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Contributors may submit short essays, notes, news items, reviews, announcements and experiences of classroom teaching. Manuscripts should be submitted in triplicate and should follow the new MLA style. Send to Edith Wharton Society, Department of English, Long Island University, Brooklyn, NY 11201.

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**In this issue**

**Conference News**.....2,3

**The Politics of Maternity in *Summer***  
Monika M. Elbert.....4

**In Imitation and Anticipation of "Mrs. Wharton —  
Cather's *Alexander's Bridge***  
John J. Murphy.....10

**The Paradox of Desire: Jacques Lacan and Edith Wharton**  
Garry M. Leonard.....13

**Justice to Teddy Wharton: Louis Auchincloss's "The Arbiter"**  
Adeline Tintner.....17

**Book Reviews**.....20

**Correspondence**.....19

**Corrections**.....12

**Call for Help**.....16

## Wharton Paris Conference Is Fast Filling Up Call For Papers

Highlighting 1991, year of celebration for the Edith Wharton Society as an official allied organization of the MLA, is the International Conference sponsored by the Society, "EDITH WHARTON IN PARIS" June 28 - July 1, 1991.

Paris, where Edith Wharton found new life and inspiration during the twenty-five years she lived there, will be an appropriate site to continue our celebration of Wharton and our Society for the renown we both now enjoy. Those who have attended past all-Wharton conferences at The Mount and Long Island University know how stimulating and enjoyable they have been. Our new official recognition promises to make this one of the most unique and vigorous convocations.

Katherine Joslin, Western Michigan University, is the conference organizer and director. Alan Price, Pennsylvania State University, Hazleton, is the assistant director. The four day conference will take place in Paris at the Mona Bismarck Foundation, 34 Avenue de New-York. It will begin with a buffet dinner and reception featuring Professor Roger Asselineau of The Sorbonne and Professor Shari Benstock, University of Miami. The two following days will feature more than thirty-five scholars from Europe, Japan and the United States. The conference will end with events and speakers in St. Brice-sous-Forêt, the village where Wharton had her country home, The Pavillon Colombe. Professors Cynthia Griffin Wolff and Millicent Bell will speak at the buffet lunch.

Several short papers will also be selected by competition. Anyone interested in Edith Wharton is encouraged to submit a proposal. The final paper should be eight to ten papers with a delivery time of fifteen to twenty minutes. The paper's subject is limited to Paris and Europe in the life and works of Wharton. Any aspect might be included: her use of Europe in her fiction, her reading of European writers and their influence on her work, her travels through France and Italy, her life in Paris, her connection to other American ex-patriates, her reception in Europe both in her time and today, and even the use of French literary theory to interpret Wharton's work. Send 250 word proposals or completed papers by January 15, 1991 to Katherine Joslin (address below). Program participants will be notified by February 15, 1991.

The conference fee is \$50 for the first three days and an additional \$50 for the last day. Separate brochures with fuller descriptions, suggestions for transportation and accommodations have been sent to all Edith Wharton Society members. If you have not received a brochure, please write to Katherine Joslin, Director, Edith Wharton in Paris, Department of English, Western Michigan University, Kalamzoo, MI 49008.

## ALA to Meet in Washington, D.C. Call For Papers

The second annual conference of the American Literature Association will be held at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. on May 24-26, 1991 (Friday, Saturday and Sunday of Memorial Day weekend.) Preregistration conference fee will be \$30 (with a special rate of \$10 for independent scholars, retired individuals, and students.) The hotel is offering a conference rate of \$60 a night (single or double). To register or obtain housing information, write to Professor Alfred Bendixen, English Department, California State University, Los Angeles, CA 90046.

The American Literature Association is a coalition of the societies devoted to American Authors. It publishes a newsletter of its activities. A subscription is \$5, made out to the American Literature Association and sent to Professor Bendixen.

**CALL FOR PAPERS:** The Edith Wharton Society is one of the founding groups and has had several exciting sessions at the organizing conference in 1989 and the first official conference in 1990, both held in San Diego. The 1991 session topic for Washington, D.C. will be "*The House of Mirth Revisited*." One to two page proposals should be sent by January 10 to Annette Zilversmit, 140 Riverside Drive, Apt. 16H, New York, NY 10024.

At the 1990 San Diego Conference, Annette Zilversmit, founder of the Edith Wharton Society received the Association's first annual service award. In making the presentation, Carol J. Singley, President of the Wharton Society stated that through Professor Zilversmit's "imagination, intelligence, and care, the Edith Wharton Society is now one of the largest associations devoted to a single American writer" and that her efforts "have helped foster a renaissance in Edith Wharton Scholarship...critical attention and acclaim...." Professor Singley further added that Professor Zilversmit's service has extended to other societies who have been helped by her example and generous offering of time and energy. In presenting the plaque, Professor Singley concluded, "With your ideas, the study of American literature in general has been strengthened."

## **Edith Wharton Society Gains MLA Recognition Celebrations Start with Session at Chicago Convention Party, Business Meeting, and Dinner Follow**

On June 1, 1990, Carol J. Singley, President of the Wharton Society received the long awaited letter which read, "It is my pleasure to inform you that the MLA Executive Council approved the application of the Edith Wharton Society for allied organization status with the Modern Language Association." This was our third petition in almost eight years of existence. The Edith Wharton Society now takes its place as the fifth woman writer's society to be granted such status among the more than fifty male author circles. Progress is slow but little dulls our purpose anymore.

1991 is declared the year of celebration. All sessions, conferences, and meetings will be dedicated to this formal recognition of The Edith Wharton Society.

Celebrations will commence at the 1990 Annual MLA Convention in Chicago this December. Appropriately, we will begin with a Special Session organized and submitted by Carol Singley (which after two years of rejected proposals was fortunately also approved) on Saturday, December 29 from 3:30-4:45 p.m. in the Field Room of the Hyatt Regency Hotel. The session is entitled "Edith Wharton: Issues of Class, Race, and Ethnicity." The speakers will be Gloria C. Erlich, "In Nettie's Kitchen: Edith Wharton and Working Class Women"; Elaine Showalter, "Class and Gender in *The Custom of the Country*"; and Annette Zilversmit, "Anti-Semitism, Misogyny, and the Anxiety of Authorship."

