspapers continued to be his

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4Espy Williams Collection, Stephens Memorial Library, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, Louisiana. Unless otherwise specified all letters, manuscripts, programs, pictures, and newspaper clippings referred to are part of this collection. See Appendix.
chief medium of publication for some time, a circumstance frequently noted by reviewers and biographers. Recapitulating his literary career in 1893, a reviewer remarked that "Busy as he has been as a business man, he still found time to write many verses, and columns of the Picayune years back will show many good poems signed 'Espy', written by the modest boy who kept his full name from publication." Three years later, a biographer noted that Williams had in the past "contributed poems, sketches and short stories to various publications, most of which have gone astray,--lost even to their author who did not always preserve copies. His noms de plume 'Espy' and 'Espy Williams' once frequently seen in the leading New Orleans papers, are now seen but occasionally, as all his spare time is devoted to dramatic work." His interest in play writing had begun much earlier. While he was still a schoolboy he had tried his hand at what he called a tragedy in blank verse. He showed it to his father and was chagrined to learn that "his blank verse was very blank,--indeed not verse at all." Williams determined not to fail

5 New Orleans Daily Picayune, September 15, 1893.
6 Mount, op. cit., p. 58.
7 Ibid.
again and set himself the task of learning to write good dramatic blank verse. The method he chose was to copy out Douglas, Hamlet, and Othello. His self-instruction program was apparently successful, for "his next attempt was fairly good verse, and was published in The Times before shown to his paternal critic, to whom it proved a veritable surprise. From this time his most earnest efforts have been toward the drama, and it is as a dramatist that he is best known."  

During this period Williams certainly had the edifying example and perhaps also the personal encouragement of young George Washington Cable, a fellow New Orleanian whose early career closely paralleled his own. Like Williams, Cable was forced to leave school for financial reasons. He did his early writing in moments snatched from work. His first story, "Sieur George" was written while he was working as a clerk by day and as a bookkeeper by night.  

His attitude, as described in the following quotation, is very much like Williams': "Going abruptly from the schoolroom and the

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8 An eighteenth century (1756) tragedy by the Scottish Shakespearian John Home, Douglas was a perennial favorite on the New Orleans stage. Kendall, op. cit., pp. 8, 66, 392-93 and passim.

9 Mount, op. cit., p. 57.

playground to man's work, ... George kept up his studies in spare time, for as he afterwards wrote, study had come natural to him since childhood. Cable was writing for the New Orleans newspapers at the same time Williams was. "Almost every issue of the New Orleans dailies carried some unsolicited contribution; the Sunday papers as a rule had several." Besides reviewing books, beginning in the 1870's, he published sixty odd poems and began his famous "Drop Shot" column in the Picayune. Williams undoubtedly read Cable's column with enthusiasm and must have applauded the denunciations of worthless and harmful reading and of the mad pursuit of money at the expense of higher accomplishments. When Cable lamented the dearth of worthy authors, we can imagine Williams vowing to fill the void himself. His diary reveals that he was reading many of the same authors Cable mentions most often: Poe, Tennyson, Milton, Shakespeare, Longfellow, Byron, Scott. Certainly he would have been in sympathy with

12 Ibid., p. 39.
13 Ibid., p. 48.
14 Ibid., p. 39.
15 MS in Espy Williams Collection.
Cable’s plea for artistic and cultural betterment of New Orleans through the establishment of a quarterly journal, a literary society, an art gallery, and a lecture series.  

There is one area, however, where Williams and Cable would have found themselves in violent disagreement. Cable had no use for the theater. His dislike for it was apparently based both on personal taste and religious principle. He described stage plays, in his "Drop Shot" column, as "those profoundly silly stage tricks and worse spectacular displays of the day," and the specific incident over which he severed his connection with the Picayune was his being asked to report a theatrical performance, though he had been promised he would never have to do so. He said, "I would not violate my conscientious scruples, or, more strictly, the tenets of my church, by going to a theatre to report a play." Cable’s objection to the theater on moral grounds was a fairly common sentiment of the time. Clergymen frequently included in their sermons warmings such as this: "The theater is one of the last places

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16 Turner, op. cit., p. 42.
17 Ibid., p. 40.
18 Ibid., p. 46.
to which a good man should go, the illumined and decorated gateway through which thousands are constantly passing into the embrace of gaiety and folly intemperance and lewdness, infamy and ruin. While Cable never went so far as to embrace infamy and ruin, he did change his mind somewhat about the theater later in life. When he became convinced that the theater could be used as a force for good, he consented to have some of his works dramatized and, in fact, dramatized some of them himself. This belief in a positive moral good capable of being accomplished through the right use of the drama is an idea Williams shared and one which he developed, as we shall see, in his essay "The Union of the Church and Stage." There can be no doubt that Williams knew of Cable and his work. There is even some evidence that they were personally acquainted. Williams' daughter writes, "one notable friend was George W. Cable, and I happen to remember that he defended him against much

\[19\text{Quoted in Eleanor Ruggles,}\ Prince of Players:\ Edwin Booth (New York: W. W. Norton Inc., Co., 1953), p. 195.\]

\[20\text{Turner, op. cit., pp. 276-77.}\]

\[21\text{MSin Espy Williams Collection.}\]
criticism directed against his books. The following letter is preserved among Williams' papers, probably because he found it amusing.

Opelousas, Feb 21st
(1881 added in pencil in another hand)

My dear Sir

I heard through my friend Mr. G. Clements\(^2\) that you are sufficiently well acquainted with Mr. Cable to give me some items relative to him. I have been called upon by a Northern

\(^2\)Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, April 30, 1957.

\(^2\)This is probably George Henry Clements, a young New Orleans writer and artist, who was one of Cable's few defenders among the Creoles. In later years he and Cable became close friends, and he was among the last persons Cable wrote to before his death. (Turner, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 13, 155, 355). It is not clear why he should have referred this correspondent to Espy Williams for information which he could well have supplied himself. Perhaps he knew the old lady's opinions and preferred not to incur her displeasure by defending Cable. According to a letter to the author dated Sept. 1, 1958, from Floy Clements Callahan, Clements' great grandson, Clements lived for a time in Opelousas and so might well have known Marie Williams. This same letter, received in response to my inquiry about "G. Clements" in the Opelousas \textit{Daily World}, suggested the identification as George Henry Clements.
paper for a critique on the Grandissimes, and though criticism will be easy enough from a purely literary standpoint, yet I should like to know something of the man himself. His own character, peculiarities, etc. are very often the mot d'enigme, to the animus of his work. Whatever you tell me will of course be entre nous, nor would I be willing to deal with his personal characteristics in a review.

The book itself being somewhat on the mountebank order is valueless as a chronicle of the times it describes, and as a literary, and artistic production, it is in my opinion without merit. There is one chapter—the murder of Clemence in the swamp—which is full of weird and sombre effects—but apart from that, what with his turgid philosophy obscurely expressed, his pointless sarcasms and the general idiocy of his creole women and men, I found the book heavy, and wonder in my inmost soul where the man had picked up his types. My Grandmother and mother were both creoles, but I had to learn from Cable, that voudouism was believed in, and preached by the best families in Louisiana.

24 The novel was serialized in Scribner's beginning in November, 1879, and appeared in book form a year later, simultaneously with the last installment. (Turner, op. cit., pp. 89-90). It was enthusiastically reviewed in national periodicals as a fresh and dramatic treatment of materials new to American literature (Turner, op. cit., pp. 99-100), but many Creoles rejected the book, and in 1880 an anonymous pamphlet appeared in New Orleans, abusing Cable so scurrilously that his friends feared for his life. This pamphlet, entitled Critical Dialogue Between Aboo and Caboo on a New Book; or A Grandissime Ascension, which was the work of Creole poet-priest Adrien Rouquette, purported to speak for all the Creoles in denouncing Cable in the grossest terms, likening him to a buzzard or a jackal, and calling his offense all the greater since he was a native of New Orleans, an "unnatural Southern growth, a bastard sprout." (Turner, op. cit., pp. 101-102).
But the success of the book at the North has been something marvellous. Those people are glad of any excuse to look upon us as semi-savages, the writer--Southern born—who brings such grist to their mill, may be certain of both fame and money. Two years ago I could have launched a successful literary venture had I chosen to pander to Northern prejudice. I do not take a sentimental view of the book, I taunt Mr. C. with his want of 'esprit d'\textit{pays}.' I would not blame a writer if he makes a success by telling unpalatable truths even of his own people. But let them at least be truths. We don't want fancy pictures of men, and women who belong to no known species, and who talk an unintelligible jargon which would be a discredit to a Fiji Islander. French Creoles never have spoken, and never will speak abominable English among themselves. At that time, mostly opulent Creoles were educated in Paris, and brought from there a polish, and culture which is rare at the present day. Yet Mr. C. gives us a wealthy Grandissime who can neither read nor write.

I only intended troubling you with a few brief lines, but have let my pen take

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\textsuperscript{25}The phrase "pander to Northern prejudice" is an echo, conscious or unconscious, of Adrien Rouquette's charge that Cable's aim was to "pander and please" Northern readers. (Turner, op. cit., p. 130).
the reins.
Hoping a speedy answer I remain truly

Mrs. Marie B. Williams

No copy of Williams' reply has been preserved, but there is little doubt that he spoke well of Cable, personally, and as a writer. Both men were first generation New Orleanians whose parents had come there from the Middle West. (Cable's from Indiana), and they could look objectively at the Creoles—neither unsympathetically nor sentimentally. Williams chose to set only one of his plays in New Orleans—The Clairvoyant. But the Creole characters in it talk and act very much like Cable's Creoles: they speak

26 Marie (sometimes spelled Maria) Bushnell Williams is noted in Louise Manly's Southern Literature from 1579-1875 (Richmond, Va.: B.F. Johnson Pub. Co., 1895), p. 26, as the author of Tales and Legends of Louisiana. Alcée Fortier (op. cit., pp. 104-105) mentions her among Louisiana female poets, as "a distinguished pupil of Alexander Dimitry, whose translations from different languages are admirable and whose poems are held in high esteem." Further information has been given the author in letters from her great granddaughter, Norma F. Landry, of New Iberia, Louisiana (Sept. 4, 1958). According to family records she was the daughter of Ann O'Brien and Judge Charles Bushnell of Baton Rouge and was born in 1820 or 1821. She married Josiah Pitts Williams on October 11, 1836, and lived at his plantation, Willow Glen, near Alexandria, until after the Civil War, when she moved to Opelousas to live with her daughter Josephine, Mrs. Thomas H. Lewis. She died in Opelousas on July 3, 1891.

27 Turner, op. cit., p. 5.

28 MS in Espy Williams Collection.
in broken English interspersed with French phrases and are full of superstitious beliefs and practices; the plot turns on the heroine's mistaken belief that she has Negro blood. It is possible that Williams was influenced by Cable in his selection of a New Orleans setting and in his handling of the Creole dialect. He was certainly an admirer of the book Marie Williams denounced, as is attested by his poem inspired by Cable's novel:

BRAS COUPÉ

The Grandissimes, Chapter XXIX

Thou King—yet captive! human—yet a slave!—
Yet He whose word those iron sinews wrought,
Fashioned that brow—a crucible for thought,
To thee that majesty of manhood gave
With will endowed to do, and strength to brave,—

Wrought he the woe with which thy life is fraught,
That thou shouldst live to have been sold and bought,
And find thine only rest in murder's grave?—
Yes!—like some martyred saint of old,
whose death
Gave to his holy work immortal breath,
And power divine the future world to save,
So wert thou doomed to drink deep life's disgrace,
And aid the great redemption of thy race,—
Thou King—though captive! human—though a slave! 29

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Whether or not Williams and Cable were personal friends, they had friends in common, for example, the novelist Molly E. Moore Davis. Williams' play The Wirecutters is a dramatization of her novel of the same name and they were personal friends. Cable's biographer remarks that at the time of her death in 1909 she and Cable had been friends for thirty years. It is tempting to speculate that, through Cable, Williams might have made the acquaintance of other literary figures such as Lafcadio Hearn, Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Joel Chandler Harris, but there is no real evidence for such an assumption. Whatever the nature of Williams' relationship with Cable, it probably ended with Cable's departure from New Orleans in 1885 to make his home in Massachusetts, though it is just possible that the unexpected favorable publicity Williams' works later received in the Boston Transcript may have been

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30"Bras Coupé" reveals that they also agreed in certain important attitudes toward the Negro and toward slavery.

31MS in Espy Williams Collection.

32From Evelyn Jahncke, Mrs. Moore's granddaughter, to Nolan, December 27, 1956.

33Turner, op. cit., p. 341.

34Ibid., p. 223.
due to the influence of Cable, whose relations with that newspaper were cordial, beginning before he left New Orleans, and continuing through the years of his residence in Massachusetts.35

The most important document for tracing Williams' activities and reconstructing his personality during these formative years is his diary. He kept a journal most of his adult life, but only one portion, covering the period from January 12, 1874 to February 10, 1875, is extant.36 His daughter destroyed the rest--parts concerned chiefly with business matters and parts containing very personal records of his courtship and marriage.37 Fortunately, the portion preserved deals almost entirely with Williams' intellectual life. In it we find observations on the books he was reading and the plays he was attending, notes on what he was writing and the troubles and triumphs he experienced with publication of his work, and a record of his introduction to the mysterious ways of professional theatrical people.

35Ibid., pp. 147, 222, 340n, 350n, passim.

36MS in Espy Williams Collection. Paul T. Nolan, who has edited the diary with an introduction, to be published by the Louisiana Historical Society, has kindly made available to me his manuscript notes. I have regularized spelling and punctuation where necessary, for the entries were often hasty.

37Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, February 15, April 30, and November 2, 1957.
The diary's emphasis on literary matters is not accidental. In the first entry (January 12, 1874) he writes:

I do not intend... to make this a record of the common events that I pass through, nor shall I put down the trivial thoughts on the trivial things which come under my observation.—In this respect my "Diary" is to be different from the many.—My object is only to keep a record of the books, etc. which I read, and other things which pertain to literature and literati. I have long felt the need of a record in which to keep the thoughts suggested by what I read, either foreign to the subjects or appertaining to them as the case may be,—and also to make notes of subjects of which I have thought, and which require research.—For these things I undertake this Diary, and I feel sure that it will prosper.—Of course I will not keep it regularly—day following day, but shall only make entries in it whenever I have anything worthy, as I think, to note.

He did not always have the leisure to record in his journal all that was worthy of a place there. Time after time several months elapse between entries because there was simply not time to write—oftener. So on June 6, 1874, he notes: "Over two months have now passed since I have opened this book, or written in it. It seems utterly impossible for me to keep up this writing regularly, and yet I would like to be able to do so. Since last writing a number of things have happened which might have here found record in full, but now may only have 'brief mention.'"
The diary provides an interesting, if perhaps incomplete account of Williams' reading during these years. He probably could not afford to buy many books, but he was a well-known borrower from the Lyceum library (January 15, 1874). His reading included some books evidently intended to be "educational." For example, he wanted to know philosophy and undertook to read Aristotle and Bishop Berkeley during this period, a combination so remarkable that one is tempted to guess he had come upon an alphabetical list of "great philosophers" and was determined to go through them in order. He did not like this sort of reading but returned to it from time to time out of a sense of duty (January 15, 17, 1874).

He was an avid reader of biographies, especially biographies of literary and theatrical figures. He mentions Moore's Life of Byron (January 12, 1874), Trelawney's The Last Days of Shelley and Byron (January 19, 1874), Disraeli's Literary Character, Rees' Life of Edwin Forrest, and Forster's Life of Dickens (March 12, 1874).

The most interesting aspects of his comments on these biographies is, first, his curiosity about greatness—what is is and how it is attained. How does a poet live, what does he read, think about, and believe? These are matters of never failing interest to a young man determined to achieve literary fame himself. The other interesting
aspect of Williams' comments on the lives of these great men is the broad-mindedness they reveal. All his life he behaved in the most respectable and conventional manner, yet from time to time he expressed in his writings a remarkably sympathetic attitude toward persons of infamous reputation. So, in an age noted for its prudishness, he writes (January 12, 1874) that he is surprised to find Moore's biography of Byron unjustly criticized on moral grounds.

I have read that "Moore did little credit either to himself or to Byron by his biography." This was no doubt written by some one of the excessive—moral school, who was so overwhelmed by the use of oaths in B's letters, and his amours etc. of which he himself speaks freely, that he could not see anything good in the work . . . . the last thing that pleases me in the work, is that it shows Byron as a man. Great men are not gods but men. The world is very apt to cover a man's humanity over with the mantle of his fame, and worship him in his greatness alone. . . . The life of Byron most emphatically proves that he was simply a man. . . .

He seems not to have been much of a novel reader. The only novel he mentions reading is The Abbott (January 19, 1874) and he remarks, "Can't take Master Scott's long and tedious descriptions as I could once."

Romantic poetry gave him a great deal of pleasure. He read Longfellow and Tennyson, preferring Longfellow (January 15, June 6, 1874) enjoyed Thomas Moore's songs (January 19, 1874) but reserves his highest praise for
Byron and Shelley (January 12, 15, 1874).

He read plays, both for pleasure and for profit. He read and re-read Shakespeare and such standard old plays as Thomas Otway's *The Orphan* (1680) and *Venice Preserv'd* (1682) (January 19, 1874). His comments on plays reveal his interest in dramatic technique as well as his romantic taste, and often we find him considering how he could have improved upon a given work. For, as he says (January 15, 1874), "I am studying the art of criticism not after Horace— not anyone else, but after myself." He was reading Shelley's *The Cenci* for the third time, and comments on it (January 12, 1874) as follows:

> It is the most horribly sublime thing in the language. It is Manfred stripped of its mystery and disclosing a horrible nudity. That Shelley should have succeeded so well in this, his first tragedy and should never have attempted another is surprising. He could have excelled Byron in the display of passion in this walk had he tried, for Byron lacks characterizations, which Shelley does not. Of all the poetical dramas of the century, this one stands out alone in the terrible and horrible feelings it excites. After reading it the first time I remember I was haunted for a month by it,—and especially by the hellish father, and the heroine. It is a play not adapted to the stage, and it is pity.—Much more could have been made out of it could it have been laid before the eyes of the unreading public who publicize the theatre.—The subject is a delicate one but it can be
adapted to the stage. The last act is magnificent.--The opening lines remind me of one of Manfred's in the last act of it. Indeed I fancy that Shelley must have been a student of that poem and that his aim was to create a companion piece, although on a certainly different principle, for the great Dramatic Poem.38

On January 15, 1874, he writes:

Took up Schiller and looked over Don Carlos. That is a play—and a poem indeed!—A grand thing, and yet, full of faults. Schiller was worn out in the subject when he completed it. If instead of having written the first two acts and then after a lapse of some years added the other three, he had written all at once it would have been far better. The first two acts are powerful and full of fire, the three last, it is true, are equally so, but of an entirely different kind. In the first he is Schiller the poet;—in the last he is the poet-philosopher-statesman. In other words, whereas his aim, if one may judge from the work, that is its manner and spirit,—in the

38 The Cenci, written in 1819, was intended for the theater by Shelley, but was not performed until 1886 when the Shelley Society produced it. This production, probably because of the delicacy of subject Williams refers to, was restricted by the Lord Chancellor to private performances. It was performed again in 1922 and several times since then. See E.S. Bates, A Study of Shelley's Drama The Cenci (Columbia University Studies in English Ser. II, Vol. 3, No. 1) and Arthur C. Hicks and R. Milton Clarke, A Stage Version of Shelley's Cenci (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1945). Hicks and Clarke call it "a great acting drama, one of the very best of its kind." The subject, incest and partricide, is less shocking today than in the 19th century. Williams' belief that the play could be staged is another example of his broadmindedness, acquired perhaps by familiarity with the Classical and Elizabethan dramatists who influenced Shelley.
first was to present passion alone, and without any other object than to excite our sympathies, in the last he completely submerges this under philosophy and political economy; he forgets his first intent—to please,—and takes up another—to teach. The subject has always been a fascinating one to me, and I have made a study of it, reading all on the life and times of Phillip that I could get hold of, --and I hope some day to be able to do for the stage what Schiller in his drama has done for the closet. He can never be surpassed in the grandness and power which he throws into his subject, and I only aim, if I ever undertake it, to write a stage-play.39

The diary provides a number of scraps of information which may be taken as clues to Williams' personality and interests. For example, we learn that he read Blackwood's Magazine and was sometimes stimulated by a review to acquire and read a new book.40 He was an active member of the Philomethean Literary Society, and on March 11, 1874, read "at their public meeting . . . an experiment, called 'Table Talk.' It was after the manner of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Autocrat, Professor, and Poet, and the discussion was upon Books.

