THE COLLECTED LETTERS OF ELLEN TERRY: VOLUME I, 1865-1888



Ed. Katherine Cockin
(Pickering & Chatto, 2010) xlvi + 241 pp.
Reviewed by Martin Meisel on 2010-06-28.

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Ellen Terry continues to engage our imaginations--and to elude and outlive our explanations-- not just as an actress who inspired artists and audiences, but (*pace* Carlyle) as a Representative Woman navigating the tides and shoals of the Victorian world and its conflicted transformation. From about 1900 (she lived until 1928), there has been a continuing stream of biographical writing about her , informed by her own *The Story of My Life* (1908), later amplified by her daughter Edy (Edith Craig) and Edy's partner Christopher St. John. Most recently, we have Michael Holroyd's masterful *A Strange Eventful History: The Dramatic Lives of Ellen Terry, Henry Irving, and Their Remarkable Families* (2008)-- a contextual embrace that Terry would have found much more to the point than many another. Landmarks along the way are Virginia Woolf's late essay, "Ellen Terry," Edward Gordon Craig's *Ellen Terry and Her Secret Self* (1931), Roger Manvell's *Ellen Terry* (1968), Tom Prideaux's *Love or Nothing* (1975), and Nina Auerbach's *Ellen Terry: Player in her Time* (1987), which remains, psychologically and culturally, the most subtle and penetrating account to date.

Terry's letter-writing is best known from her published correspondence with Shaw; and there is also a volume (*The Heart of Ellen* Terry, 1928) of some of her letters to the barrister Stephen Coleridge, her devoted admirer and legal and financial advisor. The latter correspondence, "in full" and without Coleridge's nervous curtailments, constitutes a significant portion of the volume now under review. This first volume of the carefully designated "Collected"-- rather than "Complete"-- letters of Ellen Terry initiates a project that should be applauded. The letters constitute a scholarly resource, but also are a form of performance of no mean character and interest, complete with the occasional striking remark and surprising insight. We are told that Pickering & Chatto plan to publish further volumes (how many?) annually. Some collections of letters in private hands have not as yet been made available; there is evidence that the extensive collection in Smallhythe Place, Terry's last home and now under the National Trust, has been weeded; and other letters, "especially to significant male intimates" in some periods of her life, appear to have been destroyed (xvii). But much remains. Nevertheless, if one asks whether a Collected Letters on its own can stand in for a biography, or even for a satisfactory chronicle, the answer is No.

One must be grateful to Katharine Cockin, who has written earlier on Terry and Irving, and on *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage* (2001), for the energy that organized the project and found the support for its execution. The qualification that troubles me bears on the utility of the volume for scholars and others, through both editorial design and editorial practice. First as to design: there is no index-- not even of recipients. There is a biographical chronology, and a separate list of major roles played, 1865-88, with some lacunae. Perhaps an index is being reserved for the last volume-- years off? Meanwhile, it is all but impossible to pursue particular strands and individuals, to reconnect to a previous mention or annotation, and to do all the other things the index of so miscellaneous a publication as a collected correspondence enables. Then (less grave) there is the layout of the letters. The editor wishes to translate letters from their handwritten, material embodiment into type as faithfully as possible-- their dashes and underlinings (often multiple), crossings out and insertions, and abrupt discontinuities. So far so good, though the typographic result can be rebarbative. Most of the letters were scrawled on notepaper in what developed into a large, dashing hand, sometimes only a few lines to a page. In the printed versions, page breaks are rendered as a wide, white gap, often breaking up a sentence. The result is to add disjointedness to a discourse that is associative and mercurial, and to put a drag on reading. Each letter is assigned a number, and ordered-- with some guesswork for some dates-- chronologically. Numbered explanatory and identifying notes follow each letter, which seems convenient, but in fact also make for interruptive reading . Better would have been a paragraph headnote, as employed for example in Dan Laurence's exemplary edition of Shaw's *Collected Letters* (1965-88).

As to editorial practice, two issues bear on the publication's utility: confidence in the transcriptions and the fullness and accuracy of the notes. Though I have not tried to compare with the originals, renderings at several points have shaken my confidence. For example, Terry is supposed to have written of a child "with a good heart-- loving Disposition, & not which knowledge" (6-7). Is it "much knowledge"? Again, speaking of Irving ("the dear gentlemen" [*sic*]), Terry seems to say "he is a king of men, to of course they loved" him, rather than "so of course" (46). She writes to Stephen Coleridge that she can't meet him at the time he stipulated because she is rehearsing "& there is no chance of my coming back until part 3" (139), where the context suggests "past 3." She speaks while in Scotland of a drive through an oak forest "and then up higher amongst the furs" (142). More damaging because less obvious, she reports from Berlin in 1888 on "Barmay in his new Demetrius," and then twice reflects on the kindness and hospitality of "the Barmays ... such nice folk" (190, 191). The actor-manager that Terry and Irving saw in Germany was the great Ludwig Barnay, who opened his Berliner Theatre in 1888 with Schiller's *Demetrius,* as completed by Heinrich Laube and played widely. Terry and Irving had seen Barnay before, in