A cash bar reception with an annual business meeting will follow from 5:15 to 6:30 p.m. in the Atlanta Room at the Hyatt Regency.

These new and provocative excursions into Wharton scholarship and activities will culminate in a dinner arranged by Judith Sensibar who knows Chicago well. The dinner will appropriately take place at Michael Foley's Printer's Row Restaurant at 550 South Dearborn Street, a ten-minute taxi ride from the Hyatt Regency in Chicago's historic, newly gentrified South Loop Printer's Row District beginning at 7:00 p.m. A three-course menu with entree and dessert choices and all wine and gratuities is offered. The cost is \$29.50 per person. Reservations and check should be made to Professor Judith Sensibar, Department of English KRI 1001, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-0302. R.S.V.P. by December 15.

All members, prospective members, guests and other interested persons are invited to all of the events on December 29. Hopefully, all who have over the years worked in The Edith Wharton Society, supported the Society, participated in other activities that have included Wharton and have contributed to Wharton scholarship and advancement will share in the day's (and into the night's) proceedings.

## **Official Sessions Offered in San Francisco 1991 Call for Papers Issued**

The year of celebration for the official recognition of the Edith Wharton Society as an allied organization of the MLA will conclude with the Society's first privilege of acceptance: two automatic sessions at the 1991 Annual MLA Convention in San Francisco. According to the new goverances of allied organizations, one session will be part of the official schedule and one session will be held a day before the convention begins. Clare Colquitt, who will assume the presidency of the Society in 1991, has begun organizing the sessions and activities. She is tentatively calling the panel that will meet on the regular day, "Edith Wharton: Mothers and Lovers and Other Fictions of

Desire." One to two page proposals for this session should be sent to her at the Department of English, San Diego State University, San Diego, San Diego, CA 92182. The other panel topic chosen to be held one day prior to the official schedule is "Edith Wharton's Neglected Art: The Short Story." One to two page proposals for this session should be sent to Annette Zilversmit, 140 Riverside Drive, Apt. 16H, New York, NY 10024. Proposals for both sessions should be received by March 1, 1991. Again, more celebratory activities will continue at this 1991 Annual MLA Convention in San Francisco.

# The Politics of Maternality in *Summer*

Monika M. Elbert

...Are we willing to consider motherhood a business, a form of commercial exchange? Are the cares and duties of the mother, her travail and her love, commodities to be exchanged for bread?

— Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics*

Edith Wharton's encounter with the feminine "primitive," with the "other," in her 1914 visit to North Africa, and her encounter with the product of excessively masculine civilization — a war-torn France in 1917 — were the personal and historical moments which created the matrophobic atmosphere of *Summer*.<sup>1</sup> In this novella motherhood is depreciated, disdained, and ultimately destroyed. None of the mothers thrives: Mrs. Royall cannot have children and she becomes the absent mother to foster child Charity with her untimely death; Charity's mother is robbed of her maternity with Lawyer Royall's entry onto the Mountain in the name of bringing "civilization" to the daughter; Miss Hatchard, the stereotypical barren spinster, is a poor excuse for a surrogate mother to Charity; Charity's friend Julia avoids the consequences of an unwanted pregnancy and poverty by having an abortion; Dr. Merkle, who could have been a surrogate mother, instead preys upon the likes of Charity for material gain, and in a novella filled with food imagery, she seems to devour live babies; and finally, Charity, though she decides to keep her baby, cannot be a mother freely, but ironically must rely upon her guardian's "charity" to afford the baby. Mothering does not have a chance of triumphing, let alone surviving, in Wharton's world, this as a result of man's willful distortion of motherhood. There are two negative forces at work in the novel: man's fear of the dark continent, of mothering, which is embodied in the Mountain, and man's need to control a foreign nature by giving it market value, by gaining access to the realm of the "other" in making sexuality, motherhood and its attendant housewifely duties a commodity. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in the epigraph above from *Women and Economics* (1898), makes perfectly clear that motherhood will flourish only when men will stop viewing it as a trade.<sup>3</sup>

Before going on with a discussion of the novella proper, it is worth analyzing the two circumstances (mentioned above) which shaped the writing of Wharton's *Summer*, ostensibly idyllic with its title; indeed, with its New England setting, it seems as far away from the exotic as possible, and it seems innocuous and far away from the turbulence of a war. However, the novel is filled with man's horror

of the primitive (of woman) and with his obsession to civilize the other (capitalism and competition being by-products of his civilizing frenzy, which culminates in war). Edith Wharton, as a reader of a foreign culture in her visit to Tunis in 1914, is as much a biased ethnographer as the male reader of female culture. What she says about the stunning savagery of the natives is as elitist and alienating as what the men in *Summer* think about Charity's mother, who lives on the Mountain, indeed, about the entire mysterious realm of the Mountain, which is so closely allied to the primitive functions of giving birth and dying. Thus, Wharton is just as seduced and terrified by the Tunisians' "effeminacy or obesity or obscenity or black savageness" (Lewis 361) as the men in Wharton's novel are mystified by female sexuality and reproduction. They are very much like Freud who, mystified by woman's sexuality, saw woman as something of "a dark continent" (qtd. in Gay 501), an interesting metaphor for woman, in terms of what the European imperialists were thinking about the dangerous and seductive "dark" continent of Africa, whose natives were "surely" waiting for the enlightenment of a white man.<sup>2</sup> As one anthropologist has recently put it, the encounter with the Other involves an "ethnographic distance," and this distancing "leads to an exclusive focus on the Other as primitive, bizarre, and exotic" (Loring Danforth, qtd. in Geertz 14). Certainly, Royall and Harney see with the blind vision of the anthropologist. There is, as Danforth says of the anthropologist and the observed population, "a gap between a familiar 'we' and an exotic 'they' . . . an obstacle that can only be overcome through some form of participation in the world of the Other" (qtd. in Geertz 14). Truly, there is this rift between men (Royall and Harney) and women (the "other" which is the Mountain) in *Summer*, but the writers of the code, the lawmaker (Royall) and the architect (Harney) of society, don't go out of their way to understand the other. They simply exploit and destroy that which is different, and feel content to make the women the caretakers of the library (Charity, Miss Hatchard), the repository of their history of oppression; the women themselves cannot write the texts. They merely pass on the words and the myths in their role as mothers and caretakers. Ironically, Charity must watch over "the dusty volumes of the Hatchard Memorial Library" (11), a dead library, with dead tomes, and when Harney criticizes her care of the musty old books, she answers more truthfully than she knows, "It's not my fault if they're dirty" (16). She is only caring for what men have created for her.