39 He did so the following year. See below, p. 63.
40 March 12, 1874
It pleased more than I anticipated it would. And Williams was gaining some local reputation as a literary critic. He records in his diary two instances when poetic and dramatic works were submitted to him by other amateur writers for an opinion and suggestions.

As we would expect, Williams' diary reveals that he was an enthusiastic and critical playgoer. On January 26, 1874, he reports his impressions of Lawrence Barrett's performance in Bulwer's *Richelieu*. He analyzes at length both the play itself and Barrett's performance in it. The play he pronounces "a grand thing, the most perfect embodiment of an historical character on the English stage." He places it above Shakespeare's history plays for the reason that he believed Bulwer had a harder task—making drama of the life of an historic personage every detail of whose life was known so well as to prevent the dramatist from taking liberties with the facts as Shakespeare had done. Lawrence Barrett's

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41 The New Orleans *Times* (March 13, 1874) reported the event. The club met at 8 o'clock in Hall number 3, Carondelet Street, with "twenty-five or thirty" young ladies and gentlemen in attendance. Williams' performance was described as "a very charming and tasteful one."

42 March 12 and June 6, 1874.

43 *Richelieu*, starring Lawrence Barrett, opened on January 26, 1874, at the Varieties Theater (*New Orleans Times*, January 26, 1874).
performance, however, he finds disappointing. "After seeing the later Edwin Forrest, in his sublime impersonation of it—no other can satisfy my educated standard." He believes only an old man can play Richelieu well "for youth has never experienced age. . . .

When Barrett gets to be as old as Forrest was when he died, he may then be a Richelieu,—but not until then."

In the same way, Williams compares the performances of several famous tragedians as Hamlet. On January 28, 1874, he writes:

The first play I ever saw on the stage was Hamlet;—and the first actor I ever saw was Lawrence Barrett. That is now ten years ago, and yet I remember the circumstances attending the event, and the impression produced both by the play itself and the actor, as though they were of recent date . . . Since then I have seen Barrett twice as Hamlet. The second time three winters ago, and last to-night. The second time I saw him he did not impress me favorably. I had only a few night previous seen Edwin Adams and liked

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44 Williams probably refers to Forrest's appearance at the St. Charles Theater in November, 1871. This was his last appearance in New Orleans. He was sixty-six years old and in failing health, but his performance in Richelieu "evoked from the public an extraordinary tribute to the veteran tragedian." (Kendall, op. cit., pp. 527-28).

him, and still like him, the best.\textsuperscript{46} Tonight's performance however was a good one. Full of excellent points and yet just as full of faults. Barrett's entrance was good,--his manner evidently copied after Booth,\textsuperscript{47} but it is good.

He goes on to criticize Barrett's performance scene by scene, and in places line by line, throughout the entire play. His interest is always the interest of a playwright—a man concerned with problems of stagecraft and the effect of actors' interpretation of a play. For, much as he enjoyed attending the theater, his own writing was his major concern.

As earlier, he continued to write poetry. His diary records in nearly every entry something of the vicissitudes of composition, revision, acceptance, or rejection of his poems.

On January 1, 1874, he notes, "Yesterday 'Rest' was published in the Sunday Times. It was well put up. It is one of my best scraps so far as the thought goes, and then as for the irregular metre--why I made it so

\textsuperscript{46}Williams probably refers to the season of 1871-72, when Barrett was manager of the Varieties theater. Edwin Adams played starring roles during February, 1872, and Barrett during March. (Kendall, \textit{op. cit.}, pp.426-28).

\textsuperscript{47}Since Booth and Barrett were closely associated for a number of years beginning in 1870, Williams' estimate of Booth's influence on the younger and less talented Barrett is probably accurate. (Ruggles, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 232-33).
on purpose as I fancied it."\(^48\) Again he notes, on March 8, 1874, "Have heard from Godey, by a nice letter of apology from him for not informing me of the acceptance of 'Spring' before. It appears in the April number."

But he was not always so fortunate. On June 6, 1874, he writes bleakly, "In my last entry I note having sent 'Aldebar and Adelaide' to the Atlantic. It has since gone to Scribner and Lippincott in turn; from the latter I have had yet no answer. Mr. Howells wrote me a polite little note returning the poem, -- a pleasure I did not anticipate." His long poem "The Slave," later retitled "Lorio the Captive," Williams offered first to Godey's Ladies' Book. "They, or he, whichever it may be," he writes, "can have it gratis if it suits their ideas."\(^49\) It apparently did not suit their ideas, for it appeared the following year in the New Orleans Monthly Review.

Williams' big poetic project at this time was publication of a volume of his collected poems, to be called First Fruit. He mentions the volume frequently

\(^{48}\) The poem, signed "Espy," appeared in the New Orleans Times, January 11, 1874.

\(^{49}\) March 12, 1874.
in the diary, and says on January 25, 1875:

Received a letter to-day from Lippincott and Co. relative to "First Fruit." They are unwilling to undertake the publication at their own risk, but offer to print it for $600 (an ed. of 1000 copies) and undertake the sale. I wonder why it is that they fear to venture? I have certainly seen worse books with their imprint. But I suppose it comes under the adage of "Kissing etc." I hardly know what to do in regard to the book. I wish it published but do not wish to have to pay out so much money. Shall wait awhile.

It was apparently never published, for A Dream of Art and Other Poems, published by Putnam in 1892, is always referred to as his first volume of poetry.

Full of disappointments as they were, these years brought some—albeit small—triumphs to the young author. For example, he notes on July 10, 1875, that Page M. Baker, owner and editor of the New Orleans Bulletin had asked him to write a New Year's article for the paper,

But as I had never before done anything of the kind I feared to attempt it. He

50 The expression "Kissing goes by favor" was one frequently quoted by Williams.

51 Page M. Baker and Marion, his brother were the "critics and friends" to whom Williams dedicated his volume A Dream of Art and Other Poems, 1892.

52 This is apparently the unsigned article, entitled simply "1875," which appeared in the Bulletin on January 1, 1875.
persuaded me however... it was but an attempt on my part and [has been] received with more favor than I hoped. The news boys were greatly taken with it, as was proven by their present which I received on the 8th through Mr. Baker. It was a complete Ed. of Hogarth's works in 3 vols. 8 vo. handsomely gotten up and bound elegantly in tree calf. I was quite taken back on receiving it... .

There are many diary references to the composition, publication, and presentation of his early plays, which will be discussed in the next section.

The general tone of the diary is one of enthusiasm, tempered by anxiety about the pressure of time. If not in ability, at least in earnestness, he reminds us of the young Milton in passages such as this:

This is my birthday, and I am twenty three years old. How time does fly! I can hardly realize that I am a man grown... . When I look back, as far as I can remember, and see how much time in all the past I have wasted I feel a pity for youth that passes its best part of life in utter ignorance of its own use or power. I have done nothing it seems to me to be worthy the name of man... . May this year be more profitable, and may I do something which will at least for a while appease my craving ambition... . I shall yet make myself a place among those whose names are in the mouths of living men long after they have been taken away from this Earth.53

53 January 30, 1875.
CHAPTER 3
APPRENTICESHIP IN THE DRAMA

The principal way Williams hoped to attain literary fame was as a dramatist. Mention has already been made of his youthful efforts to learn the art of poetic drama by copying out tragic masterpieces, and much of his reading and apparently all of his play-going were undertaken in the same spirit of eagerness to learn all he could about the playwrights' techniques. He realized that the best way to learn was by writing plays.

Among his early efforts were four plays copyrighted but neither published nor produced. Two of them were verse tragediés written before he was eighteen years old: The Burned Palace (1868) and The Forest Knight (1869). ¹ Although no copies of these have been

¹Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, February 15, 1958, says she has certificates of copyright dated as indicated, for these two plays, but no copies of the plays. Neither can copies be secured from the Library of Congress, since legislation providing for the deposit of copies of works entered for copyright did not go into effect until July 8, 1870. See Dramatic Compositions Copyrighted in the United States from 1870 to 1916 (Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1918), I, i. This work will be referred to hereafter as DCCUS.
preserved, the titles indicate the romantic nature of their content.

The first play Williams copyrighted after 1870 was "Merry Merrick; or, The New Magdalen, a play in 5 acts, dramatized from and founded on Wilkie Collins' novel, The New Magdalen." The copyright was granted to "Espey [sic] W. H. Williams, New Orleans," on April 12, 1873. No copies of Merry Merrick have been preserved by Williams' family, and none were deposited in the Library of Congress, though by 1873 the copyright law provided for such deposits. This situation is frequently encountered in connection with plays copyrighted before 1909, as the following quotation explains:

Under the legislation in force from July 8, 1870 to July 1, 1909, it was customary to file the title-page of the drama in advance of the deposit of copies and subsequently deposit the required copies. The result has been that a great many titles were filed for registration which were not followed by the deposit of copies. This was especially so in the case of dramas, and it is estimated that in more than 20,000 cases, while the title has been recorded, no copies have been received.

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2 DCCUS, I, 1466.
3 Ibid.
4 Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, February 15, 1958.
5 DCCUS, I, i.
Williams showed good dramatic sense in choosing *The New Magdalen*, for Collins' novels were well suited for dramatization. "More than Dickens, Collins depended upon the technique of the popular sensational theatre; how closely is shown by the ease with which he adapted several of his novels to the stage." 6 Besides Collins' own adaptations, a number of his novels were adapted for the stage by other writers. Among American theatrical successes were Augustin Daly's and David Belasco's stage versions of several Collins novels. 7 Besides Collins' own stage version of *The New Magdalen* and David Belasco's, there were a number of others. Three were copyrighted in the United States in Williams' lifetime: his own and one by Walter Benn in 1873, 9 and one by A. Newton Field in 1882; 10 one by Homer Barton was copyrighted in 1909, the year after Williams' death. 11 Still another

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8 Ibid., pp. 166-67.

9 DCCUS, I, 1623.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., I, 1624.
version of *The New Magdalen* was presented in New Orleans in 1873. It was written by Harry Watkins as a starring vehicle for his wife Rose and played at the Varieties Theater in December, eight months after Williams filed his copyright. Kendall records three other presentations of *The New Magdalen* in New Orleans: Ada Gray's, at the St. Charles in November, 1873, and again in January of the following year and Ada Cavendish's at the Academy of Music during the 1880-81 season. Thus Williams' play was among the earliest treatments of a popular story. Two qualities of his later work are apparent in the pattern of *Merry Merrick*: rather than writing completely original plays, he most frequently adapted the works of other writers to the stage; and he stayed, in most instances, in perfect step with the changing literary fashions of his time, being not so much an imitator as a sort of barometer of the public taste.

The fourth and last of his early unpublished and unproduced plays, bears out these generalizations. It was copyrighted as "Queen Mary, a drama by Alfred Tennyson, 

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altered, arranged, and adapted for the stage by . . . . Espy W. H. Williams, New Orleans."16 His copyright was registered on October 2, 1875,17 and, as in the case of Merry Merrick, no copies were filed and none preserved by the family. Two other copyrights for adaptations of Tennyson's play were filed the same month, but both slightly later than Williams': one by John M. Kingdom on October 4, and one by John H. Delafield on October 5.18 Thus the pattern of Merry Merrick is repeated.

Queen Mary (1875) was the first of Tennyson's three attempts at historical drama, all "earnest, bulky, stagnant things."20 The play needed extreme cutting and revision to be produced at all and then had only indifferent success, as is hinted in a letter from Robert Browning concerning Henry Irving's producing of April 15, 1876.

16 DCCUS, II, 1913.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 The other two were Harold, 1877, and Beckett, 1879.
20 Baugh, op. cit., p. 1390.
My dear Tennyson--

I want to be among the earliest who assure you of the complete success of your Queen Mary last night. I have more than once seen a more satisfactory performance of it, to be sure, in what Carlyle calls "the Private Theatre under my own hat," because there and then not a line nor a word was left out; nay, there were abundant encores of half the speeches; still whatever was left by the stage scissors suggested what a quantity of "cuttings" would furnish one with an after-feast.

Irving was very good indeed, and the others did their very best, nor so badly... 21

Williams had an understandable interest in the problems of making closet drama stageworthy and made a number of such experiments later in his career. It is harder to understand his choice of Tennyson's unpromising work as a project. His attitude toward Tennyson and his poetry in ambiguous. In 1871 he had published a sketch entitled "Two Veritable Dreams," in which he represents Byron, whom he very much admired, as laughing at a volume of Tennyson's poetry and throwing it away. 22

He wrote in his diary on June 6, 1874, of Owen Meredith's Fables in Song, "It is full of merit. The versification

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22 New Orleans Times, December 12, 1881.
is in many places strained into a Tennysonian method, but never faulty in the way that Tennyson is,—namely lacking sense." Yet a year later he was at work "arranging" Tennyson's play for the stage, and his poem "Tennyson," written shortly after the poet's death, expresses nothing but admiration and sorrow.

That, all forgetful of each ripening year,
We deemed thy life immortal as thy song.²³

Whatever his true opinion of Tennyson, Williams believed that "Tragedy is not the form of drama best patronized by the American public."²⁴ The earliest written of his works ever to be produced bore this out, for it was not one of his romantic verse tragedies, but a play copyrighted April 19, 1873, as "Morbid vs. Quick; a farce in 1 act."²⁵ It is a comedy of humors, as indicated by the names of the characters: Mr. Job, Miss Zest, Mr. and Mrs. Quick, and Mr. and Mrs. Morbid. The plot is a slight thing, turning on mistaken identities at a masquerade ball. Williams thought well enough of "Morbid vs. Quick" to have it printed²⁶ "for private

²³Mount, op. cit., p. 67. The poem is dated October 6, 1892, and was therefore too late to be included in A Dream of Art and Other Poems.
²⁴Mount, op. cit., p. 58.
²⁵DCCUS, I, 1553.
²⁶New Orleans, Amos S. Collins, 1875.
use,"^27 and in 1874 it was performed by an amateur theatrical group with which Williams was associated for many years, the New Histrionics. They named themselves after the old Histrionics Association, founded in 1848 and active until the Civil War. The original organization was made up of "a congregation of reputable and influential citizens who . . . associated themselves together for the purpose of exclusive and rational entertainment."^28 The New Histrionics endeavored to maintain many of the traditions of the old association, and one of these was the presentation of double programs consisting of a play plus a brief farce.\(^29\) Because of this custom, "Morbid vs. Quick" twice found a place on their program as an afterpiece. In the 1874 production, the full length play was John M. Kingdom's three-act romantic drama entitled "Macoretti, or The Brigand's Sacrifice," a work considered not worthy of comment by a newspaper reviewer\(^30\) who devoted all his space to praise of Williams' afterpiece. He pronounced the character of Job "the life of the play" and said: "The

\(^{27}\)Mount, op. cit., p. 59. She dates the printing 1874, but the pamphlet itself carries an 1875 imprint.

\(^{28}\)Kendall, op. cit., p. 323.

\(^{29}\)Ibid., pp. 324-25.

\(^{30}\)Unidentified clipping preserved by Williams, dated 1874.
farce is a good one, replete with wit and minus that evident effort to produce a laugh which displays itself in slang and local hits which distinguish most of modern farces or comedies put forth by amateurs, and frequently professional play writers."

Obviously, in 1874 Williams was not yet considered a "professional play writer," by his fellow citizens of New Orleans. But by the time "Morbid vs. Quick" was next presented by the New Histrionics, on April 4, 1889, they might well have come to consider him so. A program for the 1889 production has been preserved, and from it we learn that the entire evening was devoted to Williams' plays, his one act tragedy Parrhasius being the other offering. The Grunewald Opera House was the site of the production, and an admission of fifty cents was charged for the benefit of the Women's Social Industrial Association Building Fund.

In the interval between 1874 and 1889 Williams worked hard at his writing. The play he speaks of most often in his diary is Eugene Aram, the most ambitious literary undertaking of his career, and in some respects the most successful. The story of Eugene Aram, scholar and murderer, was a well known one. Born in England, in 1704, Aram was a brilliant philologist. He showed the relation of Celtic to the other Indo-European languages and proved that Latin was not evolved from
Greek as had long been supposed. But at the height of his career he was discovered to have conspired years before with a man named Houseman to rob and murder a wealthy man. He was found guilty and hanged in 1759. His tragic story had appealed to many writers and was variously treated according to the literary fashions of the age. For example, Thomas Hood's "The Dream of Eugene Aram," in keeping with the Romantic taste for Gothic weirdness and horror, owed a good deal to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and took its form from the seventeenth century broadside ballads. Since grisly events were a popular subject for such ballads, Aram's crime was an ideal subject, and his remorse provided the requisite edifying moral ending.

The best known treatment of the story is Bulwer Lytton's novel Eugene Aram (1831), a romance of social injustice in which the reader sympathizes with Aram's motive for the crime. Aram is a poor scholar, a sort of social and economic underdog who robs and kills a wealthy man, makes excellent use of the money, and lives an otherwise exemplary life. We have no more

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32 Baugh, op. cit., p. 1253.
sympathy for his rich victim than we have for Raskolnikov's in Crime and Punishment.

