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The Master
Colm Tóibín
Picador, £7.99

As even a cursory reading of the private dramas of his notebooks and letters demonstrates, Henry James is a more fitting subject for novelistic treatment than his reputation allows. It is yet a brave move for any novelist to adopt as subject a forebear who is widely accepted as the very master of the genre. Tóibín concentrates on the five years (1895-99) during which James suffered a kind of mid-life personal-artistic crisis. Readers with no intimate interest in James may wonder what all the fuss is about with this Booker short-listed novel; readers with a knowledge of James may find that the research sometimes sits too obviously on the page and may deliberate whether the occasional flatness of James's interior life here is a due reflection of his famed emotional emaciation; readers who have followed the rise and rise of Tóibín's profile will immediately acknowledge that this deeply felt extended tribute is by far his most substantial novel to date.
John Kenny