Lawyer Royal and Lucius Harney are attracted to what they perceive as the foulness of the Mountain in the same way that Lawyer Royal lusts after the prostitute Julia and Harney after the sensual Charity, who seems "different" after she tells him that she comes from the Mountain: "He [Harney] raised himself on his elbow, looking at her with sudden interest. 'You're from the Mountain? How curious! I suppose that's why you're so different...'" (67). Harney can use the other, exploit Charity, but it is never his intention to marry her. In the same way that the ethnographer hunts up primitive people, Harney hunts up "old houses" (18). And of course, that entails a "field" trip to the Mountain with Charity. He describes his reasons for wanting to visit the Mountain: "it must be a rather curious place. There's a queer colony up there, you know: sort of outlaws, a little independent kingdom" (65). He exploits Charity's sexuality in the same way that he uses the Mountain people in their strangeness to further his architectural research; he wonders about "that ramshackled place near the swamp, with the gipsy-looking people hanging about" and says, "It's curious that a house with traces of real architecture should have been built in such a place" (63). These are people who are outside the jurisdiction of the male civilization in North Dormer (a sleeping town at that) established by the likes of Lawyer Royal. Harney remarks "on top of that hill... [are] a handful of people who don't give a damn for anything" (65). And he knows, in the language of commodities, that the Mountain people are "rough customers" (65). And he knows too that women can be "rough customers," so he seduces Charity with his money. He gives when he's supposed to (a ten-dollar bill for a twenty-minute drive around the lake, even though Charity realizes he could have bought an engagement ring for her with the money he squandered), and he knows when not to give, for example, when he checks himself before giving a dollar bill to the proud Mountain people, who might be Charity's relatives. He figures he can buy his way into any old house or into the heart of any woman with just the right amount of money.

Similarly, Lawyer Royall takes pleasure in civilizing the natives (the Mountain people and women) as he beats them down. He feels utter repugnance towards the Mountain people, and his male discourse with its arrogance and bravado strikes a chord in the equally intolerant but "curious" Harney; their distrust of the Mountain creates an odd form of male bonding (Harney gave to Royall "for the first time in years, a man's companionship" 70). It is the picture of an unconquerable mother, an undiscovered Africa.

"Why, the Mountain's a blot — that's what it is, sir, a blot. That scum up there ought to have been run in long ago--and would have, if the people down here hadn't been clean scared of them. The Mountain belongs to this township, and it's North Dormer's fault if there's a gang of thieves and outlaws living over there, in sight of us, defying the laws of their country." (71)

Significantly, Lawyer Royall sees the Mountain as a place of birthing, of uncontrollable impulses and

fecundity, "They just here together like the heathen" (71; again, the missionary's rationale for conquering the "other"). And he imagines that the Mountain is his property, "The Mountain *belongs* to this township," and that he must be the great civilizer. He also sees the women in his life in terms of property: he can take advantage of them and hit them where they are most vulnerable, in their reproductive organs. He literally tries to force his way into women's private space and into their psyches, as for example, when he tries to barge into Charity's room soon after his wife dies; this is similar to Harney's desire to poke about in the foreign houses of the Mountain people.

Royall, the prototype of the benevolent tyrant (as his name indicates) tries to control woman's right to motherhood to secure his position of power. He does this by trying to appropriate the realm of mothering, the unknown realm, through economics. Charity's mother is vulnerable in her inability to control her mothering power; Mrs. Royall, a pale figure of a mother who finally fades out, is vulnerable in her inability to mother. Charity remembers her foster mother as a weak woman, but she intuitively that Mrs. Royall has been frightened into frigidity or sterility by her domineering husband. Her earliest recollection of Mrs. Royall is a somber, lifeless one, as Mr. Royall's sense of order has poisoned her system: "[Charity] could only remember waking one day in the cot at the foot of Mrs. Royall's bed, and opening her eyes on the *cold neatness* of the room that was afterward to be hers" (24, my emphasis; compare this to the scene where Charity spends the night on the Mountain and finds a thriving maternal instinct as her aunt's children or grandchildren are, "rolled up against her [Mrs. Hyatt] like sleeping puppies" [258]). The "cold neatness" of Mrs. Royall's room is the same order imposed on North Dormer by the likes of Mr. Royall: "North Dormer represented all the blessings of the most refined civilization" (11). Julia, the town prostitute, represents the mystery of sexuality, and Mr. Royall, the "decent" Homecoming orator, wants to penetrate her depths as much as he wants to get to the heart of the mountain people and eradicate it. He can take advantage of Julia because of her economic vulnerability — her unwanted pregnancy and ensuing helplessness has taught her the art of prostitution. Finally, Charity, described by Wharton as a victim and a trapped animal as a result of her unplanned pregnancy, falls prey to Royall in her need to finance her baby. This is a novel in which fertility, as seen through the eyes of males, seems dangerous, and which is, in fact, dangerous to women who have no control over their mothering abilities.

Royall, as a biased androcentric observer of culture, reads the act of Charity's mother giving her away as a sign of not caring, when all the while, she is compelled by economic circumstances. His interpretation is:

"Oh yes, there was a mother. But she was glad enough to have her go. — She'd have given her to anybody. They ain't half human up there. I guess the mother's dead by now, with the life she was leading."