Williams' play was copyrighted in 1873, the same year that W. G. Willis copyrighted a drama called The Fate of Eugene Aram. Though Williams wrote his play before he knew anything of Willis' work, he later read The Fate of Eugene Aram and felt his play bore comparison with Willis'. When Edwin Adams asked him whether his Eugene Aram was anything like Willis', he quickly assured him that it was not. Inviting comparison, he sent a copy of Eugene Aram to Mrs. Cashell Hoey who had reviewed Willis' play for the London Temple Bar Magazine and received a gracious letter in reply, Mrs. Hoey "expressing herself to the effect that my treatment of the subject was the best it had yet received in dramatic form."  

Williams acknowledges his debt to Bulwer in his application for copyright. The entry for his play reads, "Eugene Aram, a play in 5 acts, founded on Bulwer, by

33DCCUS, I, 628.
34Ibid., I, 668.
35Diary, January 24, 1874.
36Diary, December 15, 1874.
E. W. H. Williams. In his preface to the play, Williams indicates precisely the relationship between his work and Bulwer's:

The novel of "Eugene Aram," and the historical facts of Aram's life, are familiar to most all readers. It may not, however, be so generally known that before Bulwer wrote the novel, he commenced a tragedy on the same subject, which he prosecuted through one entire Act and part of another. The following Play may be regarded as founded on these two works. The author has derived from the novel the characters and the foundation of the plot; but the conduct of the story throughout, the scenes and situations, are materially altered and designed to be more dramatic; while the language is entirely different, except, perhaps, in a few unimportant places. This Play, therefore, is not to be regarded as a dramatization of the novel.

Of the "Dramatic Fragment," by Bulwer, the author has utilized most of the First Act, and a portion of a scene in the Second; making additions and omissions only in order to adapt it to the purposes of his remodeled story. For the material thus used he desires to make full and thankful acknowledgment.

With the exceptions above mentioned, this Play is offered as original.

Bulwer's decision to abandon his dramatic version of Aram's story in favor of the novel form is worthy of comment. He abandoned the drama "when more than half completed." The reason for his change of plan seems

37 DCCUS, I, 628.
38 South Atlantic Magazine, 1879, p. 10.
39 Bulwer's Preface to the 1831 edition.
to be his growing feeling that the novel was a higher art form and appealed to a worthier audience. In the Preface to the 1840 edition of Eugene Aram he remarks that "Fiction, whether in the drama, or the higher class of romance, seeks its materials and grounds its lessons in the chronicles of passion and crime." A further piece of evidence for this attitude comes from the novel itself, when Aram says:

> When I was a boy, I went once to a theatre. The tragedy of Hamlet was performed; a play full of the noblest thoughts and subtlest morality. The audience listened with attention, with admiration, with applause. I said to myself, when the curtain fell, "It must be a glorious thing to obtain this empire over men's intellects and emotions." But now an Italian mountebank appeared on the stage,—a man of extraordinary personal strength and sleight of hand. He performed a variety of juggling tricks, and distorted his body into a thousand surprising and unnatural postures. The audience were transported beyond themselves: if they had felt delight in Hamlet, they glowed with rapture at the mountebank.... where is the glory of ruling men's minds, and commanding their admiration, when a greater enthusiasm is excited by mere bodily agility than was kindled by the most wonderful emanations of a genius little less than divine? I have never forgotten the impression of that evening.41

Williams obviously did not share Bulwer's low opinion

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40 My italics.

of the drama as an art form. Rather he believed, like
Henry James, that the stage was worthy of an author's
highest talents and most earnest efforts.

Williams' changes in the unfinished part of
Bulwer's play are all improvements. Bulwer's speeches
were of an unwieldy length and his acts broken up into
too many short scenes. Williams' sense of stage
effectiveness is better. He makes one scene do for
seven of Bulwer's in the first act, for example. He
keeps some of Bulwer's effective speeches, and in general
his language shows the results of his admiration for and
study of Elizabethan dramatic blank verse. The Shakes­
ppearian tone of a passage like the following is clear:

Where, then, the crime
Though by dread means, to compass that
bright end?
And yet—and yet—I falter, and my flesh
Creeps—and the horror of a ghastly thought
Makes stiff my hair; makes my blood cold,
my knees
To smite each other, and throughout my frame
Stern manhood melt away! Blow forth, sweet
air!
Brace my mute nerves—release the gathering
ice
That curdles up my veins—call forth the soul,
That with a steady and unfeiling front,
Hath looked on want, and woe, and early death—
And—walked with thee, sweet air, upon thy
course,
Away from earth through the rejoicing heavens.
(Act I, sc. i)

And there are numerous close verbal echoes of Shakespeare
—as:

"Why, what is guilt?—a word!" (Act I, sc.i)
which recalls Falstaff's meditations on honor in Henry IV, I; Act V, sc. i.

In the general lines of plot and character Williams follows Bulwer so closely that it is probable he had no other source for the facts about Aram. He follows him, for example, in contradiction to probable facts, in making Aram innocent of the actual murder and in ignoring the motive of sexual jealousy. He interprets Aram's character sympathetically as Bulwer does and makes some use of the Faust theme introduced in the novel where Aram is characterized as driven to sell his soul for the sake of knowledge.

Williams thought well of his Eugene Aram and was deeply disappointed when others did not think equally well of it. In his efforts to get it published or produced, or both, he met the first serious disappointments of his career. His diary records the struggle to find a publisher. On January 19, 1874, his tone is nonchalant: "Read over 'Aram' with Father and made a few alterations. Think of publishing." By June 6 he is a little less confident. Having failed to find a buyer for the stage rights,

I have decided to print Aram, in pamphlet for my own use, in distributing among newspapers and actors,—and have already got half through the work, Amos Collins doing the job at a reasonable figure and ...
--owing perhaps to my careful supervision--in a really fine way for him and his press. I hope to have it done by July 4,--then exactly one year from the date of its completion. I am also going to publish Aram as a book for sale this winter from the press of Roberts & Bros. if I can. I fear I may not be able to enlist their services, and may have to go elsewhere, but I prefer them.

Apparently this venture came to nothing, for on January 25, 1875, we find him writing, "I sent a copy of 'Aram,' last week, to Osgood & Co., Boston, to let them read it, and decide if they would not be willing to publish it this coming winter." Their reply was unfavorable, and Williams' disappointment shows itself in the bad temper of his diary entry for February 2, 1875:

I received, to-day, Aram, back from Osgood & Co. with a letter stating that they would not be able to publish it, 1st because they had so many books on hand this year (which is what every house says at every and any time)--2nd because it was out of their line, which to one who knows is a downright lie . . . . I thought of replying and letting them know that I knew their letter to be false . . . .

Aram finally did find a publisher in the South Atlantic Magazine, but not until 1879.

Meanwhile, the search for a stage hearing was equally disappointing, and in fact, provided Williams' initiation into what seemed to him the unbusinesslike
and ungentlemanly behavior of theater people. Williams' plan was to have Mr. Albert G. Brice, a friend of his father's and of Ben DeBar, get Mr. DeBar to show the manuscript of *Eugene Aram* to Edwin Adams, who was playing at the St. Charles Theater. The project ran into difficulties at every step, and Williams finally decided to call on Adams himself. His first interview with the great man went off well enough:

As I did not know Adams even by sight he had to be pointed out to me,—when I went up to him, introduced myself and asked the favor of a few moments talk upon a matter "semi-professional." He had left some acquaintance to speak to me, and I feared that he would excuse himself as "engaged." He, however, after the formal courtesy of "being happy to meet me etc" had passed, said he was at leisure and at my service. I imparted my business. He said that he had written to London for Willis' "Aram" after it had been brought out here, but that the party to whom he had written about it, after having witnessed its performance several times advised him not to buy it. He asked me if mine was anything like Willis'. I told him that it was not, and, briefly, what it was . . . . After a few more trifling questions he wound up by saying . . . he would take it and read it.--He invited me

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43 Diary, January 15, 1874.

44 In the introduction, dated July 4, 1873, to the privately printed edition of *Eugene Aram* (New Orleans, 1874), Williams says that he was ignorant of Willis' play until after his own was completed and notes that Willis' play is not based on Bulwer.

42 Brice was mayor of Carrollton in 1874. See Ledet, *op. cit.*, p. 256.
to call on Saturday forenoon, before
the matinee and see him about the matter.45

This was Williams' big chance, and the days from Tuesday
to Saturday must have dragged. But on Saturday things
went badly. Williams describes the interview:

Called on Adams, according to appointment,--
and found him engaged. He apologized for
keeping me waiting and said he had the Ms.
in his room and would get it.--I was rather
uncertain as to what this meant, for though
I was pleased at his having called for
and got the ms.46 Yet his starting to get
it so quickly seemed ominous. As he went
he was stopped by a gentleman whom he
spoke to. When he returned he went first
to this gentlemen and gave him a ms. and
spoke with him a few moments. . . Adams
then came to me and handed me a copy of
"Ravenswood"(printed) by Braughn.47 I
told him that it was not mine and told him
the name of mine. I do not like his making
this mistake, however, there was nothing
in it. He then said that he had not had
time to read Aram as he had been very much
pressed,--but, if I was not in need of the
Ms. and would allow him, he would like to
keep it until he had read it. That he was
going down to "Miller's Island" to spend a

45 Diary, February 24, 1874.

46 From his stage manager, to whom Williams had
given it.

47 G. H. Braughn, another New Orleanian, apparently
as eager as Williams to get Adams interested in his work,
had based his play on Scott's novel The Bride of Lammer-
moor and copyrighted it in 1873. See DCCUS, II, 1939.
few weeks with Joe Jefferson,\textsuperscript{48} and
would there have plenty of time to read
it. Of course I did not object and he is
to take the ms. with him—if he has it!
And has he got it?—Maybe not . . . Can't
be positive, and will have to wait until
\textit{Time} discloses.\textsuperscript{49}

We can trace through Williams' diary entries the gradual
deterioration of his hopes for \textit{Eugene Aram}. On March
8, 1874, he writes: "Not a word from E. Adams yet.
But then he can take his time if it will add to his
appreciation of it." Again on March 12: "Nothing yet
from E. Adams. I don't know what to think of his long
silence. It may be favorable, but I fear it may be
nothing to rejoice at." And finally, on June 6:

Since last writing a number of things have
happened. . . First, the Aram project
with Adams all fell through, because of
Adams. He never had the ms—or even saw
it, and lied to me when he said that he
had only read part of it and wished to keep
it until through. I got the ms. from Mr.
Fitzgerald, DeBar's stage manager, who
said he looked it over, and thought it con-
tained much good matter, but that it was
too "talky" (as he termed it) to suit modern
playgoers. Well—\textit{he} was honest,—and that
is more than Adams was.—This last gent.(?)
may sometime like to see something of mine,
and then I shall remember him.

The best idea Williams had about \textit{Eugene Aram} was
showing the manuscript to Lawrence Barrett, who was

\textsuperscript{48}Joseph Jefferson, in whose honor Miller's
Island was later renamed Jefferson's Island, was one of
the most distinguished actors of the time, and Williams
must have hoped Adams would show him the play during their
visit.

\textsuperscript{49}Diary, February 28, 1874.
currently filling an engagement at the Varieties theater, and asking for his opinion. Barrett complimented and encouraged him but advised him "to study 'construction'"50 Of this Williams wrote, "Barrett's opinion is one which is encouraging and which certainly is of the kind it will be best for me to follow, and I have already anticipated him in the construction of my Don Carlos, which is better in that point than Aram, though it may fall lower in the scale as a literary work."51 He had noted his progress with and plans for Don Carlos earlier. On January 1, 1875, his Diary reports: I have got to the end of Act Third in my Don Carlos, but will have to re-write that act I think . . . . I am so far pleased with my plan of this play, and believe, as I hope, that it will take as an acting drama. I have the failures of Schiller, Otway, and Alfieri to steer by and I think I am profiting by the chart. I have decided to give Don Carlos to the "New Histrionics," if they will play it this coming summer . . . The members are anxious to have something of mine and I am willing that they should if they will do it justice. The New Histrionics did produce Don Carlos at the Varieties Theater on May 30, 1875. A program for the performance has been preserved, and it contains the

50 Diary, February 2, 1875.
51 Ibid.
the following note: "The author of 'PRINCE CARLOS' wishes to state that his play (taken from the history of Don Carlos, son of Philip the Second of Spain) is in part, in regard to some of the incidents, founded upon Schiller's treatment of the same subject."

New Orleans critics were kind to the play and singled out the young author for particular praise. Williams cut notices of the play out of local newspapers and saved them. One of these clippings calls the play "an effort reflecting great credit upon its author" and notes that "at the close of the piece, Mr. Williams was called before the curtain and received the most enthusiastic congratulations." Another reviewer noted that Williams "has made such excellent use of his versatile pen that we have no doubt he will be encouraged to further efforts in the dramatic line." He added that "the New Histrionics deserve much credit for their spirit in placing before their friends a play written by one of

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52 This is the title under which he copyrighted, on April 18, 1875, the play usually referred to by himself and others as Don Carlos. See DCCUS, II, 1875.

53 There are six clippings with dates noted on them in pencil. Four are dated May 13 and two May 14, 1875. The papers are not identified, but one review is signed "Neura," identified in pencil as Earnest F. Florance, and another bears the notation "J. R. G. Pitkin."
our own fellow citizens." Another anonymous critic refers to Williams as "one of our most talented young townsmen" and declares that "the literary merit of the play is worthy of great commendation." The reviewer goes on, however, to qualify his praise with a few gentle suggestions for improvement, reminiscent of Barrett's comments on Eugene Aram:

Mr. Williams has evidently devoted much care to the preparation of his play, and if we expect a little lack of knowledge of the stage mechanism occasionally evidenced in the production, it is deserving of great praise.

It is not every capable author who can write a good acting play and we deem it no cause of censure to Mr. Williams to say that some study of the requirements of the stage would prove of great advantage to him in writing his plays. As a literary production it is worthy of high commendation, and we offer our congratulations to the young author on the marked success of his effort.

Florance's review mingles civic pride in the promising young dramatist with some good-natured criticism of his poetry. Florance calls Prince Carlos "one of the first dramas composed by a Louisianian and performed upon our stage by our own actors" and adds that "New Orleans can thank him for his brave effort to raise her in the world of Literature." The reviewer regrets the necessity of noting that "here and there a mixed metaphor peeps out," but tempers his criticism in a kindly intended if somewhat mixed metaphor of his own:
"Genius has delicate veins and he that cuts too deep may sever the vital artery." He singles out for particular praise Carlo's tearful soliloquy in Act III, scene iii:

Here while I tread the ways my woes have hallowed
Each grief remembered wakens newer sighs,
Till the recruited legion, striking to my heart,
O'ercomes me quite—and last, in my poor weakness,
I'm deluged in a weeping memory!
So sorrow's company begets more woes
And the completed past, like a foul weight,
Breaks the round shoulders of our present action
And dwarfs us into shadows of ourselves.

The influence of the language of \textit{Hamlet} on lines such as those just quoted is obvious, and Mr. Pitkin, in his review of \textit{Prince Carlos} points out further resemblances between the two plays:

The play, while clearly original, reveals a Madrid that is an opaque suggestion of Elsinore. Carlos is a new \textit{Hamlet}, sore-distraught, relies upon Posa as his Horatio, mourns a father, dead to him while yet living, steals upon him at midnight as Hamlet sought the praying Claudius, though with no wicked arm—and, finally, falls as did the Dane, a victim of villainy and with the tidings of the Queen-mother's death in his ears. Domingo is in part a Polonius . . . .

Pitkin apparently does not intend this comparison as adverse criticism but says he means to show by it how carefully Williams has read and assimilated the "masters
of drama" and used such traits "as might aid his general purpose." Of the verse he says that "if it halts or falters in a few instances, it does not hobble." All in all, he feels he can "congratulate Mr. Williams upon his well-earned success," though, for his part, he would prefer somewhat lighter entertainment. "Next time," he begs, "give us a light genial comedy, a cool, savory, intellectual lemonade . . . ." But Williams continued to serve out buckets of hot blood for some time to come. His lemonade period came later in his career.
CHAPTER IV

THE BEGINNINGS OF PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS

Williams had no plays published or performed between 1875 and 1879. No doubt he continued to do some writing, while he worked in the insurance company office, earning his living and learning all he could about the world of finance, but he gave more time and attention than ever before to social life. This was natural enough for a young bachelor in his middle twenties, and even more natural when we consider that he had fallen in love.

He remarks in his diary on January 30, 1875, his twenty third birthday, "I have been--for the past five years at least, so busy in mind and body, but mostly in mind, that I have had little time to devote to what is considered a young man's proper sphere--society.--I fear in this respect I must reform altogether." Perhaps as a result of this resolution, he made the acquaintance of Miss Nannie Bowers, who, after a courtship of several years, became his wife on April 15, 1879.¹ She was the daughter of George

¹See Who's Who in America, 1897-1942, p. 1351.
Phillips Bowers of Mobile, Alabama, and Catherine MacGavock of Virginia. Her father was a member of the New Orleans firm of Bowers and Avery, cotton brokers.²

Marriage, of course, influenced Williams' literary career. His wife's background was more southern and more conservative than his own. She had been brought up in a strict Presbyterian atmosphere³ and was apparently never quite comfortable about her husband's connection with the wicked world of the stage. In Mrs. Osgood's words, "She was very proud of my father's successes but didn't share his enjoyment of what was, in those days, considered the 'bohemian' atmosphere of writers and theatre people."⁴

By all accounts Williams was a devoted husband, and consideration for his wife's feelings may well have been the reason why he "never turned his back on New Orleans and steadfastly refused the temptation to move to the vicinity of New York, nearer the center of theatre life."⁵

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²Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, April 30, 1957.
³Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, November 29, 1957.
⁴Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, November 2, 1957.
⁵Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, January 17, 1957.
The Williamses had four children, a boy and three girls, the last born in 1892; and the increasing obligations of family life undoubtedly contributed to Williams' decision not to abandon his secure position in the business world for the more precarious existence of a theatrical career. In fact, Williams took an additional step toward making finance his chief career when, in 1885, he went into the building and loan business for himself.7

The year 1879 marked not only Williams' marriage but also the publication of two major works: Eugene Aram and Parrhasius. After many unsuccessful attempts to get Eugene Aram accepted for production or publication, he had finally decided in 1874 to have it printed privately at his own expense. He distributed copies of the play to everyone he thought might be interested in it and at last found a publisher. The play was serialized in the South Atlantic Magazine, one act an issue for five issues. There is no record of how much he was paid for the play by the editor,

6 Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, April 30 and November 29, 1957.

7 Who's Who in America, loc. cit.
Mrs. Carrie Aiken Harris, of Wilmington, North Carolina. The general quality of the magazine was poor, and serial publication of the play was ineffective, but Williams could at least claim one more publication he had not had to pay for himself.

The publication of Parrhasius; or, Thriftless Ambition, A Dramatic Poem, was the most important literary event for Williams in 1879. In some respects it was the chief event of his whole literary career, since it opened the doors of the professional theater to him and brought him the acquaintance and admiration of Robert Mantell, an actor and manager of considerable influence.