Julius Caesar, during the momentous visit of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen's company to London in 1881. None of this appears in the notes. That earlier revelatory encounter, equally unnoted, is the subject of a quick dispatch to Stephen Coleridge-- conjecturally dated 29 July 1881 from a postmark-- "I hope you too will be able to go to I.C. They say it's done so well: I've just been sent a box & had had another sent by the German folk (courteous!) already" (55). "I.C." I take to represent "J.C." Moreover, since the Meininger's Drury Lane appearance began May 30, there is some reason to suspect a misreading or misapplication of the postmarked envelope, especially since Terry would seem to have been traveling 29 July. Similarly, with respect to dating, a letter conjecturally assigned to 1880 mentions Stevenson's *Weir of Hermiston*, published in 1896.

Identification and annotation are in general erratic. Some obvious things are persistently, even obsessively noted-- such as the identities of Edy and Edward, Terry's children, whose names appear for long stretches in just about every letter. Terry frequently incorporated phrases from plays and other literature, especially Shakespeare, and she drops titles and allusions with great frequency. When she writes concerning a necklace, "You can't eat yr beads and have ¾em or I'd try!" a note tells us, "An allusion to the phrase ¾have your cake and eat it'" (30-31). But when she says in the same letter that she is going to *Proof* on Thursday, we are given no inkling identifying the play (F. C. Burnand's adaptation of D'Ennery's *Une Cause Célèbre,* Adelphi, 1878). Nor do we learn that *Rudder Grange*, recommended as "the Book of books"(185), is a novel by Frank Stockton (1886). Among the many allusions ignored-- the furnishings of a mind-- are "Hope on, hope ever" (2), from Gerald Massey the Chartist's poem of that name; "You wos very good to me you wos" (47), from Dickens's *Bleak House;* "so much endured, so much endures"(135), from Byron's *Manfred; "*Gointo the fire Jew-- Go into the fire*" (*215), from Leopold Lewis, *The Bells*; "& I pray Ted's heart will ever be ¾true to Poll' " (198), from the signature song of Mrs. John Wood in Brougham's *La Belle Sauvage*. Likewise unmentioned are the sources of *"*on such a night"(52) from *Merchant of Venice* and "There was a star [danced and under that I was born] " (81) from *Much Ado About Nothing.* (Coleridge reports he had suggested the line to be put under Terry's photographs, and his note is cited, but the line remains unsourced). Other unsourced allusions to Shakespeare are "woes which tread upon another's heels so fast they follow" (89), "I have a daughter*"* (174), and "I'll change that name with you" (213), all from *Hamlet;* and "lest the wise word [for ¾world'] should look into my [for ¾your'] moan" (291) from Sonnet 71. Besides these unsourced allusions, we also have many unidentified names, in an inverse relation to need. P.T. Barnum is identified, but not Ernst von Possart, German actor and theater director; Ignaz Moscheles and William Cullen Bryant, but not Lindley Murray the grammarian, nor the anti-Stratfordian Ignatius Donnelly, nor Herbert Railton nor Gordon Browne (son of "Phiz"), two well-known illustrators; nor Compton Reade, thanked for "two precious volumes," most certainly his memoir and literary remains of Charles Reade, so important in Terry's history. As for Charles Reade himself, in 1878 Terry interrupts a letter with "Here is Griffith Gaunt." Terry had the habit of calling persons (including herself) by the names of characters played or imagined; and though Griffith Gaunt was the eponymous protagonist of Reade's best known novel at that date, the editorial note says, "Unidentified" (27-28).

Elsewhere, when Terry tells the Henry Arthur Joneses "they are going to serve me up for supper to night at the Lyceum-- hot-- from the Witches Kitchen!"(120), the note says "Probably referring to rehearsal for *Macbeth*"-- actually, still two years off-- rather than to her performance in *Faust,* W. G. Wills's rendering of Goethe's play with its gothic-grotesque Witches' Kitchen scene, followed by that in which Margaret's fate is sealed. When Terry invites Gladstone to her benefit at the Lyceum (68-69), we are told that William Ewart Gladstone "had a long and distinguished parliamentary career as a Tory [!] becoming ... prime minister in 1868-74 and 1880." Thus (party aside) the editor mostly elides Gladstone's second, third, and fourth terms as Prime Minister, including 1882, the year of the invitation.