He feels that as a protector of male order (the

spokesperson for "Old Home Week") and the guardian of Charity, he must always keep Charity (and thus the Mountain people) in their place. He even baptizes Mary Hyatt's daughter Charity, baptism, a civilizing ceremony of sorts, in order to remind her of the debt she owes him for bringing her down from the Mountain; indeed, the name and identity of Charity's mother is withheld until Charity herself embarks on her maternal quest — to find her mother and to become a mother. Royall neglects to tell Charity that economics has brought her down from the Mountain, not a lack of mothering instinct on her mother's part: Charity's real mother was burdened with too many children and Mrs. Royall, his wife, who could not or did not have children, wanted to buy the experience of surrogate motherhood by taking Charity in. In the most elitist fashion, characteristics of the imperialist ("royal") explorer and conqueror, Mr. Royall tells Harney about the male romantic quest and expedition of conquering the other. He has gone to the Mountain once, he boasts, despite the apparent threats and despite his prosecuting (civilizing) a member of the band: "The wiseacres down here told me I'd be done for before I got back: but nobody lifted a finger to hurt me. And I'd just had one of their gang sent up for seven years too" (72). He tells the story of the alleged father of Charity, a convict, who repents by taking on the lawyer's values; he asks that lawyer Royall Christianize Charity, which means, in male exploitive terms, to take her away from her mother and to remove her from the Mountain: "he wanted her brought down and reared like a Christian" (73).

We never get an objective view of the Mountain, the realm of mothering and birthing, not even through Charity's eyes because even her vision has become warped. Like the anthropologist who taints his description of the other with traits from his own culture, Charity begins to see the Mountain as something foul and disgraceful.<sup>4</sup> She knows that "to come from the Mountain was the worst disgrace" (22), because Lawyer Royall indoctrinates her with this attitude; even the women of the town, as the upholder of male values, remind her of her obligation to male civilization: "You must always remember, Charity, that it was Mr. Royall who brought you down from the Mountain" (32) says Miss Hatchard, an odd type of spinsterish surrogate mother. Though Charity "knew" that the Mountain "was a bad place, and a shame to have come from" (12), she feels otherwise. She escapes from the library to the lower hills circling the Mountain whenever she has the chance. There she experiences a communion with nature: "She loved the roughness of the dry mountain grass under her palms, the smell of thyme into which she crushed her face, the fingering of the wind in her hair . . ." (21), and she exults in the earthiness of nature: she often throws herself into the grass, "her face pressed to the earth and the warm currents of the grass running through her" (53). "Every leaf and bud and blade" seems alive to her, and her dormant sexual feelings are awakened as all smells "were merged in a moist earth-smell that was like the breath of some huge sun-warmed animal" (54).

Liff Hyatt, who later turns out to be a relative, offers the "link between the mountain and civilized folk" (55), the path to reunion with the mother, but Charity realizes early on that all men, even the Mountain men, present a threat to her in their ability to stamp out life. Catching sight of Liff's muddy boots, she admonished him, "Don't stamp of those bramble flowers, you dolt" (55), and she also asks the eternal question which women pose to men, "Don't you ever see anything, Liff Hyatt?" (55). Charity has the wherewithal to see beyond the confines of North Dormer and of the Mountain — she can cross borders. She tries, at least first, to see the environment with unbiased eyes: she looked about North Dormer "with the heightened attention produced by the presence of a stranger in a familiar place" and wondered, "What . . . did North Dormer look like to people from other parts of the world?" In the end, though, she realizes that the feminine/maternal condition is circumscribed by both the "primitive" freedom of the Mountain and by the "refined" civilization of North Dormer. In her work on mothering and economics, Gilman makes clear that woman, "even among savages . . . has a much more restricted knowledge of the land she lives on [than men]", but that

The life of the female savage is freedom itself . . . compared with the increasing constriction of custom closing in upon the woman, as civilization advanced, like the iron torture chamber of romance. Its culmination is expressed in the proverb: "A woman should leave her home but three times, — when she is christened, when she is married, and when she is buried." (*Women and Economics* 580)

This certainly bodes ominously for Charity, as her cycle of giving birth and dying will be the same as her mother's.

To Charity, the Mountain represents mothering — a return to her real mother and to her own ability to mother, a return to the mystery of her origins, and finally, to the mystery of her mortality.<sup>5</sup> In her recreation of the myth of the Mountain, she sees an antitype of Eden, a procreative wilderness, a lawless place settled by men who tried to escape from the police and where "others joined them — and children were born" (66). She wants to "explore the corner of her memory where certain blurred images lingered" (59), and that entails a reunion with the mother/Mountain. When she feels the first stirrings of sexuality with the arrival of Harney to North Dormer, she begins to feel obsessed with ascending the Mountain. As she feels more entrapped by her feelings and by the conflicting signals from Royall's law, she threatens escape: to "go to the Mountain," "go back to my own folks" (159). Finally, in the end, when she is pregnant, she needs to encounter her mother once and for all, a mother who happens to be dying. In this respect, too, Charity, herself, takes on the mythmaking of the males: the thought of giving birth is allied to that other taboo mystery, dying. According to Otto Rank, a discipline of the matriphobic representative man, Freud, man feels an "ideological need" to "blot out the mother-origin in order to deny his mortal nature" (236). This implies

that the beginning and the end is in the Great Mother, the giver and destroyer of life, and Charity, frightened by the manifestation of her own limitations, sees her dead mother as the horrible destroyer: here mother's face was "thin yet swollen, with lips parted in a frozen gasp above the broken teeth. There was no sign in it of anything human: she lay there like a dead dog in a ditch" (250).