The idea for Parrhasius may have been suggested to Williams by Bulwer's reference to the legend in his unfinished dramatization of Eugene Aram. In Act I, scene v, Aram says:

I pray thee, Boteler,
Is it not told of some great painter--whom Rome bore, and earth yet worships--that he slew A man--a brother man--and without ire, But with cool heart and hand, that he might fix His gaze upon the wretch's dying pangs; And by them learn what mortal throes to paint On the wrung features of a suffering God?

Mount, op. cit., p. 58.

New Orleans: Southern Publishing Company. This may have been a subsidized publication.
But Williams knew Parrhasius was a Greek, not a Roman. It is interesting to speculate that his knowledge of the Athenian painter may have been derived from studies supervised by his mother, who was noted as a Greek scholar in her youth. The resumé of Williams' work which formed part of his obituary notice in the Daily Picayune contains, among other inaccuracies, the statement that Parrhasius was a "dramatization of N. P. Willis' poem of that name." Williams, who was meticulous about giving such credits, never acknowledged any debt to Willis' work.

In this first version Parrhasius was only eight hundred lines long. Written in blank verse, it tells the story of the Athenian painter Parrhasius who, in order to have a model for his painting of the death of Prometheus, buys a slave and has him tortured to death before his eyes. The slave is discovered, too late, to be the long lost father of Parrhasius' beloved wife.

The Greek ideals of dignity and restraint are noticeably absent from Williams' play. His interest in the excesses of the passionate artistic temperament reflects his admiration of Byron and Shelley rather than any Classical model. And he has the slave actually tortured to death on the stage—a serious breach of

10August 29, 1908.
Classical decorum. What Gilbert Highet says of the Greek sculpture *Laocoön* could as well be said of Parrhasius. He notes that the hideous depiction of cruel death, of physical suffering and torment, is not representative of Greek art, either in theme or execution, for "the entire subject is ugly, and the emotional charge in it is excessive. ... Tension so extreme as this was never portrayed in Greek art of the great period, when death itself was shown in eternal calm. Greek painters would not show the face of Agamemnon at the sacrifice of his daughter; Greek playwrights would not permit Medea to murder her children or Oedipus to blind himself before the audience."\(^{11}\)

Nevertheless, Williams manages to capture something of the spirit of Greek tragedy. Parrhasius' downfall is the result of *hubris*, and he unwittingly works toward his own destruction in the Classical tradition of dramatic irony. In the last lines of the play, Parrhasius says to Theon, who had warned him of the downfall his ambition for fame might bring:

> Behold! --thy prophesy. Thus do the gods
> Inflict our punishments with our own hands,
> And scourge us mortally with our own errors!

This is one of the few plays in which Williams followed the Classical unities of place, action, and time. Ordinarily such considerations had no part in his concept of dramatic form. He moved his characters from Delhi to Prague between scenes, developed elaborate sub-plots, and spanned generations between acts.

Demonstrating that Williams was among the pioneers in writing Classical tragedy for the American stage, Paul Nolan points out that the earliest American copyrighted translation of a Greek tragedy intended for the stage was not made until 1872, when W. G. Wills copyrighted Medea in Corinth, a three-act tragedy based on Euripides. The next such attempt, Edgar S. Werner's Antigone, based on Sophocles, was not copyrighted until 1892. He goes on to say, in evaluation of the play, that "what Williams has done in Parrhasius is in essence what Anouilh, Cocteau, Fry, O'Neill have since done, admittedly far better. He has borrowed from the Greeks a form and a myth by which to interpret a problem of value of his own time."}

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13 Ibid., p. viii.
Williams had only a small reputation as a newspaper poet and amateur playwright when Parrhasius appeared, and no one took any particular notice of the play at first. Then, in 1689 it was produced twice by amateurs in charity performances: on March 1, at the Women's Social Industrial Association Hall on St. Charles Avenue, when it was preceded by a musical program; and again on April 4, at the Grunewald Opera House, with a slightly different cast, where it shared the bill with another of Williams' one-act plays, Morbid vs. Quick. Since both performances were for the building and charity fund of the Women's Social Industrial Association, it seems probable that the first performance was so successful as to necessitate hiring the opera house for the second.

Two years later Parrhasius had its first professional performance. It was presented during December, 1691, for a week's engagement at the Grand Opera House, as an afterpiece, by Joseph Haworth and his company. This was a period of great competition among New Orleans theater managers, and Williams' play

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14 Programs for both performances are in the Espy Williams Collection.

15 The program is in the Espy Williams Collection.
was one of a number of new attractions which Henry Greenwall, manager of the Grand Opera House, formerly the Varieties Theater, featured as part of his competition with David Bidwell, manager of the Academy of Music and of the St. Charles Theater. Thus Williams was the beneficiary of a rivalry which Kendall comments on as follows:

For a time there was the bitterest kind of warfare between the two groups. At first, neither really had the advantage, but the result was that the New Orleans public profited amazingly. It may be doubted if any city in the United States, outside of New York, enjoyed as fine a list of attractions as that featured during these years at the New Orleans theaters.16

As a result of the unusual theatrical activity in New Orleans, Williams was able, without leaving home, to make the acquaintance of a number of important theater people with whom he later worked: Lawrence Barrett, Frederick Warde, Louis James, Robert Mantell—all of whom were brought to New Orleans in the 1880's and 1890's by Bidwell or Greenwall.17

Lawrence Barrett, whose criticism had been helpful to Williams in the past, read Parrhasius and

16 *The Golden Age of the New Orleans Theater*, p. 587.

did not think well of it. He was quoted as saying that "such a horrible story would never be tolerated by an audience." His opinion was not, however, shared by Robert Mantell. Whether Mantell saw one of the amateur or professional performances of Parrhasius while he was playing in New Orleans, or whether Williams sent him a copy of the play, he thought it had possibilities, and on May 5, 1892, he produced it at the Park Theater in Philadelphia, where it was a pronounced success. Williams' good fortune was reported in detail by the New Orleans press, full of pride in its native son, now that Philadelphia had recognized his talent. The following notice in the Item may serve as an example of the local acclaim Williams received:

A TRIUMPH FOR NEW ORLEANS

The Item, with very great pleasure, tenders its congratulations to our talented and much esteemed fellow-citizen, Mr. Espy W. H. Williams. The fact that he is highly endowed as a dramatic author is known to our readers, although the public did not respond as the occasion warranted when his stirring tragedy, "Parrhasius," was presented here.

However, it was not then in appreciative hands, and the acting may have suggested the criticism that the play was better suited for the study than the stage.

But not discouraged by lack of success in those to whom he had entrusted his grand

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18 Mount, op. cit., p. 58.
production, Mr. Williams tendered it to that meritorious actor and real tragedian, Robert Mantell, who at once grasped its possibilities and had the work fitly staged to set off the player's art. The result—the only possible result in competent hands—was a grand success. It was produced last night.

The Item, calling upon Mr. Williams on business, found him reading the following telegram, and at once confiscated it for the benefit of the gentleman's many friends:

May 6, 1892

Espy Williams, New Orleans, La.:

"Parrhasius" a great success; will send papers. R. B. Mantell

The Item hopes Mr. Mantell will play "Parrhasius" in New Orleans. . . .

A few days later, the Item reprinted the reviews from Philadelphia papers which Mantell had sent to Williams. They were indeed favorable. The Press called the play "a decided hit" and reported that when the performance was over Mantell had asked the audience what verdict on the play he should telegraph to the author in New Orleans. They had responded with enthusiastic applause. The Call said the language was "graceful, picturesque and at times vivid" and concluded that "the best evidence of its merit was the unqualified approval given by the audience." Both the

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19 New Orleans Item, May 6, 1892.
Evening Bulletin and the Evening Item commented on Parrhasius' superiority to The Lady of Lyons, a full-length play, and the chief attraction of the program. The Evening Bulletin called Parrhasius "the most interesting event of the evening. . . . compact, forceful, and well-written" and expressed the belief that it "gave promise of good work hereafter from Mr. Williams." The Evening Item said: "It was hardly kind of Mr. Mantell to keep the critics at the Park Theatre last night until about 11 o'clock before he permitted them to see his new one act drama, 'Parrhasius,' by Espy Williams. Evidently the actor thought they might leave before 'The Lady of Lyons' if he placed 'Parrhasius' first on the programme." This reviewer complains that the play is "ferocious in sentiment and repulsive in plot" but finds it well-written nevertheless.

The Philadelphia success prompted Mantell to present Parrhasius in Boston the following week, a production which met with approval also. Thereupon, Mantell contracted with Williams for the stage rights of the play, which Williams agreed to enlarge and revise considerably. Mantell's enthusiastic plans for the play, as well as the wretchedness of his emenda-

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20 Mount, op. cit., p. 58.
tions, are indicated in the following notice from the Picayune:

Mr. Espy W. H. Williams, of this city, has sold the stage rights of his play, "Pharrhasius," to Robert Mantell, the well known actor, for the sum of $3000. The play as it stands is three acts long, and will fill an evening's performance. In a letter to Mr. Williams accompanying the contract, Mr. Mantell says: "I begin my season early—July 10—at Salt Lake City and work out to the coast; then south and through Texas. Will play in New Orleans about Sept. 10. I hope to have the play in pretty good shape by that time. I have been having some very nice drops painted, about seven in number, to take with me to give it a good chance for success. The costumes will also be very fine, and I am picking out my people more for "Parrhasius" than for any other of my plays. I intend to introduce a Grecian ballet of dancing girls and flute players into one of the scenes as a feature of the performance. Send me some words for Clythie's song at once."

What few virtues the original version of the play Parrhasius had were due largely to its economy of form. Williams, to please Mantell, enlarged it, first into three and then into four acts. The number of characters is increased in the longer versions; sub-plots are added, concerning a love affair between Parrhasius' sister and his friend and a soldier who seeks revenge against the painter for an old injury; and numerous scenes with slaves, dancing girls, soldiers, and bacchantes are introduced. The dramatic irony of

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21 New Orleans Daily Picayune, June 14, 1893.
the original ending is lost in melodramatic ranting. Nevertheless, Parrhasius suited Mantell's purposes in its revised form. As a one-act play it could be used only as the afterpiece to another play. And the added opportunities for histrionic display suited his ornate style of acting. It remained part of Mantell's repertory for a number of years.  

New Orleanians, as Mantell had promised, got their chance to see his production of Parrhasius in the fall of 1893. It played at the Grand Opera House on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, September 14, 15, and 16, to enthusiastic audiences. After the first performance, Mantell led Williams out before the audience and told them "that New Orleans ought to be proud to be able to reckon among her citizens a man able to write a play so grand as the one the audience had just witnessed." The Picayune included with its review of the performance a picture of Williams, impressive with his balding head and full beard and mustache, and a short biographical sketch— the first time any of the local papers had paid so much attention to him.  

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22 Mount, op. cit., p. 58.
23 New Orleans Daily Picayune, September 15, 1893.
24 Ibid.
In the meantime, there was some evidence that he was gaining a literary reputation in New England as a result of the performance of the one act Parrhasius there. The following letter was received by Mantell, who forwarded it to Williams in New Orleans:

BOSTON TRANSCRIPT,
Editorial Department
Boston, May 21, 1892

My dear sir

I have found myself so interested in the little tragedy, "Parrhasius," that I wish to know something of the author. Can you put me on the track? Even his address would be a help. I regret that in the rush of many duties I have been unable to say in print all that I felt concerning this fine work, but hope to find the opportunity soon.

Faithfully yours

/S/ F. H. Leahy

Apparently Williams replied to Mr. Leahy in some detail, for the following article, interesting for what it tells us about Williams' current activities and plans for the future, appeared in the Boston Transcript less than one month later:

The Author of "Parrhasius"

The impression made at the recent performances in Boston of the one-act tragedy, "Parrhasius," that here is a work of powerful vitality, justifies the publication of some facts concerning the author, of whom little seems to be known in this part of the country. Espy W. H. Williams is a native of New Orleans, where he has always lived and where he is engaged
in business. Literature has been a recreation with him, and his productions, outside of miscellaneous work for New Orleans newspapers, have consisted of poems and dramas. "Parrhasius" was written some years ago and was published as a dramatic poem. At the instance of friends he brought it out with amateur players, and as it proved a success he remodelled it for stage use. Two other plays, "Eugene Aram" and "Witchcraft," have been published by Mr. Williams for private circulation. Another play, "Dante and Beatrice," a tragedy in blank verse, was intended for the use of the late Lawrence Barrett, whose criticism and advice are acknowledged by the author as having been most helpful. Robert Mantell, who controls the stage rights of "Parrhasius," has the piece under consideration. "Witchcraft," which has been newly named "The Last Witch," to avoid conflict with another play bearing the former name, deals with the famous episode in our colonial history. Mr. Williams has a volume of short poems in press to be published by Putnam's Sons in the autumn.

The two new plays referred to here, "Witchcraft" and "Dante and Beatrice," were both disappointing to their author. Neither ever found a commercial publisher or a producer, though Williams printed and distributed copies of "Witchcraft" and though "Dante and Beatrice" was considered for production by several important managers.

Williams copyrighted "Witchcraft; or, the witch of Salem, a legend of old New England in 5 acts" on March 20, 1882. In 1886 it was published for him

25 June 18, 1892.
26 DCCUS, II, 2595.
as a fifty-three page pamphlet by E. A. Brandao and Company of New Orleans. Though there is no record of its ever having been performed, Williams made extensive notes on his copy of the play, indicating possible revisions, casting, and stage diagrams.\textsuperscript{27}

Although historical personages, such as Cotton Mather and Justice Harthorne, appear in the play, and although Williams had, according to his own note, consulted a standard historical work\textsuperscript{28} for some of the details of his drama, it is far from accurate. The story is actually a romance of a lost heiress found in the nick of time, with witchcraft giving an exotic and exciting background to a routine tale of lost treasure. Williams' attitude toward those who believed in witchcraft is extremely patronizing. He assumes that only the very ignorant and superstitious ever believed in it and that the educated, intelligent people of Salem merely used witch hunts as a dishonest means for securing political power. The play is full of anachronisms, as Justice Harthorne is portrayed as cynically plotting to get the heroine, Amy Fairfax, acquitted of the charge of witchcraft if she will marry his nephew and bring her fortune into his family.

\textsuperscript{27}Espy Williams Collection.

And the royal official, Sir Jasper Gates, never credits the superstition for a moment, considering it a quaint, if rather wicked, Americanism. Of course, many a work of literature has succeeded in spite of historical inaccuracy, but *Witchcraft* is a thoroughly undistinguished play, and its lack of success is not surprising.

Lawrence Barrett had commissioned Williams to do a play on Dante and Beatrice, probably in 1890. The company headed by Barrett and Edwin Booth was in serious need of new materials. Both actors had passed their prime and needed more than the same old standard offerings to attract audiences. Eleanor Ruggles, in her biography of Booth, notes that "Booth had had trouble this season [1889-1890] deciding which of his well-worn vehicles to pit against the fresher attractions at other houses. He admitted to Barrett that in New York especially he felt stale, 'stale in the reiteration of the same old plays.'" Booth and Barrett had always made it a point to appeal to the "conservative, well-to-do element in every community, which could safely bring its young daughters and give the girls the satin programs for their memory books." Williams was certainly well qualified to write for

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29 *Prince of Players*, p. 348.
their genteel audience, and it is natural that Barrett, who had known him and his work for fifteen years, and who had given him a great deal of "patient, frank and truthful criticism," should look to him for a new play.

It is possible that Barrett had used some of Williams' work before. Among Williams' manuscripts there is a literal translation of Un Drama Nuevo by Manuel Tamayo y Baus. This play, in a somewhat revised English version, was one of the most popular items of Barrett's repertory from 1878 on. Under the title Yorick's Love it had a stage history of about twenty years, undergoing various revisions from time to time.

Yorick's Love is usually attributed to William Dean Howells, although several other persons had a hand in the adaptation. Barrett liked to work closely with his playwrights, suggesting and even personally making changes in their work. His stage manager, William Seymour, also did part of the work on Yorick's Love, and there are manuscript fragments of slightly variant texts done by still another unknown person. Barrett's method of work was maddening to Howells, who complained in a letter to John Hay, "I haven't the least

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31 Mount, op. cit., p. 57.
idea how far Barrett has let my work alone. He wrote me in Chicago three weeks ago, in quite a panic, that it was all bad, and that he should have to 'take it into his workshop' and do it over. Perhaps taking it "into his workshop" included putting Williams to work on some of the revisions.

According to his custom, Barrett worked closely with Williams on *Dante and Beatrice*, chiefly concerned, as always, with having a good starring vehicle for himself and Booth. Unfortunately for Williams, Barrett died before the play was completed. His death, on March 16, 1891, was more than the cause for disappointment about his play for Williams, however. He felt grief for the loss of a valued friend. On learning of Barrett's death, Williams wrote a poem in his memory which shows real admiration for the actor as a person:

Lawrence Barrett

His was the Poet's mind, whose subtle ken
With loving purpose searched the realm of Art,
To win the golden secrets of her heart
And lay them tribute on the souls of men.

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His was the Soldier's heart, whose ready hand
Grasped with an earnest will the needed steel,
Yet ne'er forgot 't was human still to feel,
And tempered with love's pity war's command.

His was the Brother's hand, whose open palm,
In silence sought, with loving, fruitful deed,
The drooping heart and weary hand of need,
And poured upon affliction heaven's balm.

And his the Christian's soul, whose spirit-sight
Pierced the dark confines of its prisoned life,
And through earth's lowering clouds of worldly strife,
Still caught a glimpse of life's celestial Light.

—March 21, 1891. 33

Great confusion reigned in Barrett's and Booth's company after Barrett's sudden death, as Booth and Theodore Bromley, their manager, straightened out the confusion of cancelled engagements and adjusted broken contracts. 34 The contract with Williams was one of those which had to be adjusted. It is not known whether Williams was paid for the work already completed, but Booth did not purchase the rights to his play, perhaps sensing that his own theatrical career was all but over. He completed the two remaining weeks of the season and then left the stage. He planned to return after a year's rest but never did. 35

33 A Dream of Art and Other Poems, p. 22.
34 Ruggles, op. cit., p. 358.
Williams completed the play which Barrett had commissioned, and on May 16, 1892, he copyrighted it as "Dante: a Florentine romance, in 3 acts," but he was never able to sell it. Robert Mantell considered it in 1892, as did Frederick Paulding in 1893, but in 1896 it was "still unused and not published." Perhaps it was too much tailored to Barrett's exact needs to be suitable for anyone else.

The plot of the play has very little connection with the actual facts of Dante's life. The theme is the conflict Dante feels between his loyalty to Florence and to Art. Williams has him say in Act I:

And yet the fact remains;--our duty first,--
And afterwards,--art, pleasure, what you will.

... But you, my friends,
What would you have me do? Shrink from my fate?
Resign the council, leave the state, and turn
A traitor to my manhood and my trust?
Then, seek once more my own and men's esteem
Through the good grace of Art?--Never--never!