Though much that Terry writes, especially to men, is keyed to the outlook of the recipients, her letters give us continual insights into the life and mind of the writer. The vigor of her writing appears in a phrase like that she uses to Bram Stoker to describe Irving's performance amid the gross shortcomings of a Belfast theater: "I've heard of ¾acting in a Barn'; Henry's acting wd shine brightly through *a sewer*" (p. 62). Responding to Clement Scott's patronizing review of her portrayal of Lady Macbeth, she explains what motivates the character in a critically luminous interpretation (214-16) redolent of her perception of her own bent and situation . Happily, she also gets to express (to a woman) her growing loathing for Margaret in *Faust* "600 hundred [*sic*] times uttering those idiotic words-- the meekness of that woman is sickening-- (as bad as E.T....) (153)." She likes New York--she believes she does much better work in America, and that she is there better appreciated (171)--but she is not much taken with the de facto segregation of men and women in American society. "I like it myself a little more mixed I think" (155). On a combined acting tour and field trip in Scotland, with an eye to site and atmosphere for the coming Lyceum *Macbeth*, she reports of Irving (145) , "Directly Henry begins his work, he is to me the most wonderful creature under the sun-- but when he is holidaying he's but a mortal man, & I don't think much of him!" (145). (Scotland turns out to have not much remaining of Macbeth's world that they can use.) In general, there is much praise for Irving, "that wonderfullest man" (178), and Terry holds him up as a model-- especially in his work habits, where he is unsparing of himself and others-- to her far from model son, the future Edward Gordon Craig. Much of Terry's correspondence as we have it reflects an intense preoccupation with her children, and the crisis comes with the expulsion of "Ted" from his school in Heidelberg. Throughout, the anarchic Edward is the problem, thoroughly disapproved of by the indispensible and progressively stuffier Stephen Coleridge; and almost always his sister Edy is represented as the good child, garnering "the best reports" (197), practicing her music and her German, working hard, singing in a choir. One can't help a twinge of sympathy for the incorrigible Ted.

Unquestionably, the project of collecting Terry's letters, transcribing them painstakingly and making them available, is well worth the pains, and the succeeding volumes, which should be even richer, will be welcome. But since it is unlikely that there will be another edition for at least a generation, it is incumbent upon the editor and the publisher to see to it that they will be made more usable (and perhaps more readable), and inspire a confidence in their contextualizing elucidations-- including conjectural dating--beyond what this first volume achieves.

Martin Meisel has written extensively on Shaw, and on the fiction, painting, and theater of the nineteenth century. His latest book is *How Plays Work: Reading and Performance* (2007).

KATHARINE COCKIN RESPONDS

I appreciate Professor Meisel's detailed comments on the first volume of this major undertaking and I shall certainly bear his comments in mind when preparing the subsequent volumes. *The Collected Letters of Ellen Terry* (Pickering & Chatto) draws on over 3000 letters and is an eight-volume work to be published over a period of seven years. The publication details (number of volumes and dates of publication) are available on Pickering & Chatto's website and have been publicised widely and for some considerable time. The project has been informed by my research on Edith Craig and the Terry family which began twenty years ago with the biography of Craig (1998) and resulted in the catalogue of the National Trust's Ellen Terry and Edith Craig archive of over 20,000 documents. The catalogue has been accessible online since the end of October 2008. The publication of the letters and the cataloguing of this vast archive mark a new era in Ellen Terry studies.

The introduction to Volume I of the *Collected Letters* outlines the history of the project and the editorial principles used. Since Terry uses non-standard punctuation and embellishments, we have kept the transcriptions as close to the originals as possible in order to give a sense of her voice. Her correspondence does include a large number of what might be considered errors, in part reflecting limitations in her exposure to formal education. To present the letters without undue intervention, which Professor Meisel himself considers desirable, we decided not to highlight every error but to transcribe the letters as faithfully as possible without correction. Our transcriptions have been checked by several people familiar with Ellen Terry's handwriting, which presents considerable variation, sometimes deploying non-standard forms at moments of tension and haste and sometimes for ironic effect. We have made every effort to avoid errors in transcription.

To avoid interrupting the text, we decided to furnish notes only where necessary for the clear understanding of the correspondence. We repeatedly annotate the very common first names of her children because they can be confused at times with other Edys and Edies, Teds and Teddies. As an actress Terry quotes quite freely, but to identify every allusion would disrupt the reading of the letters (and is not always necessary to clarify her meaning). Also, since the edition is meant for academic readers, I have assumed that they will be more than capable of identifying her allusions for themselves. The identification of page breaks in the letters is designed to provide the reader with as much relevant information as possible. Following standard practice for many multi-volume sets, the index for this collection will appear (as publicised) in the final volume.

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