If Charity cannot accept her mother's death as something natural, on feminine terms, if she sees it as something ugly, as men would have it, she will not be able to accept her pregnancy without the feeling that mothering is somehow as dirty and obscene as the Mountain. She actually loses her fight towards independence when she buys into Minister Miles' funeral oration for her mother: "We bought nothing into this world and we shall take nothing out of it..." (251). These are male terms which equate birth with death, because they are outside the realm of maternal creation. Indeed, in the middle of the funeral, there is a moment of black humor, as an elderly man, worn down by life in his inability to produce, states pugnaciously, (as if to contradict the minister's "Nothing is brought into this world . . ."),

"I brought the stove . . . I wen' down to Creston'n bought it . . . n' I got a right to take it outer here . . . n' I'll lick any feller says I ain't" (252).

This certainly shows man's confused belief that he can produce something material that is of significance; this buying of the stove is much different from Charity's impending birthing of a child. Yet, by returning to Royall's civilization, she gives up her mothering rights and her bond to the primeval mother within her. In fact, when she gives herself up to Royall, she attempts to block out the "white autumn moon," a reminder of the Mountain. Before she had pressed her head sensuously into the grass; now she "press[es] her face against [the pillow] to shut out the pale landscape beyond the window" (283). She lies in the "darkness," because she has alienated herself from the maternal landscape; but she also does not fit the "other" interior landscape of Royall's civilized world: she does not know how to "manipulate" the "electric button" to turn on the light (282).

Royall has spoiled Charity so that her maternal traits have atrophied, and she has lost touch with the meaning of mothering. In part, this is due to her many empty hours of leisure. Perkins Gilman, in her then revolutionary text on mothering in *Women and Economics* (1898), shows that women are trained to be consumers and not self-reliant producers, thus perpetuating the myth of the helpless woman: "Because of her maternal duties, the human female is said to be unable to get her own living . . . Is this the condition of motherhood? Does the human mother, by her motherhood, thereby lose control of brain and body, lose power and skill and desire for any other work?" (575). Gilman suggests that in cutting themselves off from other social activities and productivity, they resign themselves to a "pathological motherhood" (587) that denies complete self-realization; they cannot fulfill themselves simply as mothers who rely upon husbands. This has pro-

duced "an enormous class of non-productive consumers, — a class which is half the world, and mother of the other half" (585). This type of limiting motherhood leads to a debilitating feminine condition, with women dabbling in frivolous activity. While men are allowed to explore the world, women wait at home dutifully; thus, in North Dormer, "at three o'clock on a June afternoon its few able-bodied men are off in the fields or woods, and the women indoors, engaged in languid household drudgery" (9). To her credit, Charity refuses to do the housework after refusing to become Royall's wife at the start of the novel; he hires a domestic servant, which enables Charity to take on her job at the library, but still, because she lacks education, she spends most of her time wanting to escape to the "outside," or sewing and embroidering lacy frivolous items for herself. Charity becomes what Gilman would call, a "priestess of the temple of consumption," a victim of male market created for women, a "market for sensuous decoration and personal ornament, for all that is luxurious and enervating" (*Women and Economics* 585). Gilman warns that this relationship between men and women "sexualizes our industrial relation and commercializes our sex-relation" (585).

Charity, from the start, is never given an opportunity to go beyond the stereotypical consumer-female who ends up relinquishing her "self" by the "maternal sacrifice," as Gilman would put it (*WE* 589: indeed, when Charity writes her last letter to Harney, she thinks of the sacrifice she is making for her unborn child [289]. From the start, we realize that Charity is burdened with her guardian's consumer-producer mentality, and she realizes that her assets revolve around her sexuality: she knows what kind of effect she has had on Harney, "She had learned what she was *worth* when Lucius Harney, looking at her for the first time, had lost the thread of his speech" (62, my emphasis), and she knows that if her indiscretions with Harney become too obvious to Royall, she will have to "pay for it" (62). She is aware of her effect on all men, as she sits in front of the mirror repeatedly and preens herself, and her purchases are meant to ornament her. Thus, for example, she gazes in the mirror and adores that hat Ally Hawes had secretly made for her: "It was of white straw, with a drooping brim and a cherry-coloured lining that made her face glow like the inside of the shell on the parlour mantelpiece" (124). Realizing that she has to compete with Annabel Balch's blue eyes to capture a man, she sits in front of the mirror for long periods of time and futilely wishes her brown eyes to turn blue (8, 39), and fantasizes walking down the aisle with Lucius Harney, a bride in "low-necked satin" (40). Even in the end, when her pregnancy puts an end to her quest for self in the mirror, she is still as aware as ever of ornate surroundings. During her "honeymoon" with Royall, though she is too "ashamed" to catch a glimpse of herself in the looking glass (278), she notices in the reflection of the mirror the intricate details of the hotel room: there was "the high head-board and fluted pillow slips of the double bed, and a bedspread so spotlessly white that she had hesitated to lay her hat and jacket on it" (279); even in her exhaustion from the trip to the



Mountain, she does not miss for a second absorbing the gold-framed paintings around her bed (279) and the chandeliers and "marble-panelled hall" of the dining-hall (281). As Liff Hyatt had told her early on, as he looked at her lying in the grass with her "new shoes" and "red ribbon": "They won't any of 'em touch you up there, f'ever you was to come up...But I don't s'pose you will" (56). With her exorbitant taste in clothing and furnishings, Charity alienates herself further from the secrets of the primeval mother.