The preoccupation here with the conflict between the demands of social responsibility and devotion to art

36_DCCUS, I, 468.
37_Boston Transcript, June 18, 1892.
38_New Orleans Daily Picayune, September 15, 1893.
39_Mount, op. cit., p. 57.
was to be a major theme in Williams' work for some time to come. It undoubtedly reflects his own difficult position as a man forced by financial obligations to put his writing in second place.
On December 15, 1874, Williams wrote in his diary, "I have printed only a few minor poems this past year; but have made a collection of my best... and shall have them published under the name of 'First Fruit' if I can get a publisher." Eighteen years later, in 1892, a volume of his collected poems was finally published. G. P. Putnam's Sons brought it out, under the title The Dream of Art and Other Poems. A slender volume of only ninety-nine pages, selling for one dollar, it contained twenty-eight short poems, three longer narrative poems, and a one-act verse drama.

The shorter pieces are made up of love lyrics, poems about his children and family life, occasional and descriptive poems, and miscellaneous verses, some very serious and thoughtful, others playful or satiric in tone. They show that Williams experimented quite widely with versification, but always within the conventional forms: couplets, ballad stanza, the sonnet, and others.

The short poems are mostly very slight. Some of the family pieces are charming, such as "Queen Maude" and "Rex," which deal playfully with two of his
children; others, like the baby talk poem "Yovin' an' a Kiss," are merely embarrassing. Of the love poems, the lyrics are better than the "philosophical" pieces like "What is Love?" One of the best is "A Love Song," beginning

Tell me not where roses blow,—
Tell me, where do roses go?

Several of the occasional poems, such as "Lawrence Barrett" and "Bras-Coupé" have already been quoted and commented on.

Five of the short poems are worthy of fuller comment, two because of the unusual political attitudes they express, three because they deal with Williams' ideas about poetry and the poet.

The poems on "Davis" and "Grant," printed on facing pages, and clearly intended to be read as companion pieces, are probably the best of the shorter poems and certainly are the most interesting. They are remarkable works for a native Southerner who spent his formative years during the Civil War and Reconstruction. They show Williams to be a man who formed independent and thoughtful judgments. As such, they are worth quoting here, particularly since the volume in which they are included is now practically unavailable.
Davis

He hath won victory at last in death!
And loving faith, and faithful love,
Have led him, hand in hand, above
The praises or the blame of mortal breath.

Oh ye whose wanton, fruitless hatred still
Sought to destroy his peace of life, --
Let death's long silence hush your strife,
And leave his fate to Time's impartial will.

And ye within whose palms he ever lay
A comrade's ever loving hand,
Now, past defeat, behold him stand
Your comrade still in death's eternal day.

Grant

He is not greatest who by bloody deeds
Mounts to the pinnacle of war's renown;
Who bears upon his brow the victor's crown,
And tramples under foot the foe who bleeds;
But he, who rises to his country's needs,
And wears but for occasion battle's frown; --
Who, when his duty's done, his foeman down,
Foremost for fallen, misspent valor pleads.
He is the greatest: and his crown of fame, --
A monument to peace though wrought by war,--
Even as thine, whose honored war-won name,
Upon the lips of nations near and far,
Rose in a requiem o'er thy life's refrain.

Three of Williams' shorter poems, "The Poet,"
"The Critics— A Libel," and "Inspiration," deal with
poetry and the poet— the first one seriously, the last
two humorously.

"The Poet" is a very serious poem. It deals with
the problem Williams had raised in Dante and which he
undoubtedly felt as a source of conflict in his own
life— the problem of the poet's place in a materialistic
world. The two opposing standards of value Williams
represents by "the Poet" and "the World-Man." The poem is naive and the issues are over-simplifed. "The World-Man, tinsel hearted," chides the Poet for wasting "time best put to better uses," and then returns "to cheat the City." At last, the World-Man dies and is forgotten.

But the Poet hath begotten,
Lasting life in every breath.

"The Poet" is not a good poem, though is is a sincere one. Ironically enough, Williams was probably, to most New Orleanians at the time, the epitome of the World-Man--busy at his building and loan company office every day, a prosperous and distinguished man, hardly the type of the starving, suffering artist. But, though he gave most of his time and energy to business, Williams always thought of himself as a Poet, never as a World-Man.

"The Critics--A Libel" and "Inspiration" show that Williams had a sense of humor about poetry and poets. In "The Critics--A Libel" he invents a myth of the creation of poets and critics. Jove and Vulcan had a contest to see which could create the best man.

Imperial Jove, with godlike thought,
Of godlike soul the Poet wrought;
Of fashion fair, and spirit face,
Beauty and strength in wedded grace.

Vulcan spied on Jove's work and attempted to duplicate it in his smithy. His creation, the Critic, bore a
superficial resemblance to the Poet:

In form and feature,—but no more!
For in his mind, alack! he bore,
'Midst overheat and sickly flame
(A Critic's heritage and fame!)
The smithy's soot and windy roar,
And Vulcan's envy, sadly sore.

"Inspiration" shows that Williams was able occasionally to see the lighter side of the poetic vocation, which he usually viewed with high seriousness. The point of this slight verse is that though a true poet cannot write without inspiration, he need not despair, for he can always find that inspiration if there is anyone around "in a bodice and skirt."

Of the three longer poems, the title poem "The Dream of Art" is the most significant. It presents again Williams' preoccupation with the condition of the artist in a hostile environment. Here it is not the pressure of other obligations which keeps the artist from his work as in Dante. It is not the materialistic world which scorns his work as valueless as in "The Poet." Here it is the physical universe itself which is hostile to art and the artist.

The story Williams tells in "The Dream of Art" is like an artist's nightmare. A sculptor, having worked many weary, fruitless years, at last forms his clay into an inspired shape. He knows he will be
immortal when his work is cast in bronze and shown to the world. But, half frozen in his poverty, and exhausted from his toil, he falls asleep beside his work. As he sleeps, the frost creeps into his room, and the work of art becomes a shapeless mass of "frozen, fissured, crumbling soil." The sculptor, who has given "his scant pallet's meager spread" to cover the statue, dies, frozen, in his sleep.

The frost may be taken to symbolize all in the artist's environment which—through indifference rather than malice—destroys him and his work. The diction and imagery of "The Dream of Art" are conventional enough, and the melodramatic ending with the sculptor's death is in the romantic tradition Williams so much admired, recalling Thomas Hood in particular. The subject and tone, however, have something in common with the naturalistic writings of Stephen Crane, whose work began to appear the same year as A Dream of Art and Other Poems.

The other two long poems are undistinguished romantic blank verse narratives. "Count Camora" is a version of the old story about a husband who suspects his wife of infidelity, kills her, and learns too late that he was wrong. "Ahasuerus: a Legend of the Wandering Jew" tells a story in almost unbelievably bad taste. On Christmas Eve a mysterious stranger named Ahasuerus
appears in the happy home of the narrator and tells how he has been condemned to live forever and wander the earth, because, when Christ was on earth, Ahasuerus' sweetheart left him for Christ, provoking Ahasuerus' jealousy and causing him to conspire with Judas Iscariot to get rid of Christ. Just as Ahasuerus reaches the climax of his story, his keeper comes for him. He is only a harmless escaped lunatic and not really the Wandering Jew of legend after all.

The most significant part of The Dream of Art is the one-act verse drama entitled "The Atheist: A Modern Masque." The play had been published before, as an undated pamphlet, privately printed for Williams in New Orleans, as many of his works were. In this first edition, Williams dedicated the play to Robert Ingersoll. When he reprinted "The Atheist" in The Dream of Art, he omitted the dedication.

"The Atheist" is probably the most remarkable piece of work Williams ever did—in its subject, in its tone, and in its form. It is a very brief play, only 175 lines long, in which is represented just one dramatic moment in the life of the Atheist. There are only two characters on stage. Off stage there are two voices singing and a group of children caroling. Stage directions also call for "a chorus of devils in hell."
The play is highly stylized—opening and closing with the chant of the chorus of devils, who apparently would appear on the lower half of the stage, with the main action placed on a second level. Rather than striving for realistic effects, Williams uses some of the techniques of the medieval mystery and morality plays, having human and supernatural characters represented on different stage levels, and making his characters personified ideas rather than individualized persons. They are even nameless—being identified only as the Atheist and the Lady. Rhymed verse, blank verse, and prose are all effectively used in "The Atheist," rhymed verse in the musical portions, blank verse for the long speeches of the Atheist and the Lady, prose for their brief conversational remarks.

The scene is Christmas Eve, the setting the Atheist's room. The play opens with the chorus of devils, fallen angels, proclaiming the Atheist as a kindred spirit, as unvanquished as themselves, though martyred by the world's renown. The Atheist, alone in his room, speculates on the true nature of human life:

And this is life, a little while to feel Kind Nature's sweets, then be resolved in nothing!
Lost even in an unseen respiration,
Less than the echo of a whispered sigh;
And while we live, live only to acquire
A growing sense of our own littleness,
Till we become a jest unto ourselves,
A wreck, self-ridiculed and self-despised.
Our span of being is a little more
Than the bright butterfly's--our happiness
Much less--and that the only difference.

Then, hearing the church bells ringing for midnight
Mass, the Atheist, still soliloquizing, deplores the
self deception that has brought man to create religions
rather than facing the realities of his condition:

Alas, poor man,
Whose final, only consolation is a myth
Wrought deftly from his own conceit and pride;
A tale of superstition told so oft
It hath become the semblance of truth
Inwrought indelibly into himself.

At this point in the play a figure, shrouded
in a priest's gown and cowl, enters the Atheist's
room and debates with him--though the Atheist has most
of the lines and all of the good ones. The Atheist
sums up his position in a speech which, like many
parts of this play, echoes the thoughts and even the
language of Ingersoll's famous orations:

(Laughing) A thousand times I have heard such
like words,
And still a thousand times been left unchanged.
Your tests, your arguments, I have heard all,
Yes, preached them to myself, with will attent,
Yet ever to their condemnation: all.
There is no God, who, merciful, condemns:
No righteous One, who makes but to destroy.
From nothing, from a never-dying law
We come, and thence to nothing we return;
And they go first who violate that law,
And suffer its unfailing execution.
This much alone man knows. Priests know not more.

The priest says that "He who loves hears heaven within his breast" and asks the Atheist if he has never known love. The Atheist becomes angry and cries out that he had known love, "Until your God--yes, your God--stepped between us." The Atheist explains that the woman he loved and who loved him was a conventionally religious person and was shocked by his unbelief.

She weighed me, and found me wanting in the scale
Of cant, hypocrisy, pretense to things
Which truth and manhood could not dare profess,
Yet which His priesthood held for blind belief,
For faith unquestioned, from a thoughtless crowd.
'Twas then my dream fled, for she had been won
By such as you, whose subtle mastery
Poisoned her heart against me, till at last
I came to be a thing abhorred, though loved,
An evil spirit doomed to lasting hell,
Unless, good, simple, soul, her prayers could save me,
Her life of cloistered penitence wash out
My sins. So much I trusted, loved her then,
That even I was shaken, and in fear
Half doubted for myself. But time and facts
Dispelled all doubts and fears. Her life was wrecked,
Full-freighted with youth's bountiful desires,
Upon the rocks of blind, fanatic faith.
Her life was lost, her womanhood discarded,
Her end and place in nature unfulfilled,
Her very being a self-created void.

Hereupon the "priest" throws off his gown and
hood and is revealed as the Lady the Atheist loves.
She tells him that she has left the convent for him, and she explains why.

Within the convent walls
My life passed idly day by day in prayer
For thee, and all was lost in thoughts of thee.
Think not that there, though shut up from the world,
The world can enter not to those that seek it.
So, every day, something I heard of thee:
Heard of thy jeers and scoffs at things called holy,
Thy unrepentant sacrilege, and most
Thy shameless jests on such as I was there.
But, too, I heard, how all thy deeds to man
Were fraught with greatest good; how in thy life
Thou preached no standard, save by acts, all good;
How, singled from thy kind as a lost soul,
Doomed by the Church to its eternal hell,
Instead of shunnings, curses, and damnations,
Thy way was everywhere bestrewn with blessings,
The fruits of thy own sowing, lavished on thee
By who, all those, despite thy branded name,
Knew thee a messenger of God, of Him
Whose life is love, whose love is still to do.
What was I then compared with thee? Nothing.
In all my days of prayer, not one stood forth
Crowned with a living act of good, not one
For sorrow eased, for trouble comforted.
Then in my heart, the star of Bethlehem
Rose steadfast, pure, and strangely bright,
And in
My soul I felt the quickening of new life;
And, led as were the shepherds on that night
Of old, I followed till the star stood still
Above thy threshold, here above my head.

The Lady ends by saying she has not lost her faith, but has gained a "greater faith."

The play concludes with a chorus of the devils in hell, chanting a curse on the Atheist and the Lady who have discovered the truth—that love, human love, is the only thing of value in life, and that goodness
and happiness are to be found only in personal relationships outside the framework of organized religion.

The sentiments of "The Atheist" are not those one expects to find expressed by a respectable citizen of Williams' time and place. And by dedicating his play to Robert Ingersoll, Williams connected it squarely with a very real and extremely controversial issue of his own time.

The term "atheist" has customarily been used in America rather as a pejorative than a descriptive word, often with the connotation of immorality of conduct as well as unorthodoxy of belief.1 To illustrate the prevailing climate of opinion, Sidney Warren quotes Governor Rollins of New Hampshire, who said in 1899: "No matter what our belief may be in religious matters, every good citizen knows that when the restraining influences of religion are withdrawn from the community, its decay, moral, mental, and financial, is swift and sure."2

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2Ibid., p. 29. Quoted from the New York Times, April 7, 1899.
There was, of course, a tradition of free-thinking in America, going back to Thomas Paine, but it was always a restricted movement, both numerically and geographically. The Infidel Association of the United States, founded in Philadelphia, in 1857, had twenty-five affiliated chapters in New England and in cities of the Middle West, but, unable to gain wide support, it collapsed. In 1877 the New York State Freethinkers' Organization was founded, and in 1886 it tried unsuccessfully to form auxiliary chapters in other parts of the country. After 1886 it was supplanted by the National Liberal League, now called the American Secular Union, which led a spirited existence in the Northeast and West until about the turn of the century. But there is no history of organized freethinkers in the South.\(^3\) The Freethinkers' Association and Freethought Directory for the United States and Canada, published in 1882, lists only four Louisiana members. Only five states: Georgia, Maryland, Rhode Island, Mississippi, and Nevada, had fewer representatives than Louisiana, and no Southern state had more than ten. On the other

\(^3\)Ibid., pp. 169-70, 193-200.
hand, Wyoming Territory had nineteen, Wisconsin fifty-three, Michigan seventy-one, and Pennsylvania 125. Certainly these figures cannot be construed as including all atheists, agnostics, and other brands of free-thinkers in the respective areas, but they may be conceded to indicate that avowed atheism was not a popular tradition in Louisiana and the South in the last decades of the nineteenth century. W. J. Cash, in The Mind of the South, says:

The Reconstruction years left their mark upon the religious pattern of the South, and deeply. In New England, and to some extent all the Eastern states, the influence of the Transcendentalists and the Unitarians had already, as is common knowledge, set up a definite drift toward the general sophistication and liberalization of the old beliefs. And in the decades from 1870 to 1900, this drift, reinforced by the rapid spread of scientific ideas, would continually gather head. More or less complete and open skepticism would become an increasingly common phenomenon. . . . But in the South the movement was to the opposite quarter.

Robert Ingersoll was the most prominent free-thinker in Williams' time. Warren says of him:

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6He described himself variously as an infidel, unbeliever, atheist, and agnostic. The term "free-thinker" is used here as including all the others.
American agnosticism can hardly be discussed without the name of Ingersoll—indeed, the entire freethought movement was inseparably bound up with him. Through the lecture platform and the press, his words reached greater audiences than those of any other freethinker. . . . It was Ingersoll who was instrumental in translating the philosophical abstractions of agnosticism into terms comprehensible to most laymen. 7

Ingersoll travelled around the country lecturing, considering himself a sort of missionary dedicated to converting Christians away from the gospel of religion. 8 Since he lectured in every state except North Carolina and Mississippi, 9 it is possible Williams heard him. Even if he did not attend any of the great spellbinder's performances, he undoubtedly was acquainted with his writings. Ingersoll wrote voluminously, and his lectures were published. Certain of his speeches and articles were widely reprinted and discussed.

Such was the case with "A Christmas Sermon," possibly the direct inspiration for "The Atheist." This piece, originally published in the New York Evening Telegram for December 19, 1891, was a proposal that, in

7Warren, op. cit., p. 95.
8Ibid., p. 89.
effect, Christ be taken out of Christmas. Ingersoll suggested that Christmas be celebrated as a purely secular holiday, devoted to the enjoyment of love, kindness, and joy. The "sermon" included a denunciation of Christianity as bringing a message of grief and damnation rather than "tidings of great joy" to the world. "A Christmas Sermon" was the subject of dozens of attacks in newspapers and from pulpits all over the country in the months following its original publication. Ingersoll was even threatened with indictment for blasphemy because of it.\textsuperscript{10} Given such publicity, Williams can hardly have been unaware of the article. He may well have been at work on "The Atheist" about this time, and the setting of his play on Christmas Eve gives added weight to the possibility that the idea for "The Atheist" may have been suggested by "A Christmas Sermon."

If the South in general had little use for atheism, it had even less for Robert Ingersoll. Neither were Ingersoll's feelings toward the South cordial. He was an active Republican and a Civil War veteran. In 1861 he had entered the Union forces with the rank of colonel, and as commanding officer of the 11th Regiment,

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., pp. 164-67.
Illinois Volunteer Cavalry, he saw action at Shiloh. He was later captured and paroled. For thirty-five years afterwards he was in demand as an orator— at soldiers' reunions, on patriotic holidays, and during political campaigns. On such occasions his words were frequently immoderate, to say the least. A speech delivered in Indianapolis in 1876 illustrates his ideas about the South and his rhetorical style. He said, in part:

Every enemy this great Republic has had for twenty years has been a Democrat. Every man that denied to the Union prisoners even the worm-eaten crust of famine, and when some poor emaciated Union patriot, driven to insanity by famine... stepped one step beyond the dead line the wretch that put the bullet through his loving, throbbing heart was and is a Democrat. Every man that loved slavery better than liberty was a Democrat... Every man glad that the noblest President ever elected was assassinated, was a Democrat. Every man that wanted the privilege of whipping another man to make him work for him for nothing and pay him with lashes on his naked back, was a Democrat. Every man that clutched from shrieking, shuddering, crouching mothers, babes from their breasts, and sold them into slavery, was a Democrat. Every man that impaired the credit of the United States... every calumniator of his country's honor was a Democrat.

Even when less impassioned, Ingersoll was equally contemptuous of the South. He regarded it as a citadel of

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11Ibid., pp. 47-54.

willful ignorance, saying "The South always dreaded the alphabet. They looked upon each letter as an abolitionist, and well they might. They knew that when slaves began to think, masters began to tremble." He once advised a resident of Alabama that the best thing he could do was to emigrate.

Naturally enough, to many Southerners, Ingersoll was the devil incarnate. His books were burned, with prayer and singing, in Pennington Gap, Virginia. One Atlanta clergyman thought the youth of that city should be "quarantined" during his visit as from the plague. Another said he would kill his dog if the animal heard Ingersoll lecture.

