'In Great Form'*

MAX BEERBOHM

I met old Henry himself several times: he has become one of the stock ornaments of dinner-tables, uniform with Sargent,¹ Claude Phillips,² etc., – though he insists on being regarded as a recluse; and, wherever he is, nobody is *supposed* to see him there. All the same, he is in great form, really delightful to be with – though he hasn't a good word to say for anyone. I particularly want to read him on the subject of Arnold Bennett, of whose *Hilda Lessways*³ he said (but will perhaps not put in writing) that it was 'like the slow squeezing-out of a big, dirty sponge'. He was splendid about a production of *Hamlet* by William Poel⁴ at the Little Theatre. Somebody had taken him to see it, and I asked him what it was like. 'Like? Like? It was like Morning Prayers in a work-house!'

* David Cecil, *Max* (London: Constable, 1964) pp. 329–30.

NOTES

Sir Max Beerbohm (1872–1956), English critic, essayist and caricaturist. He knew James for about twenty years; for his first impressions of James, see Introduction. They met frequently on social occasions, but the friendship was never close. According to Leon Edel, James 'was of two minds about Max. He liked his praise and his wit; at the same time he experienced the element of hostility implicit in caricature and parody even when it also contains a large measure of affection' (*Master*, p. 395). Beerbohm wrote several parodies of James, reviewed two of his plays, and did nineteen major caricatures of him between 1898 and 1954 (listed in Rupert Hart-Davis, *A Catalogue of the Caricatures of Max Beerbohm* (London: Macmillan, 1972); see also *Beerbohm's Literary Caricatures*, ed. J. G. Riewald (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1977) pp. 224–35). On his parody of James in *A Christmas Garland*, and James's reaction to it, see p. 58; and for Beerbohm's comment on Sargent's portrait of James, see p. 145. The extract quoted is from a letter to Reginald Turner and records a meeting with James during a visit to London in 1914.

1. See p. 15.

2. See p. 30.

3. Novel by Arnold Bennett published in 1911.

4. William Poel (1852–1934), English theatrical producer.