Though her hunger is a manifestation of the emptiness within her, her taste in food is also luxurious and frilly. In this realm too, she craves superfluities, the sweets which men have created as a steady diet for the consumer-woman. For Charity, civilization means visiting Nettleton, the closest thing to a city, and devouring bonbons that men will buy her or gawking hungrily at the sumptuous clothes in the store fronts. She reminisces lovingly about the "coconut pie" she had eaten in Nettleton during the course of a field trip to "hear an illustrated lecture on the Holy land" (9-10); she craves chocolate that Harney can provide for her (237), munches on the party sandwiches Harney brings her "from the love-feast at Hamblin" (209); and is absolutely mesmerized by the garden of delights which Nettleton offers her when Harney takes her to the Fourth of July celebration: there were "fruit and confectionary shops stacked with strawberry-cake, coconut candy, boxes of caramels and chewing-gum, baskets of sodden strawberries, and dangling bunches of bananas" (133). Indeed, she spends most of her time with Harney and with Royall eating. Too late she realizes that they cannot satisfy her appetite: immediately after her marriage to Royall, she loses her appetite, "the thought of food filled her with repugnance" (281), but eats to pacify Royall. Perhaps the most revealing scene focusing on food occurs when Charity has spent the night at Liff Hyatt's house, on the evening of her mother's death. After her aunt's family has showered what little hospitality on her (the children's blanket) as they can afford, she herself raids the pantry: "faint with hunger" (262) in the middle of the night, she breaks off some bread from the half of a stale loaf. Driven by her hunger, she disregards the hunger of the others: "No doubt it was to serve as the breakfast of old Mrs. Hyatt and the children; but Charity did not care; she had her own baby to think of" (262). In the name of mothering, she steals from other children: this is the height of narcissistic individualistic mothering as promoted by the competitive and capitalist men around her.<sup>6</sup> After she devours the bread "greedily," she leaves one of her "dainty things," a "pretty chemise" (262), in exchange. She does not understand the true meaning of mothering and productivity: her gesture indicates that she values luxuries more than necessities.

It is not just man's fear and jealousy of the primeval mother that makes him destroy her. It is his attempt to supplant feminine creativity with male productivity, with his sense of order and civilization. Thus, Charity has learned from her "avaricious" uncle (69), the Hometown spokesman, who has shown her the value of woman's sexuality. For example, when he first receives Harney's payment for use of his buggy (and indirectly but perversely for the use of

Charity), he gives Charity the money, a ten-dollar bill, to make herself look good (for him): "Here — go get yourself a Sunday bonnet that'll make all the other girls mad" (70). He teaches her the male value of competition. Later Royall begrudgingly approves of Charity's choice of Harney as lover, ". . . I don't blame you. You picked out the best when you seen it . . . well, that was always my way" (117). Finally, when he has caught her as his wife, he hands her two twenty-dollar bills and triumphantly advises her to "buy yourself whatever you need . . . You know how I always wanted you to beat all the other girls" (285).

Perkins Gilman said that lack of productivity is destroying women and motherhood, and it is true in the context of this novel that capitalist male productivity, which promotes the notion of idle women or women competing for eligible bachelors, is destructive. And it is male civilization that comes out ahead of female nurturing in *Summer*. There is no true community of women here: the only bonding occurs when Miss Hatchard's circle of girls makes the garlands, decorative frills, for homecoming week. And, of course, in contrast to the Mountain, we have an image competing for prominence, and that is Dr. Merkle's office. Her house in Nettleton with the sign, "Private Consultations," is as foreboding to the women in the town (to Charity and her only ally, Ally), as the Mountain is to the men. Dr. Merkle robs women of their motherhood, and Julia "came as near as anything to dying" (125). Just as male civilization is glutted with ugly superfluities, and the excessive food and clothing imagery in the novel makes one nauseous, so too is Dr. Merkle's office decorated gaudily. Moreover, she is a "plump" woman (the devouring mother) with "unnaturally white and even teeth" (224). What makes her most hideous is that she has picked up all of men's worst vices; she encompasses the competitive business mentality in its most grotesque aspects. Though her smile appears "motherly" (226), she thrives on her illicit market. And her character beneath the artificial appearance is utterly false: Charity perceives her as having "false hair," "false teeth," and a "false murderous smile" (225).

All the excessive productivity and destruction comes as a result of man's rule. Royall, whom Charity aptly describes as the "very symbol of household order" and who is adept at giving patriotic orations (with Daniel Webster as his guide), is at the heart of the "pattern" of civilization which destroys through its rigidity. When asked about the character of Lawyer Royall by the art historian and friend Bernard Berenson, Wharton said "he's [Royall is] the book" (qtd. in Wolff, Intro., emphasis not mine). This is certainly true if one were to judge which values triumph in *Summer*. One is reminded of Amy Lowell's poem "Patterns," published in 1916, one year before *Summer*, and whose context is ostensibly the dis-ease of male civilization, the malady of all the order which a man finds so sacred, the manifestation of which is war. Women's attempt in the poem to lead man "in a maze along the patterned paths" by her softness and sensuality (the "other" embodied in Wharton's Mountain) is thwarted; woman's savagery is in contrast to "a pattern called a war." When Edith Wharton records her writing of *Summer* as being



outside the realm of her wartime experience, she is deceiving herself: war does permeate the pages, though subtly so. She writes in *A Backward Glance* that despite being "steeped in the realities of the war," she "began to write a short novel, *Summer*, as remote as possible in setting and subject from the scenes about me; and the work made my other tasks seem lighter. The tale was written at a high pitch of creative joy" (356). Yet, the subject matter of *Summer* is closely allied with the wartime destruction, the lack of respect for life, around her: the sensuous indulgence and excessive materialism of war are rampant in *Summer*.

In *A Man-Made World* (1911), a prophetic vision of the war to come and a sociological work which predates *Summer* by six years, Charlotte Perkins Gilman warns about the evils brought about by a "man-made" civilization and she advocates a government based on mothering, "a peaceful administration in the interest of the family that comes of motherhood" (189).<sup>7</sup> She sees the arbitrary law of male government as a "fine machine of destruction" (184) and "free competition" as the battle cry of the "predaceous male" (192); the "iron weight" of male authority reaches its "most perfect expression in the absolutely masculine field of warfare" (183). Gilman asserts that "the tendency to care for, defend and manage a group, is in its origin maternal" (210), and she calls for more of this maternal expression in society. When Charity renounces the Mountain and drives up "to the door of the red house" as Mrs. Royall, she has closed the door on maternal possibilities. Her brand of motherhood is not so far removed from Julia's prostitution; they have both sold into the consumer society produced by men.<sup>8</sup> Not much has changed. The Mountain stands alone and abandoned. And the Dr. Merckles of the cities are still doing good business.