The inextricable tangle of political and religious sentiment in the South is reflected in a statement issued by a group of Southern clergymen who asked that "his lying assertions about our Confederate heroes be published. . . and before he asks our people to believe what he says about their Lord and

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13 Cramer, op. cit., p. 120.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., pp. 159-160.
16 Ibid., p. 120.
Saviour, let him prove what he said against the best men and women of the South."

Williams was apparently untouched by the general Southern feeling against Ingersoll. It has already been remarked that he shared few of the political and regional prejudices of his area, following the pattern of liberalism set by his parents. Further, he obviously saw beyond the popular image of the atheist and Black Republican and found many qualities to admire in Ingersoll the man. These qualities included a lively appreciation of art and literature, particularly the theater; generous support of humanitarian causes; sober reasonableness and patient persuasiveness in theological argument, which contrasted well with the hysterical denunciations of him which came from some of the faithful; and, above all, an idyllic home life, based on the highest ideals of marriage and parenthood. Williams and Ingersoll had some theatrical friends in common, notably Lawrence Barrett, whose funeral oration Ingersoll delivered, and it possible they were personally acquainted.

17 Ibid.

It would be exaggeration to say that Williams shared all of Ingersoll's religious beliefs. Actually, we know very little about what Williams believed. He never attended church; neither did his wife. But they sent their children to church, had them baptized, and their daughters married in church. If Williams was an unbeliever, Ingersoll would not have approved of his sending his children to church. He believed it was wicked for parents to permit their children to be taught what they did not know to be true. Williams' convictions were not nearly so firm as this. Ingersoll would, perhaps, have approved of Williams' choice of a church to send his children to, if they had to go, since the one they attended was Christ Church Cathedral, an Episcopal church in New Orleans. Ingersoll believed that Protestants were better than Catholics because they had less religion. Within the Protestant fold, he favored the Episcopalians for the same reason, because he thought that they had less religion than other denominations.

19 Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, November 29, 1957.
20 Fifty Famous Selections, pp. 531-34.
21 Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, November 29, 1957.
Whatever the exact nature of Williams' religious beliefs, he cannot have impressed those who knew him as a militant atheist. May Mount wrote of him in 1896, "He is gentle and kind in thought and action, never betraying by look or deed anything other than Christian fellowship for all." Perhaps because his manner was so mild, his espousal of the cause of atheism and his dedication of a play to Ingersoll were overlooked by his readers; nevertheless, "The Atheist" is evidence of both intellectual freedom and moral courage. Williams' choosing to reprint the play in _The Dream of Art_ shows he thought well of it. Indiana humorist George Ade considered Ingersoll "the most openly denounced but secretly admired person in the United States and the idol of all those who were afraid to speak for themselves." Williams was among the distinguished if not numerous group, including Mark Twain and Walt Whitman, who openly admired him.

Literary critics who reviewed _The Dream of Art_ were perhaps at a loss to know what to make of "The

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23_Some Notables of New Orleans_, p. 59.
24_Cramer, op. cit.,_ p. 100.
25_Ibid._
"Therefore most of them ignored it. I know of only one commentator who singles it out for mention, saying: "This volume /The Dream of Art/ was well received, though its character was hardly of the kind to represent the best work of its author, except in the one dramatic poem, 'The Atheist,' and that is too short and unforcible to bring out his full strength." It is only the form and not the ideas which are noticed here. There is perhaps an allusion to "The Atheist" in a review which notes, strangely without comment, that "side by side with the poetic expression of simple faith and the affections of home life, the dark problems of sin and doubt are unveiled to us."

The Dream of Art was reviewed in the New Orleans papers and in the Boston Evening Transcript, where Williams' work had received favorable notice before. The New Orleans reviews express pleasure that some of the poetry of a well-known newspaper poet is now collected in a permanent form. They recommend the

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26 Mount, op. cit., p. 58.
27 New Orleans Times-Democrat, September 25, 1892.
28 Ibid., and New Orleans Item, November 6, 1892.
29 September 3, 1892.
volume both for libraries and "all choice home collections," since it is sure to be a favorite with all "who value purity of tone united with literary excellence." The poem most admired and discussed in the New Orleans reviews is "A Dream of Art," with "Count Camora" and "Ahasuerus" receiving next most attention and praise. One New Orleans review mentions briefly the poem on "Davis," but neither mentions the one on "Grant."

In the Boston reviews, on the other hand, "Davis" and "Grant" receive more attention than any other poems in the volume. The Transcript printed two reviews of Williams' volume on the same day, written by different people. One reviewer apparently knows nothing of Williams' background but makes a shrewd guess:

With the strong bias of his human sympathy, the poet pays his tribute both to Davis and to Grant. These are properly printed on opposite pages. It is altogether likely that the author is a Southerner by birth and in his sympathies. His lines to the leader in secession can be understood upon no other supposition. We quote them as a specimen of the author's verse. [Here "Davis" is quoted in full.] These lines are not above criticism in their form; but on the supposition that their writer is faithful to the memory of the lost cause, the thought and feeling are justified. The sonnet to Grant is equally elevated in sentiment and language.

Both reviews in the Boston paper are unsigned,
but the second seems to be the work of F. H. Leahy, who had liked Parrhasius and had written to Mantell for information about Williams. He begins by reminding his readers that the author of *The Dream of Art* is the same man whose Parrhasius had played in Boston the preceding winter. He devotes most of his space to "Grant" and "Davis," saying,

Mr. Williams being a native of New Orleans has, doubtless inherited some admiration for the Lost Cause; traces of this regard appear in the lines with the caption "Davis," presumably in honor of the dead leader of that cause. On the other hand, Mr. Williams knows how to admire a great man even if not on his side, as witness this sonnet which seems inspired by General Grant's noble refusal to take the horses of the Confederate army at the time of Lee's capitulation. [Here "Grant" is quoted in full.]

All in all, the reviewers dealt as kindly as Williams could have hoped with *The Dream of Art*. The general public seemed to like it too, for a year after its publication a newspaper account noted that "that volume still sells well." And the 1903 edition of *Who's Who in America* notes the republication of the title poem "The Dream of Art" as a three-page pamphlet, indicating, perhaps, that there were still some readers to be found for it.

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30 See above, p. 82.

31 *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, September 15, 1893.
CHAPTER VI

A "NOTABLE OF NEW ORLEANS": 1893-1903

One of the reviews of The Dream of Art describes Williams as "a gentleman of New Orleans, who finds time to court the muses in the midst of a busy mercantile life."\(^1\) His business responsibilities and his business success continued to increase during the 1890's. He was able to provide handsomely for his growing family, building them one and then another brick house, at 921 and later at 1626 Carrollton Avenue. He was active in civic affairs and in his carnival club.\(^2\) The 1896 volume, Some Notables of New Orleans, devoted considerable space to him.

As "the managing official of one of the largest and most successful financial institutions in the city,"\(^3\) he was a familiar figure in downtown New Orleans. An old time resident recalls:

I knew the late Espy W. H. Williams by sight quite well, when he was secretary of a Building and Loan Association, in the old Hennen Building. (Now the Maritime Building) . . . . At that time I was working

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\(^1\)Boston Evening Transcript, September 3, 1892.

\(^2\)Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, January 30 and February 15, 1957.

\(^3\)Mount, op. cit., p. 57.
in a law office in the old Hennen Building and used to see Mr. Williams frequently in the elevator. I knew him at that time as the author of several plays . . . . I always recall that Mr. Espy Williams looked like a modern version of the well known picture of Shakespeare— at least I recall it that way.4

In Some Notables of New Orleans he is described as "a man of medium height, light build, of a cheerful, sanguine disposition, with blue eyes and sandy hair,—what remains of it, for he is somewhat bald,—and with a full auburn beard. His speech is fluent and voice soft, and he is gentle and kind in thought and action . . . ."5

During the 1890's Williams gained a statewide and even a national reputation in financial circles, as pioneer in the building and loan business. The Mutual Building and Loan Association, of which he was president from its founding in 1885 until he retired shortly before his death, was, in 1892, the largest institution of its kind in the South, with over 1000 members and an active capital of $1,706,500.6 When the Louisiana State

4Francis P. Burns to Nolan, April 6, 1957.

5Mount, op. cit., p. 59.

6New Orleans Daily Picayune, September 1, 1892. This was a special issue of the newspaper, devoted to an analysis of business conditions in the city.
Homestead League was organized on May 28, 1891, he was elected President. He still held that position five years later when, on July 23, 1896, he addressed the annual meeting of the United States League of Local Building and Loan Associations in Philadelphia. His subject was "The American Homestead Association, the Safeguard of American Finances." Reporters in Philadelphia noted that "Mr. Williams' paper caused considerable discussion." The Picayune reprinted accounts of the meeting from the Philadelphia papers and reproduced the entire text of Williams' address. It contained a proposal which later was actually put into practice by the national government:

The suggestion of this paper, based on the success of the financial system of the homestead association, is to fund the debt of the United States in a truly popular loan, in bonds of small denominations, which shall be offered exclusively to citizens of the United States. It is a suggestion which, for us may be far in advance of the times, but which may yet become a triumphant realization.

Here as has been noted in some other areas, Williams shows himself to be a man of sound and sometimes original ideas.

7 Ibid.
8 New Orleans Daily Picayune, July 24, 1896.
The years of Williams' greatest business activity were also those during which he was most active in the drama. Between 1893 and 1903 he wrote at least thirteen plays. One of these was published commercially, and seven of them were professionally produced, as was a comic opera for which he wrote the libretto. Five other plays, two undated and three lost, were probably also written during this decade. Unfortunately for Williams' literary reputation, however, his work during these years suffered through his willingness to compromise with the demands of the popular theater. The early promise of Eugene Aram and The Atheist is not fulfilled in the later plays, some of which, ironically enough, had considerable commercial success.

The pattern of these years was foreshadowed by the history of Parrhasius. Beginning in 1893, Mantell toured the country with the three and four-act versions of the play. Though much inferior artistically to the original one-act version, the full-length Parrhasius received very favorable reviews. The San Francisco Examiner said: "A powerful piece of dramatic writing; it is the work of genius." The San Francisco Chronicle called it "The strongest tragic scene in modern work. One of the most important contributions in our dramatic literature of late years." The San Francisco Music and
Drama believed it to be "The strongest tragedy in modern times." Nor was it popular only in the Far West. The Kansas City Journal said of it, "The conception and treatment are magnificent." And the Memphis Appeal declared: "The play is the best work of native origin that has been seen here in a decade." Such extravagant praise of a play notable chiefly for its sensational subject and, as Mantell produced it, really more a spectacle than a drama, reveals the miserable condition of the American theater in the 1890's.

A Statue's Tragedy, published in Fetter's Southern Magazine, Louisville, Kentucky, in May of 1893, takes up once again Williams' perennial theme of the conflict between the artist and the world. Here the conflict is between the high morality of art and the mores of society. In A Statue's Tragedy Raphael has carved a nude statue of Count Villani's wife as Venus. It is a masterpiece of art, but he is forced by the model's husband to destroy it. There has been nothing immoral in the relationship between artist and model, but appearances must be preserved at all costs. It is, of

9 All of these quotations are reprinted inside the front cover of Williams' The Husband (New Orleans: Theo A. Ray, 1898).

10 pp. 304-316.
course, anachronistic to credit Renaissance Italians
with Victorian notions of decency. Read in the context
of late nineteenth century American controversy over
the propriety of the nude in art, the play is, however,
of sociological interest.

A Statue's Tragedy is a one-act play, Williams'
last effort in that form. The one-act play was well
suited to Williams' talents, as The Atheist and the
original version of Parrhasius demonstrate, but it was
a form with no practical theatrical value. It did not
pay to write one-act plays, and Williams had come to
that place in his career when he was most anxious to
write the kind of plays which would find producers. In
his evaluation of the dramatic achievements of William
Dean Howells, Walter J. Meserve comments on the status
of the one-act play:

One could list many reasons why Howells'
plays were not more widely accepted in the
theater. But perhaps most important, he
wrote mainly one-act plays, and as Augustin
Daly told Howells in a letter (January 11,
1893, Harvard Library), "... one act pieces
bring no profit & very little lasting re-
putation to authors, actors or managers." The theater managers wanted full-length

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11 See: Thomas Beer, The Mauve Decade: American
Life at the End of the Nineteenth Century (New York:
Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), pp. 44ff.
plays and exciting, violent, passionate action.\textsuperscript{12}

The particular actor-manager that Williams was eager to please was, at this time Robert Mantell. Mantell was happy with Parrhasius and wanted another play of Williams' to add to his repertoire. Williams undertook to provide it in a play called first 'Twixt Love and Duty, later The Cup of Bitterness,\textsuperscript{13} and finally The Husband.\textsuperscript{14} A romantic treatment of marital intrigue in contemporary society, this play began Williams' movement away from tragedy and the verse drama. The Husband was well designed as a vehicle for Mantell. There were dueling scenes to allow him to exhibit his prowess as a swordsman, and the plot gave him the opportunity to play one of the double roles so dear to actors, in this case a Frenchman disguised during part of the play as a Russian.

According to Williams' own statement in the preface, he took the idea for The Husband from an old play called Retribution, by Tom Taylor (1817-1880), best known

\textsuperscript{12}Introduction to The Complete Plays of W.D. Howells, p. xvi.

\textsuperscript{13}MSS Espy Williams Collection, dated December 5 and 7, 1894.

\textsuperscript{14}Printed, New Orleans: Theo. A. Ray, 1893.
as the author of Our American Cousin. He follows Taylor's play only in its major outlines, making of The Husband a new play rather than merely a revision. The characters and situations in The Husband are all stock, but the action is fast-moving and the play has the virtue of an unusual beginning: in the first act a seduced woman is abandoned by her seducer and commits suicide just before her husband arrives and discovers her shame. Thus a very ordinary ending for a play becomes the beginning in this case, the last three acts concerning themselves with the wronged husband's attempts to identify his wife's seducer and seduce his wife in return.

For the first time in The Husband Williams deals with unconventional sexual situations and indulges in risqué allusions, for example, when he has an elderly gentleman complain that his young wife is "telling upon his constitution." Perhaps he believed that in France people behaved and talked that way. Perhaps he was working under instructions from Mantell to put a little spice into the play. Mantell had certainly had enough experience in the theater to know that proper people would tolerate an amazing amount of suggestive action and language in a play with a foreign setting, especially
a French one.  

The Husband was produced by Mantell beginning in 1895.  Evidently he did not purchase the permanent stage rights, however, for in 1898 Williams had the play copyrighted and printed, and the printed copy bears the routine notice that the author must be paid royalties on all public performances, amateur or professional.

In the back of the printed copy of The Husband, Williams offers for sale the stage rights to several of his old plays: Dante, The Last Witch, and Eugene Aram. In addition, he describes and advertises three other plays: A Social Rebel, The Love Chase, and A Cavalier of France.

Williams' description of A Social Rebel here is the only trace that remains of the play. It was never copyrighted or published, at least under that name, and the description does not fit exactly any of his extant plays. He advertises it as "A society drama in four acts. A new and original problem play, with a novel and startling plot, and a strong and healthy moral.

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15 The same double standard was applied to American and French novels as Beer points out, op. cit., pp. 50-52.

16 Who's Who in America, 1897-1942, p. 1351.

17 DCEUS, I: 1023.
A play which wives will welcome and take their husbands to see." Perhaps we need not be too disturbed about the loss of *A Social Rebel*.18

*The Love Chase* is not really an original play. It is rather an adaptation of an old play by James Sheridan Knowles (1784-1862) and was so described on the application for copyright in 1897.19 There is no record of its publication or production. The manuscript in the Espy Williams Collection consists of a copy of Knowles' play with Williams' deletions, additions, and other revisions marked on it. Set in the England of Charles II, *The Love Chase*, as its name implies, is a romantic comedy of love and intrigue. Though not so popular as his poetic tragedies *Virginius* and *The Hunchback*, Knowles' *The Love Chase* had often been presented in New Orleans in the past, but not since 1873.20 In casting about for materials, it was logical enough that Williams should have undertaken to modernize and revive it.

18 We have just the names, without descriptions, of two other lost plays of this period: *Fortune's Fool*, mentioned on the title page of the printed scenario of *A Fool and His Money* (1899); and *The Silent Witness*, mentioned on the title page of the manuscript of *John Wentworth's Wife* (n.d.).

19 *DCCUS*, I: 1321.

A Cavalier of France, the third of the new plays advertised in The Husband, was Williams' most successful since Parrhasius. He finished writing it on October 23, 1896,\(^1\) and on February 13, 1897, copyrighted it as "A Cavalier of France; or, An intrigue in the days of Henri Trois, a romantic drama in 5 acts."\(^2\) He revised the play slightly for Mantell, who produced it in 1896 with a different title—perhaps chosen for its suggestive connotations—The Queen's Garter. The following year, 1897, Louis James produced the play under the original title.\(^3\)

Like Parrhasius, A Cavalier of France achieved a popular success hard to understand except against the background of conditions in the American theater during the period Arthur Hobson Quinn has labelled "The Indian Summer of Romance." He says: "While the general tendency toward the treatment of actual American life upon the stage was being established, the heroic play . . . was not by any means neglected . . . . The heroic or romantic play usually depended upon the interest of an actor to whom the character of a hero, defying fate or

\(^1\)Dated MS in Espy Williams Collection.

\(^2\)DCCUS, I, 307.

\(^3\)Who's Who in America, 1897-1942, p. 1351.
enemies, strongly appealed .... These actors turned frequently to Shakespeare or to other English and even to continental drama, but their biographies reveal their constant search for American playwrights who could furnish them with material."\textsuperscript{24} It is in this tradition that Mantell had bought \textit{Parrhasius}, that Barrett had commissioned \textit{Dante}, and that Louis James played \textit{A Cavalier of France}.

\textit{A Cavalier of France} is the only one of Williams' plays to be listed in the \textit{Best Plays} series.\textsuperscript{25} It is also his only play to have a New York production. After an opening in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, followed by a week in Kansas City,\textsuperscript{26} Louis James opened in \textit{A Cavalier of France} on April 4, 1898, at the Metropolis Theater in New York for a week's engagement and then went on the road with the same company.\textsuperscript{27} The play received many favorable reviews in the West and South: the Butte \textit{Miner} predicted it would "surely take high rank in the

\textsuperscript{24} Arthur Hobson Quinn, \textit{A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day}, I, 200.


