



Introduction: Victorian Theatricalities

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After a barrage of manipulative fan-letters from Sir Merton and Annie Russell-Cotes, Sir Henry Irving, titan of the Victorian stage and the first actor to be knighted, eventually came to stay, briefly, at East Cliff Hall in Bournemouth. A peculiar but attractive compound of Scottish baronial castle, Italian villa, French château and Bournemouth seaside bungalow, complete with lavish Art Nouveau interiors and a fountain in the entrance lobby, the house was always designed in and of itself as a dramatic location and was also intended as a magnet for theatrical celebrities. Sir Merton and Annie amply stuffed it with nineteenth-century British paintings, miscellaneous sculptures, and souvenirs of their extensive overseas holidays. Today the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum remains the late Victorian treasure house par excellence, and I can imagine few more vivid short-cuts into the culture and mindset of the late nineteenth-century haute bourgeoisie than an afternoon spent marvelling at the tons of accumulated trophies and bibelots cluttering its rooms or the acres of tastefully-exposed nipples adorning its walls. What the Russell-Cotes Museum also makes clear, even at its gloomiest, is the key place of drama in the Victorian imagination. After Irving's death in 1905, the Russell-Cotes bought many of Irving's personal effects at auction. Adding these to their existing collection of Irving memorabilia and other theatrical paintings and souvenirs, they converted the bedroom in which Irving had stayed into a permanent shrine to his memory. The Henry Irving Room would make an ideal introduction to most of the contents of this volume.

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