#### Montclair State College

#### Notes

1. Cynthia Griffin Wolff describes the conflict in terms of "a confrontation with the secret sharer (that uncivilized, unsocialized self within); conflict between generations, the two ages of man; the primitive in North Africa; the war; all of these — themes and journeys and events — must be understood as a part of the preparation for this novel" (*A Feast of Words* 271).

See also Gilbert and Gubar, who speak about the horror of maternal domination within a patriarchal society. Though the context of their discussion is *Ethan Frome*, what they say can also be applied to *Summer*: "the tale [*Ethan Frome*] reveals the horror that must inexorably come from maternal domination in a society where, at least from Wharton's point of view, what we would now call the Lacanian Law of the Father associates the feminine with regression and chaos" (155). Though Gilbert and Gubar states that *Ethan Frome* is "the book of the mother" (155) and suggest that *Summer* is the book of the father, I feel that the inescapable mother figure is just as crucial in *Summer*.

2. For an excellent study, besides the seminal work of Gilman, which analyzes how patriarchy has made motherhood a commodity, see Barbara Katz Rothman, who argues that capitalism, exploitation, and profit have created "the deep trouble motherhood is in" (66). She feels that mothers are being viewed as property and children as commodities.

3. For a lengthy discussion of Freud's conception of woman's sexuality as the dark continent, see Peter Gay, 501-522. Gay concludes by saying that "All this popular wisdom about mysterious Eve hints at the fundamental, triumphantly repressed fear of woman that men have felt in their bones since time out of mind" (522).

4. Geertz's discussion of the ethnographer's "self-reflexive, where-am-I, where-are-they, nature of anthropological writings" (23) can be applied to the men's psychology of the ruling class in *Summer*. Charity, though, believes in the authority of their text. The way that Royall perceives the Mountain becomes her truth, and his own prejudices become reality. In Geertz's terms, "...such writing about other societies is always at the same time a sort of Aesopian commentary on one's own" (23). Thus, his pronouncement that "For an American to sum up Zunis, Kwakiutl, Dobu, or Japanese, whole and entire, is to sum up Americans, whole and entire, at the same time" (23) can be reformulated in the context of *Summer* as "For men from North Dormer and from the city to sum up the feminine Mountain and Charity Royall, whole and entire, is to sum up men, whole and entire, at the same time." Their fears, desires, and neuroses enter the picture and taint the accurate reading of woman.

5. Traditionally, in classical mythology, the earth has been regarded as feminine either as maternal and sensual or as barren and virgin. Charity, to the men in this novel, appears as a seductive combination of both sensuality and chastity.

Citing de Beauvoir and Annette Kolodny, Alicia Ostriker shows how man, throughout history, has tried to bend the earth to his will, to conquer her with his technology (110). Ostriker also gives a brief overview of the recurrent mountain metaphor in women's poetry. Thus, for example, the mountain in Yosana Akiko's "Mountain Moving Day" symbolizes "women's bodies and their awakening consciousness" (111). And Judith McCombs' "Loving A Mountain" shows distinct "parallels between mountain and housewife/mother" (111).

6. Historically seen, women in a capitalist society have been more inclined toward family class bonding than sex class bonding, for "the family is a key economic, sexual, procreative and nurturant unit in capitalist patriarchal modes of sex/affective production" (137). The individual defines his interests in terms of what will help his/her individual family situation.

7. See also Sara Ruddick, who does not feel that mothers are innately peaceful, but who does believe in the possibility of peaceful politics through maternal thinking and in the educability of men to acquire such thinking.

Significantly, women are the ones who put the pieces together again during and after the war. As Wharton herself notes in *A Backward Glance*, women, in a mothering role which extended beyond the nuclear family, learned about new aspects of themselves in their jobs outside the family: "Many women with whom I was in contact during the war had obviously found their vocation in nursing the wounded, or in other philanthropic activities. The call on their co-operation had developed unexpected aptitudes which, in some cases, turned them forever from a life of discontented idling, and made them into happy people. Some developed a real genius for organization..." (356). Thus, Gilman's prediction that women could be productive outside the realm of domestic duties came true for some mothers, at least during wartime.

8. Interestingly, Gail Thain Parker, in her discussion of Perkins Gilman's attitude towards motherhood, says something similar to what I say about Wharton and motherhood. Gilman became convinced of her "unworthiness" as a woman through her mother's negative experience with marriage and with childbearing as well as through her own experience (89). According to Parker, for Gilman, "In a word, mother was a prostitute. Mrs. Gilman was obsessed with Veblen's vision of the middle-class woman who dedicated her energies to honorific expenditure. Underlying her abhorrence of the double sexual standard was a fear that the institution of marriage was no holier than the white slave trade" (88). Parker alludes specifically to the prefatory poem "Two Callings" at the beginning of Gilman's book *The Home: Its Work and Influence*.

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(continued on page 24)

# In Imitation and Anticipation of "Mrs. Wharton" — Cather's *Alexander's Bridge*

John J. Murphy

In 1931 Willa Cather, by then celebrated as the author of *My Antonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and Pulitzer Prize winner in 1922 for *One of Ours*, looking back on her first novel *Alexander's Bridge* (1911) tended to dismiss her earlier effort as a mere studio picture made out of fashionably interesting material. "Henry James and Mrs. Wharton were our most interesting novelists" then, she said ("My First Novels" 93), and most of the young writers like herself followed their manner without having their qualifications. However, even after Cather turned to the soil for her subject (the subject she considered as qualifying her), the drawing room manners of her first novel continued to define her fiction in a variety of subsequent novels — *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, among others. While James was probably the main inspiration for *Alexander's Bridge*, in its visual crispness and in the clarity of its psychological probing it resembles Wharton's fiction more than James's; neither Wharton nor Cather had James's skill or desire to explore the layers of consciousness that he did. What is curious about the Wharton connection of Cather's first novel is that the Wharton novel it most resembles, *The Age of Innocence*, was published nine years after *Alexander's Bridge*. There are some interesting similarities between Wharton's 1920 Pulitzer Prize winner and the work Cather would later disown as "unnecessary and superficial" ("My First Novels" 92), and comparing Cather's first novel to Wharton's masterpiece helps us see both novels more clearly than we might otherwise see them.