\textsuperscript{26} Advertising Brochure in Espy Williams Collection.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Best Plays of 1894-99}, p. 226.
contemporaneous drama," the Portland Oregonian said its characters were "drawn by a masterhand," the Kansas City Journal called it "a play of sterling quality," and the Kansas City Star declared that each act was even better than the last, until by the end the audience was frantic with joy. The San Francisco Chronicle, however, threw a little more light on the true quality of A Cavalier of France in the dry comment that it "about exhausts the possibilities of dramatic intrigue . . . . Mr. Williams has done his work very ingeniously." 28

And in cities even more sophisticated than San Francisco, the critics were correspondingly cooler. The New York Dramatic Mirror remarked that "the vogue of plays of this character has been short, and A Cavalier of France, therefore, probably will not long be included in Mr. James' repertoire." 29 But there was even fainter praise, for in Boston, the coolest place of them all, a reviewer said: "A Cavalier of France' has been performed during Mr. James's present season in the West and the South and probably been received rapturously. Here it is different. . . . It is a play, in short, to be tolerated, but not to be encouraged." 30

28 Reviews quoted in advertising brochure.
29 April 16, 1898.
30 Clipping from unidentified Boston newspaper.
The fact is that Williams obviously wrote it specifically to satisfy the enormous popular demand for romantic drama. The very qualities which the Boston and New York critics objected to probably account for the success of *A Cavalier of France* in the provinces. Ther hero, ardent lover and dashing fighter Rene de Froisac, is an old Dumas character, described in the play as "the best sword in France." (Compare "the fastest gun in Tombstone.") He has lines like: "Stand back, ruffians!" and "Lass, you owe me no thanks! Are you not a woman?" There are five intricately interwoven plots, full of the "exciting, violent, passionate action" which Augustin Daly recommended to Howells. 31

A Boston reviewer remarked sarcastically:

In "A Cavalier of France" are all the concomitants of the story that the youth sits up in bed all night to devour greedily. There are sword conflicts, hideous poison and a heroine escaping from confinement by the aid of a tattered sheet; there is intrigue, love scorned, love triumphant and love rewarded; there is the wicked queen, the wicked queen’s wicked mother, the fickle cowardly king, the modest, drooping heroine, and last, but generally in the stage centre, Mr. James, the cavalier personified, Ruy Blas, D’Artagnan and Romeo rolled in one, a triple characterization in one suit of doublet and hose. 32

31 See above pp. 120-121.

32 Clipping from unidentified Boston newspaper.
But to the average playgoer on the repertory circuit, this indictment would probably have sounded like an advertisement for the play. Louis James knew what the people would pay to see, and A Cavalier of France remained a part of his repertoire for years. How much the success of such a play—or any play for that matter—depends upon factors other than the playwright's lines is always a matter for conjecture, and Williams must have read with mixed emotions the report of a Kansas City newspaper that during most of the last two acts "the applause . . . overthrew all possibility of hearing what was said upon the stage. They only cared for what was done."  

A Cavalier of France was by no means Williams' only excursion into romantic drama. Quinn remarks that "The work of industrious playwrights . . . who arranged for the stage the most popular of the romantic historical novels that swarmed during the close of the Nineteenth and the beginning of the Twentieth Centuries needs no analysis."  

Williams was one of these industrious adapters, and indeed most of the results of his industry can be dismissed with only the most cursory notice.

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33Review in Kansas City Star, quoted in advertising brochure.

On April 29, 1897, Williams copyrighted "The Man in Black; a romantic drama in 4 acts, founded upon Stanley J. Weyman's famous novel of the same name." According to a notice inserted in his manuscript copy of the play, Williams had entered into a contract with Weyman (1855-1928), the author of a number of pseudo-historical romances, for all American dramatic rights to The Man in Black. It was produced in 1897 with Walker Whiteside in the starring role, as Chevalier Raoul de Renaux, a soldier of fortune in the service of Cardinal Richelieu, who suffers amnesia and a complete change of personality from a knock on the head in act I but is luckily restored to himself by another blow in the last act.

The Duke's Jester, copyrighted March 16, 1900, was also known as The Court Jester, The King and the Fool, The Fool's Comedy, and Chicot the Jester. These titles appear on various manuscripts of the play, which show Williams revisions in several stages. He began by taking a minor character, the court jester, from Alexander Dumas' novel La Dame de Monsereau and writing a love story around him. In subsequent revisions he

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35 DGCUS, I: 1391.
36 Program in Espy Williams Collection.
changed the setting from the court of Henry III of France to that of the Duke of Milan in the 1460's. He finally got so far from Dumas that he was justified in copyrighting the play as "an original romantic comedy." 37

Frederick Warde produced The Duke's Jester during the 1900-1901 season, and the following year Clarence Brune took the play to England, planning a production of it there. 38

Still another play based on a romantic historical novel is The Scarlet Camelia, described on the title page by Williams as "an emotional play in four acts, suggested by Ouida's 39 Strathmore." The Scarlet Camelia was never produced or printed, and Williams manuscript of it is not dated, but we can date it approximately by the scenario, which he completed on July 10, 1902. The play follows the novel closely—capturing all the vulgar qualities which made Ouida's novels so popular. Ouida's notions of life and love among the international set were bizarre enough, but they captured the imagination of her readers so com-

37 DCCUS, I: 576.
38 New Orleans Item, June 21, 1902.
39 The pen name of Maria Louisa de la Ramée (1839-1908).
pletely that in the 1870's she earned £5000 a year by her pen. In an effort to explain her popularity, Yvonne ffrench suggests that "Those who knew what High Life was really like wanted to be amused; while those who did not know it believed the descriptions to be true pictures of the daily existence of grandees."\(^4^0\) By the time Williams turned to Ouida for dramatic material, her great popularity had faded and her name was no longer enough to insure a buyer for his undistinguished play.

The Emperor's Double, a romantic drama begun in 1901, is not based upon any novel. The setting is Dresden, 1793. The plot turns on an unusual physical resemblance between Baron Holdstein of Prussia and the Emperor Napoleon. Only the prologue and the first two acts are extant, but we know that Williams completed the play and sold it to Clarence Brune for production in England. The following letter casts some interesting light on certain aspects of the Anglo-American theater at the turn of the century:

Sept 24 1903

My dear Mr. Williams

I wrote you last night in re "Emperor's

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Double" and tonight I receive yours of 13th inst about it. Your proposition is satisfactory enough except the first clause as to territory—you know my only object in producing any play in England particularly with myself on the bill is the good it will do me in the states later—you don't imagine I am in The Fatal Wedding for the good it does me in London. Although it gives me a standing here the great benefit is the advertising I get in states out of it—and as I shall undoubtedly return to the states next year or year after I would not produce any piece of which I did not have the American rights. Without the American rights I wouldn't take the risk on the production here of any play if I were given the English rights for nothing free of royalty.

I do not agree with you about making Cromwell, Washington, or Sheridan the leading part . . . . I had in mind the substitution of the Duke of Wellington for Napoleon—Nelson has been done here by Forbes Robertson but I believe Wellington has not though I am not absolutely positive.

The only one you mention that I think might do at all would be Cromwell but that is a rather hazy period in the average British mind. They would not accept Washington and would not know what you were talking of if you used Sheridan—you are accustomed to the bright American mind but if you were here a short time you would see that the English brain must be handled in an entirely different way and I should rather take chances on Napoleon and the German Baron than have you attempt to recast it giving it an English atmosphere. I know you will not take this statement particularly to yourself for I would be fearful of any author who has not had the opportunity of experimenting with English audiences—Take my word for it they're a queer lot. I don't believe a great majority of them think at all or if they do it's a half hour behind time—I had to change line after line and situation after situation in "The Fatal Wedding." If they'd gotten it
as it was done in America it would have been all over before they knew what was going on . . . . I simply mention these things to let you know some of the difficulties one gets up against . . . .

With best wishes I am
Yours,
/S/ Brune

Evidently the difficulties were worked out satisfactorily, for Brune produced *The Emperor’s Double* in England in 1903.41 Despite his protestations, there is no record of an American performance.

Two of Williams’ romantic plays, *The Wirecutters* and *The Clairvoyant*, are of special interest because of their American settings. Romances of American life were packing the theaters. Particularly popular were western dramas, such as Augustus Daly’s *Horizon*, Joaquin Miller’s *The Danites*, Augustus Thomas’ *Arizona*, and David Belasco’s *The Girl of the Golden West*. Perhaps because he hoped to take advantage of the interest in romances of the West, Williams entered into an agreement with New Orleans novelist Mollie E. Moore Davis to dramatize her novel *The Wirecutters*.

*The Wirecutters* is a local color play. It begins on a plantation near Richmond, Virginia, before the Civil War but takes place mostly in the little town

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of Crouch's Settlement, Texas, in 1883. Although he usually left the interpretation of dialect up to the actors, Williams attempted to write dialect speeches for some of the characters in this play. The Virginia Negroes are stereotypes of the "bfo' de wah" darky, both in their speech and the attitudes they express. For example, an old slave says: "Dees here boots aint gwine take no time! 'Sides, I aint fear'd Marse Roy's gwine make any bodderation wif me, wat rized him from a wee baby, 'specially on dis here day wen he's gwine off to de war, and mightn't nebber cum back agin, 'cept wif a Yankee bullet frew his heart." The Texans are somewhat better done. There is a real effort to suggest the quality of their lives and culture through the use of folk language and folklore. Authentic folk expressions are included, such as "to hear his bulldog bark" for "to hear the sound of his gun." Authentic folk customs like the square dance are worked into the play for local color effect. And authentic folk beliefs--such as the one that a drowned man's body will rise to the surface if someone who loved him throws something into the water--are effectively used in the play. Williams indicates many regional pronunciations by spelling, for example, "debate" and "settle-mint."
Williams completed The Wirecutters in 1900, but before he could copyright it, a pirated dramatization of the novel appeared in New York under the title Hearts of Gold and was a considerable success. Mrs. Davis and Williams brought suit and collected damages, but the pirated play appeared all around the country—even in New Orleans—and Williams' was never produced.\(^2\)

It apparently exists only in two manuscript copies—one in the Espy Williams Collection and the other, with an alternate title, A Virginian in Texas, in the possession of Mrs. Davis' granddaughter, Evelyn Jahncke.\(^3\)

The Clairvoyant, or A Living Lie Williams' other American romance, is set in New Orleans in 1856-57, except for the first act, which takes place in Paris. It is a drama of mixed blood. The title character is a beautiful young girl who mistakenly believes that she has a trace of Negro blood. The Clairvoyant, though it has no direct literary source, is in the tradition of miscegenation plays like Dion Boucicault's The

\(^2\)Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, February 15, 1957, and unidentified newspaper clipping attached to MS of The Wirecutters.

\(^3\)Evelyn Jahncke to Nolan, December 27, 1956.
Octoroon and Bartley Campbell's The White Slave. The pageantry of New Orleans Mardi Gras was undoubtedly part of the inspiration for Williams' play. Act II takes place during the parade of the Krewe of Comus, providing an opportunity for exotic costumes and sets. Perhaps Williams was moved to write a drama of New Orleans partly by the example of his acquaintance George Washington Cable, who had so successfully captured the speech and manners of the Creoles in his novels. It is interesting to note that though Cable's dramatic readings from his novels were very well received, dramatizations of his novels never made very successful plays. Part of the difficulty was doubtless in finding actors able to deal with the subtleties of Cable's Creole dialect. Though Williams' play never found a producer, this would not have been much of a problem in his case, for the dialect of his Creole characters is not very subtly handled. They speak a comical kind of broken English, more impressionistic than realistic. For example, Gustave Bonfois describes the clairvoyant: "She is the grand wonder! She is not one of the picayune Fortune Teller, non! She charge high,—ten dollar!"

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But—the thing what she discover you, mon Dieu! She know everything! She tell me about myself, yes! I would be fear to tell it, what she betray me to me myself,—because it is true, yes! And me,—I did not think that any one her could find me out!"

About the turn of the century Williams made three experiments outside the romantic drama: A Fool and His Money, Ollamus, and John Wentworth's Wife. The less said about A Fool and His Money, the better. It is a farce comedy or "comic-tragedy," as Williams describes it on the title page of the manuscript. It is a mistaken identity story, full of frantic action. College boys and girls in the cast supply a background of wisecracks and antiquated slang. Williams copyrighted the scenario for A Fool and His Money in 1900 and distributed it in pamphlet form for advertising purposes, but the play itself was never copyrighted, published, or produced.

Ollamus, or A Royal Joke, is a comic opera for

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45 Brochure in Espy Williams Collection.
which Williams wrote the libretto and Louis J. Blake of New Orleans, whose other operas include The Khedive and Striped Petticoats, wrote the music. The plot of the work turns on the visit of a group of travelers to a mythical kingdom, Utopiana in the original version, Mars in the revision. The Americans in the group undertake to force upon the happy little kingdom an American form of democracy. The satire is carried further by making one of the Americans a suffragette type who runs for president and makes herself generally ridiculous. Except for the satire on American expansionist tendencies and the feminist movement, most of the humor depends on dialect characters: a Tammany Irishman, a Negro who steals chickens and misuses big words, a Latin American who speaks broken English. Ollamus, published and copyrighted by Williams and Blake in 1894, was presented the week of May 14 the same year at the St. Charles Theater in New Orleans. The performance was sponsored by the Audubon Park Commission. Then, in 1901, the revised opera, entitled A Royal Joke, was presented for

46Mish A. Blake, the composer's son, to Warren C. Ogden, ed. Dixie Roto Magazine, April 10, 1957. See also Harlequin (New Orleans), August 15, 1901.

47Program in Espy Williams Collection.
the week of August 18, at Athletic Park, by the Metropolitan English Opera Company of New Orleans.\textsuperscript{48} Performances were enthusiastically received,\textsuperscript{49} perhaps in part because the cast included "Forty beautiful Amazon maidens in marches, dances, etc." Williams and Blake apparently had the good sense to look upon their opera as fun rather than great art, to judge by their own description of the work: "The libretto is full of dash, action and fun, while the music is light, catchy and rollicking,—in fact the entire opera was written with the express intention of pleasing everybody, and making money."\textsuperscript{50}

\textbf{John Wentworth's Wife}, also known as \textit{A Domestic Affair} and \textit{The Marriage Contract}, apparently pleased no one and made no money. It is Williams' one experiment in the serious drama of social problems. He calls it "a modern play," on the title page, indicating his awareness of the general tendency toward the realistic treatment of actual American life on the American stage.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{49}New Orleans \textit{Times-Democrat, Daily Picayune}, and other New Orleans newspapers, August 18, 1901.
\item \textsuperscript{50}Printed synopsis of \textit{Ollamus}, copyrighted by Williams and Blake, 1893, in Espy Williams Collection.
\end{itemize}
In its straightforward treatment of an "unmentionable" subject and particularly in the delineation of the principal character, Hilda Wentworth, this play owes something to the example of Ibsen and Shaw.

Williams had got many a laugh--in The Husband and Ollamus, for example--by poking fun at "emancipated" women, but in Hilda Wentworth he presents the best and most admirable aspects of female emancipation. She is an intelligent, honest, enlightened, straightforward woman who refuses to behave in a conventional manner when, as a bride of one year, she learns of her husband's infidelity. Propriety demands that she pretend not to know, or demand a divorce, or be broken-hearted and bring him to his knees in remorse. Instead, she faces his conduct unflinchingly and, though he is shocked, accusing her of a lack of self-respect, she finds the girl he has seduced and abandoned and assists her. Worried about what people will say, he forbids her to associate with a fallen woman, but she refuses to obey him, saying that the marriage contract has not absolved her from the responsibility of doing what she believes is right. There are no heroics on her part. She does not reproach her husband but only tells him that when she agreed to a marriage "for better or for worse" she meant it literally, and she had never supposed him to
be without faults. She is as strong as her husband is weak. Her virtues are neither fugitive nor cloistered but are based firmly on knowledge, understanding, and love. The play is undated, but it must belong to Williams' most mature period. Though it was never copyrighted, published, or produced, it is one of his most thoughtful plays.

One might wish that Williams had concentrated his last efforts at playwrighting on the serious drama of social problems, but the actors and managers with whom he had connections wanted another kind of play from him; therefore, as his last major undertaking, he wrote *Unorna*, a four-act melodrama based on F. Marion Crawford's romantic novel *The Witch of Prague*. The history of *Unorna* is an example of the star system at its worst and of the triumph of sensationalism and spectacle over all other aspects of the drama.

Crawford's *The Witch of Prague*, 1890, is one of his better novels. It is readable, entertaining romantic escape fiction of the lightest sort. Its theme is the ever-fascinating one of hypnotism. Unorna, called a witch by the people of Prague because her hypnotic powers are thought to be of the devil, falls in love with a man who does not return her love. She endeavors to cause him to love her through hypnotic suggestion, but the results are disappointing, so she helps him find his own lost love and then obligingly dies.
Williams dramatized *The Witch of Prague* specifically as a starring vehicle for Minnie Tittle Brune, whose husband, Clarence Brune, intended to make her an overnight sensation with the role. The play was widely publicized beginning months before it opened. Brune distributed, for example, an advertising brochure, printed in three colors, bearing Mrs. Brune's picture in nine different seductive poses, and announcing "The American Bernhardt as Unorna." The language of the brochure is extravagant to the point of being ludicrous. It begins: "When Mrs. Brune dawned upon the theatrical horizon, a constillation\textsuperscript{sic} of rarest worth was discovered, for she has not only justified all the eulogistic predictions made, but has manifested by meritorious effort that she is the possessor of talent, temperament and mentality, this coupled with youth and beauty . . . ." The pamphlet ends by assuring the public that "The scenic investiture is upon a scale of regal magnificence." The settings for the first three acts are "marvels of the stage mechanics' skill and the scenic artists' art, . . . gems of interior construction, decoration and color." But the most magnificent of all is the last act, which
is "the interior of the famous Cathedral at Prague. This is an exact duplicate of this wonderful edifice and is a marvellous structure." We have here a foreshadowing of Hollywood publicity: the glamor queen, the pyramids of Egypt exactly reproduced for this extravaganza, the complete subordination of the drama to spectacular effects and to the personality of the star. The Brunes consulted with Williams and suggested revisions in his work to assure that the play would do just what they wanted it to do for Mrs. Brune. We can only guess what their emendations were, but the "cobra dance" Unorna performs in the first act, is perhaps an example of the kind of scene, completely non-functional in the development of plot or the presentation of character, which they may have asked him to add.

Unorna opened on September 22, 1902, in both the United States and England. The American opening was held in Norfolk, Virginia, and an English copyright performance was held the same day and hour at the Royal Princess's Theater in London. Despite the wretchedness

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51 New Orleans Item, June 21, 1902.

52 Virginia Pilot (Norfolk), September 22, 1902.
of the play, it was enthusiastically received by audiences and newspaper reviewers, though some of them were obviously impressed most by non-literary qualities of the production. "The properties are costly and handsome," said the Columbia (S. C.) State. "In one act is displayed a magnificent tiger rug, being the coat of a genuine Indian Bengal."\(^{53}\)

So many reviewers failed to give Williams credit for the dramatization, attributing it rather to Crawford, that Crawford felt obliged to write to Williams from Italy, saying: "I have seen a curious note in the Dramatic Mirror to the effect that Mrs. Brune had spent most of the summer with me in order to complete the play. As I am sure this could not have come from any statement of hers, I shall not take the trouble to contradict it. I wish it had been in my power to be of more use as a collaborator, but I have been more overworked than ever this year, and after all I am very glad that you should get the sole credit for what is altogether yours." In the last part of the letter Crawford says that he hopes to visit the United States

\(^{53}\)October 1, 1902.
soon and will try to see the play while he is there. If he did, he must have been doubly glad to give Williams all the credit for it, since Unorna is not only inferior as literature but also contradicts some of Crawford's most cherished prejudices. Crawford was intensely Catholic. Like Browning's bishop, he loved "Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke" and put a great deal of it into The Witch of Prague, large sections of which are set in a convent and in a cathedral. He was furthermore strongly anti-Semitic in his views. The Jews in his novel are dirty, greasy, immoral, money-loving, and generally loathsome. Williams' treatment of the novel practically reverses these prejudices. He makes a good deal of fun of the un-Christian behavior of Catholics, particularly nuns and the clergy, toward Unorna. His Catholic characters seem superstitious, intolerant, and cruel.\(^5\) It is the saintly members of Prague's Jewish community whom he admires.

Whether or not the Brunes were responsible for Crawford's getting the credit for Williams' play,

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\(^5\)Williams' anti-Catholic sentiments have been noted before as in The Atheist.
Williams went on the road with them during the first month of Unorna's production in the Southeast, revising and improving it, getting it ready for New York.\(^5\) Sometime in October, Wallace Munro, Mrs. Brune's stage manager, went to New York to arrange the opening there.\(^6\) But the play never got that far. In November, Mrs. Brune was taken ill with typhoid fever. The company tried to continue with another actress in the starring role, but the great publicity campaign which had made Unorna merely a vehicle for Mrs. Brune now backfired and made the play valueless without her. It closed November 27, 1902.\(^7\)

\(^5\) Richmond News, September 24, 1902.  
\(^6\) New Orleans Times-Democrat, October 27, 1902.  
\(^7\) Memphis News, November 28, 1902.
CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSION

After the fiasco of Unorne, Williams seems to have practically given up as a playwright. He completed a project already undertaken, revised a couple of old plays, and wrote a comic skit for a club he belonged to. In the last few months before his death he did undertake one last serious play, but he completed only the first draft before his death. The creative output of his last five years was, in short, extremely slight. The work which gives interest and significance to this period is his unpublished essays on the drama. Looking back over his own career, and considering the history and condition of the American stage, he made some observations worth noticing.

Some brief attention should be given to the minor theatrical projects he undertook during the last years of his life. The revision of The Emperor's Double already discussed was completed in time for Brune's 1903 production in England.¹ Sometime before the end of

¹See above, pp. 132-134.
1905, Williams worked over his old manuscript of *Don Carlos* but never did anything with the revision.\(^2\) He also "amended, reconstructed, and modified\(^3\) one of F. Marion Crawford's historical plays, *Madame de Maintenon*, but the revision was never produced. The leading role, that of a plain, sententious, middle-aged woman, would attract few actresses.

During late 1907 Williams worked with his friend Isadore Dyer on a comic skit entitled *Merlin's Last Quest*, which was presented on January 23, 1908, at the decennial celebration of the Round Table Club, of which he was a member.\(^4\) The play is without dramatic or literary merit, being designed primarily as a framework for "stunts" to be performed by various club members, but it is of some biographical interest. Because it was written to be performed privately, by and for his friends, and perhaps because he was a dying man, Williams expressed freely many of his personal opinions and prejudices in this play. Consider, for example, the following ill-tempered lines:

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\(^2\)The revised MS in the Espy Williams Collection is dated November, 1905.

\(^3\)On title page of MS in the Espy Williams Collection, dated March 17, 1903.

\(^4\)Program in Espy Williams Collection.
And that one yonder with the blinky eye—
He's the Professor--bosses in the schools
Where learning stumbles over dunces' stools,
Where fools put down their dollars to be fools,
Where isms, ologies and theories rant
And hold forth dress parade in quibbling cant,
And embryonic men and women strive
To think they think and on conceit still thrive.

Perhaps this is just conventional satire on schools,
but there is a tone of sour sincerity here. The boy,
eager for learning, deeply disappointed at not being
able to complete his formal education, has followed a
familiar pattern by becoming a successful, self-made,
middle-aged man who looks upon schools and professors
as a lot of pernicious humbug.

Fortunately not all of Williams' thinking dur-
ing his last years was colored by prejudice and bad
temper. His essays on the drama contain some of his
best ideas and can be taken as serious statements of
his views, as the plays cannot always be. There are
four essays: "The Building of a Play," "The Literary
Quality of the Modern Drama," "The Union of the Church
and Stage," and "The Shakespeare Myth." The second and

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5 The essays, which exist only in manuscript form,
are undated, I place them during the last years of
Williams' life from internal evidence, for example, a
reference to Ibsen's death (1906) in "The Literary
Quality of the Modern Drama."
and third of these were somewhat revised and combined to make a lecture, entitled "The Modern Drama: Its Literary and Moral Value." The first one may also have been delivered as a lecture. One of his biographers remarks that he was considered "an authority on literary subjects" and "as a lecturer . . . he was in large demand" in New Orleans. The last named of the essays may have been prepared as a book review. The form in which Williams left these papers, carefully typed out in uniform fashion and arranged together, suggests that he may have been toying with the idea of publishing them as a small volume, perhaps planning to pay some local printer to publish them in pamphlet form as he had done with many of his plays.

"The Building of a Play" deals with the mechanical aspects of the playwright's art. Williams points out that a dramatist must have more than the literary abilities of a poet or novelist. His imagination, his powers of observation and perception, his skill with logic and with words—all will go for nothing unless he has also the imagination of a painter who can compose a successful living picture, of an architect who can design his scene with historical and scientific exactness,

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6 New Orleans Daily Picayune, August 29, 1908.
and of a mechanic who can plan and direct the movements of the action. If the playwright has these skills, "then the literary work in his play becomes of value; if not . . . it is but wasted labor, no matter how good its literary qualities." He goes on to describe step by step the laborious and technical process of "building" a play, from the writing of the scenario to the timing of the dress rehearsal. He notes the importance of getting actors on and off the stage skillfully, of making every line count for the development of plot and character, and of ending each act with a dramatic climax which will give the movement of the play sufficient momentum to carry the attention of the audience over the break between acts. This essay reveals very clearly just how much to heart Williams had taken Lawrence Barrett's suggestion more than thirty years before that he study stagecraft and dramatic technique. His early notion that idealistic sentiments and poetic language made a good play had yielded through the years of theatrical experience to an admiration for the pièce bien faite.

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7See above, p. 63.
The essay called "The Literary Quality of the Modern Drama" shows that Williams could appreciate good drama far beyond his ability to create it. Here he disposes of the popular opinion that the modern drama has produced no masterpieces to rank with those of the past, "no works of such intrinsic and lasting value as those of Goldsmith, Sheridan and Bulwer-Lytton,—to leave Shakespeare and his contemporaries out of the question as being above comparison;—no plays which are at once good acting plays and good literature." Such arrangements of the modern drama, he says, are made by critics who are not looking for real excellence but rather for imitations of the great works of the past. The true test of a great play, he maintains, is not its likeness in thought or expression to the standard works of the best but whether it holds the mirror up to nature, whether it is true to the vision of life in the imagination of the artist. As each age is different, so the great art of each age must be different. Shakespeare knew this and achieved greatness in his dramas. Jonson missed greatness by "modelling his style on an arbitrary standard of excellence built upon the classics of Greece and Rome."
In the last part of the essay, Williams names and comments on some modern dramatists who, he believes, have written plays which combine success on the stage with real literary excellence. His choices reveal a cosmopolitan acquaintance with the drama and stand the test of time rather well. He places Ibsen first among the dramatist of his age, saying of him: "While his work is narrow in range, sombre to a fault and utterly deficient in the light and shadow effect which comedy always throws upon the dramatist's canvas,—he is, nevertheless, full of literary quality, and his plays interest both on the stage and in the reading, because of that truth to nature which permeates every line."

Other dramatists he singles out for praise are Sardou and Rostand in France, Sudermann and Hauptmann in Germany, D'Annunzio in Italy, Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, and Barrie in England, and in America, Bronson Howard, Clyde Fitch, and Augustus Thomas.

He emphasizes his opinion that "fine writing" does not make a fine play, and the poetic drama is not necessarily better from the point of view of literature than the prose drama. His theory of the drama demanded that a play be produced. He believed, in other words, that closet drama was not really drama at all. A play
had no real existence outside the performance any more than a musical score did. This attitude throws some softening light on his own eagerness to write the sort of thing which could find a producer.

Perhaps the most interesting and most original of the essays is "The Union of the Church and Stage." In this work Williams deplores the antagonism which exists between the church and the stage. He believes the conflict to be harmful in two ways: first, it brings an unjust stigma of immorality upon the stage and upon actors. "That this condition," he says, "is one which is wholly unnecessary as the outcome of the simple representation upon the stage of incidents drawn from life, no one will question, for if the stage is to hold the mirror up to nature, not only will its reflection present good—but evil." The second unfortunate result of the conflict is that the official forces for good lose an important opportunity to reach and influence masses of people who never go to church.

He notes that this dichotomy between church and stage did not always exist. The best of the miracle plays combined secular entertainment with religious instruction and inspiration. And before medieval times the union between the church and the stage was even
closer. "It is to the Church alone that both the drama and the stage owe their existence. Incredible as it may seem to those who are ignorant of the fact, the Church was the first theatre,--the altar the first stage,--the priests the first actors,--and the Mass the first play."

Clearly Williams, as an anti-Catholic and an admirer of Ingersoll, does not advocate a return to the conditions of medieval life and art. He believes, however, that a close cooperation between organized religion and the stage is both possible and desirable in modern life. As a practical beginning, he suggests that priests and ministers try attending the theater in order to find out what really goes on there. Then, by judicious praise and encouragement of the best that is offered, rather than the present blanket condemnation, they could exercise tremendous influence: "The victory of the good over the bad, the lifting of the moral plane of the audience into a higher and purer atmosphere, and the gradual development of a better and purer standard of patronage of the drama."

Williams' views on the drama are a great deal like those of Ingersoll, who called the theater "the home of the ideal" and believed the drama could perform
an important moral function. He did not mean that plays should be openly didactic, only that they should be true to the realities of good and evil in human life. The most important function of the drama, he said, was "to civilize mankind and to soften the human heart." Every great dramatist was a believer in the nobility of human nature and every great play, therefore, had an ennobling effect on the audience. He advocated keeping children home from Sunday school and taking them to the theater instead, where they could see the imaginative creations of genius, the beauties of logic, sequence, and proportion, and the dramatic lessons of life.

It is clear from these three essays that Williams' ideal theater was like the one Francis Fergusson discusses in *The Idea of a Theater*, a theater like that of the Greeks or the Elizabethans, a theater which understood a play not as literature but as performance, as the imitation of life in the form of action, a theater focused squarely in the center of the culture of its time, in the center of its moral and emotional awareness. Such a theater did not exist in Williams' time.

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8 *Letters*, pp. 422-424 and *Fifty Great Selections*, p. 373.
It does not exist in our own. In Fergusson's words, "We do not have such a theater, nor do we see how to get it. But we need the 'Idea of a Theater,' both to understand the masterpieces of drama at its best, and to get our bearings in our own time." 9

The last essay, "The Shakespear Myth," is only of passing interest. It discusses the possibility that Marlowe is the real author of the plays attributed to Shakespeare. This hypothesis was suggested to Williams by Wilbur Gleason Zeigler's novel _It Was Marlowe: A Story of the Secret of Three Centuries_, a romance in which Marlowe, supposedly dead, is really living under cover to escape prosecution for a number of crimes, including atheism and murder. He writes plays in hiding and smuggles them out to his friend Shakespeare, who kindly passes them off as his own and dies without revealing Marlowe's secret.

Williams grants for the purposes of argument the possibility that someone other than Shakespeare wrote the plays attributed to him and then proceeds to


10 Chicago: Donahue, Henneberry and Company, 1895.
weigh the pros and cons of Zeigler's hypothesis. He comes to the tentative conclusion that it is "plausible, though not wholly satisfactory," given the mysterious circumstances surrounding Marlowe's supposed death, the early promise of his plays, and the resemblances between some of his work and that attributed to Shakespeare. Williams concludes by saying "While much in the arguments of the novelist has impressed me, I cannot claim to be enough of a Shakespearean student or critic to be able to go into the detailed analysis which perhaps is needed to properly form a satisfying judgment." This is certainly cautious enough, and, in fairness to Williams, it should also be noted that we are able to reject summarily the Marlowe hypothesis chiefly on the basis of evidence unearthed by Leslie Hotson nearly twenty years after Williams' death.\footnote{Leslie Hotson, \textit{The Death of Christopher Marlowe} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1925).}

Whatever his reservations concerning its historical truth, the idea of \textit{It Was Marlowe} obviously appealed strongly to Williams' imagination and seemed to him to have dramatic truth at least, for he made it the theme of his last play, \textit{The Buried Name}. The title perhaps had some autobiographical significance for Williams.
His literary career was over. Though moderately successful, he had not achieved the great things he had dreamed of in his youth. Doubtless he realized that his name would be "buried" and his work forgotten before long. He may have hoped by this last effort to secure some degree of permanence for his reputation.

Williams was fatally ill when he began *The Buried Name*. Incapacitated by a spinal ailment, he had been unable to go back and forth to his office since 1906.\(^\text{12}\)

By the time he finished the play he was near death. His daughter, looking back almost fifty years, writes that a re-reading of the play "recalls so vividly my father's long and painful illness, his courageous effort to divert his mind in writing this last work, an old fashioned lap board across his armchair, and the day just two weeks before his death, when he read the completed manuscript to my mother, myself and my two sisters."\(^\text{13}\)

*The Buried Name* was never published or produced, probably never read outside the immediate family.

Williams died shortly after midnight on Friday, August 28, 1908, at his residence, 1626 Carrollton

\(^{12}\)Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, February 15, 1957.

\(^{13}\)Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, November 2, 1957.
Avenue, New Orleans. He was buried the next afternoon in Metairie Cemetery. The Daily Picayune carried a lengthy obituary article about him, including a list of his principal works with dates of publication and production, not always accurate. I quote the first and last paragraphs of the article:

THE SOUTH'S LEADING DRAMATIST

The literary fame of Espy Williams, who passed out of this mortal life in this city in the early morning hours of Aug. 28, instant, deserves more than a passing notice, since, in addition to his refined culture and other accomplishments, he was the foremost dramatist in the South, or if Henry Guy Carleton is classed as a Southerner, Mr. Williams ranks unquestionably with him and with the principal playwrights of his day in the American Republic.

... Mr. Williams realized a fact made plain throughout the South that literary work, however successful, offers no large pecuniary rewards, and he did much of his composition and study in the intervals of an active business career. Few literary men were more lovable and more generally esteemed by his friends and associates, and few were less assuming and self-assertive. He was an honor to letters in the South, and merits lasting admiration and remembrance.

From the perspective of more than half a century, during which the American drama has undergone a revolu-

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14 New Orleans Daily Picayune, August 29, 1908.
15 Mrs. Osgood to Nolan, April 30, 1957.
16 New Orleans Daily Picayune, August 29, 1908.
tion, such praise of an unknown playwright looks absurd. Seen against the background of the time and the place, however, it seems less extravagant. Local pride and perhaps personal affection aside, the writer for the Picayune had a point. There was pitifully little competition for the title of "The South's Leading Dramatist"; witness the dredging up of Henry Guy Carlton as a possible contender. There were, in fact, almost no Southern playwrights at all.

The situation was not much better nationally. Macgowan and Melnitz, in their history of the drama, go so far as to say that "only four writers of any merit appeared in America before 1915." They mention Langdon Mitchell, author of The New York Idea; William Vaughan Moody, author of The Great Divide; Edward Sheldon, author of Salvation Nell; and Elmer Rice, author of On Trial. All four of the plays they list came later than Williams' last produced drama.

17 A writer of poetic dramas who receives one sentence in the Literary History of the United States (II, 1008), one sentence more, to be sure, than is devoted to Williams.

Williams' literary career is an example of why, for all its impressive activity, the nineteenth century American theater produced very little good dramatic art. The two principal traditions dominating the stage were the heroic-romantic tradition of a generation of great actors and the popular demand for sensational, melodramatic escape entertainment. Because he wanted to see his plays produced, and because he was not the sort of original genius who creates new art forms single-handed, Williams worked within these traditions. He wrote plays like Dante, the long versions of Parnassius, and A Cavalier of France as vehicles for the old school actors Lawrence Barrett and Robert Mantell. When such actors and their school passed away, better heroic plays than Williams' were forgotten. He wrote plays like The Man in Black and Unorna to please the popular taste for sensational melodrama. "But in the history of the drama," Arthur Hobson Quinn writes, "such plays are mere episodes, to be forgotten because they do not advance the art at all. . . . Of all dramatic forms they fade most quickly, for they pay the price of their seizure of contemporary interest by certain oblivion." When Williams did write a play

19Literary History of the United States, I, 1000.

20Quinn, op. cit., II, 112.
which was a little off the beaten track, such as *The Atheist*, the one-act version of *Parrhasius*, or John Wentworth's *Wife*, his talent was too slight to command attention. There was no hearing in the theater for experimental work, even that much better than his. Conditions in the commercial theaters—the monopolistic syndicates and the star system, for example—forbade creative experimentation, and the non-commercial experimental theaters had not yet come into being.

In Arthur Hobson Quinn's words, however, "Just as this low point was reached, the forces that were to bring about regeneration were at work."21 George Pierce Baker's Harvard course in playwriting, which helped to form the talents of Eugene O'Neill, Robert Sherwood, and Frederick Koch, began in 1905. In 1915 the Neighborhood Playhouse was opened, and in the same year the Washington Square Players and the Provincetown Players were organized.22 The regeneration of the American drama was begun.

With the New Theater, came a sharp break with the old dramatic tradition. The reputation of a writer

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like Williams, whose work never showed any real distinction, faded even more quickly than it might have otherwise. Today it is sometimes said that the American drama began with Eugene O'Neill. Williams and the tradition of which he was a part are almost forgotten, except as an unfortunate episode in American cultural history. Perhaps the kindest thing which can be said about the popular theater of Williams' time has been said by Arnold Hauser: "It certainly lacked discrimination and was often trivial, ... but it prevented the development of the drama into mere literature."\(^{23}\)

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Baron Holdstein. See The Emperor's Double.

The Baron's Last Love. See The Emperor's Double.

The Building of a Play. MS


Chicot the Jester. See The Duke's Jester.


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APPENDIX

THE ESPY WILLIAMS COLLECTION
Stephens Memorial Library
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(All materials in this collection are by the
courtesy of Williams' daughter, Mrs. Phillips Endicott
Osgood. Bibliographical descriptions of manuscripts
were prepared by Dr. Elmer D. Johnson, Director of the
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MS. 21 The Buried Name. (Marlowe)
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MS -- Scrapbook containing various clippings from newspapers, magazines, and books; also programs and original MS letters. No number is assigned to this MS.
VITA

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EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

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Date of Examination:

July 19, 1961