The fruits of Cather's principle of the unfurnished novel (novel demeuble) are evident in the clean-lined drama of Cather's protagonist, Bartley Alexander, that of a man caught between clutching for the promise of youthful passion — while juggling the stability and calmer fulfillment of life with his noble wife. The universality rather than wealth of realistic detail of Wharton's novel becomes obvious in the comparison; the drama at the heart of *The Age of Innocence* is that of a man reaching cautiously for the flower of life — the exotic woman to whom he sends yellow roses — but, due to his conservative temperament, falling short to become a devoted husband and father, a good citizen of his community. In both novels marriage wins — this despite some critics' emphasis on Cather's anti-marriage theme, and despite Wharton's own marital difficulties and the conclusions of some of her critics that throwing caution to the winds (and marriage and domesticity with it) is equivalent to the virtue courage. To both novelists the flower of life is unobtainable, and therein lies the poignancy of their novels.

The setting of *The Age of Innocence* — New York in the mid 1870s — is earlier by a generation than that of *Alexander's Bridge*, set mainly in the early 1900s, the era of Wharton's epilogue (Chapter 34),

where Newland Archer reflects on society's changes, discovers his deceased wife May knew of his affair, and refuses to take up, even meet, his old sweetheart, Ellen Olenska. Young men of his son Dallas's generation, Archer reflects, have gotten out of the narrow groove of sport and society, dilettante law and business and involved themselves in politics, municipal reform, archeology, architecture and engineering. The great man of Wharton's epilogue is Teddy Roosevelt, an energy force from Wharton's own aristocratic society but nurtured in the American West — "a man who set the example [rolled up his sleeves and got down to the muck], and whose summons to follow him was [for Archer] irresistible" (274). Cather's protagonist, Bartley Alexander, is just such an energetic leader — a man of action from the West: "The machinery was always pounding away in this man"; in his moments of apparent relaxation "Bartley had merely closed the door of the engine room" (13). Yet this celebrated bridge-builder is at home in his wife's Beacon Hill world; he lived in harmony with "beautiful things that have lived long together without obtrusions of ugliness or change.... warm consonances of color [which] had been blending and mellowing before he was born" (9-10). Newland Archer recognizes his own differences from this new breed, that he never was original enough to be, like Roosevelt, an exception to his own limited society and generation: "He had done little in public life — he would always be by nature a contemplative and a dilettante — but he had high things to contemplate, great things to delight in..." (274).

At the center of both novels a decent though different kind of man struggles between what he might have chosen and what he has, but at different stages of life. Archer's struggle is in his young manhood, before and during the first years of marriage to May Welland; Alexander's decision to ditch the Irish actress for the stability of marriage to Winifred Pemberton occurred years before Cather's novel opens. In middle age, however, when the routines of career, marriage, and society begin to shut down on him, Alexander takes up with his long-lost love. Long after Wharton's central drama had concluded, Archer, now a widower in his late fifties and free to take up with his beloved Ellen, if she will have him, decides against seeing her, lingers until the Paris day fails and the shutters of her lighted window are closed.

The struggle in each case is managed through a series of alternating scenes where the protagonist hesitates between the wife figure and the mistress figure. This pattern is established at the very beginning of Wharton's novel, when the seductive Ellen appears in an opera box with Archer's fiancée May, dressed in a theatrical and revealing dark gown against May's white one with modest tulle tucker and bouquet of lilies of the valley. Although Archer, as routine, has sown his wild oats in an agitated affair with Mrs. Thorley Rushworth, he now intends to

settle down with the virgin of the lilies, who he expects to be, somehow, as worldly wise as the married lady of his affair: "How this miracle of fire and ice was to be created, and sustain itself in a harsh world, he had never taken the time to think out..." (17). Subsequent exposure to Ellen, to her authority, beauty, superior conversational abilities, and flair for interior decoration (always a Wharton virtue), undermines May's innocence and tastes, exposing them as defensive guile and mere habits fashioned by her parents' way of life.

However, the mystery of Ellen, while part of her attraction, feeds Archer's suspicions about her morals; she makes suspicious friends like Julius Beaufort, a notorious rake lurking somewhere in the cellar of New York's pyramidal structure of approved families, and she makes unfashionable friends like Mrs. Lemuel Struthers of Struthers' Shoe Polish. When Ellen's estranged husband, Count Olenski, charges that she was unfaithful, Archer goes to Ellen, and, when she fails to offer defense, convinces her to protect her family from ugly suspicions by dropping her plans for divorce. "[W]hat should you gain that would compensate for the possibility--the certainty--of a lot of beastly talk?" he asks, and she responds with another question: "But my freedom--is that nothing?" (96). Archer suspects that her husband's charges are true, that she hopes to marry the partner of her guilt, her husband's secretary. This scene and the one at the van der Luyden Hudson River estate Skuytercliff -- where his tête à tête with Ellen is interrupted by what he initially suspects to be, despite her denial of this, a prearranged meeting with Beaufort--sends him fleeing to May in St. Augustine. May now becomes his truth, his reality, "like the life that belonged to him" (118). Even after his subsequent declaration of love to Ellen, when she says, "in reality it's too late for us to do anything but what we'd decided on" (142)--that is, for her to remain an estranged wife and for him to marry May--even after this, Archer fails to pressure her to proceed with the divorce. He then resigns himself to May, "to all those old inherited ideas about marriage....[May] would always be loyal, gallant, and unresentful...the tutelary divinity of all his old traditions and reverences....He had no fear of being oppressed by [her qualities], for his artistic and intellectual life would go on, outside the domestic circle; and within it there would be nothing small and stifling--coming back to his wife would never be like entering a stuffy room after a tramp in the open" (159-60).

But by the end of their extended honeymoon and the renewal of his pursuit of Ellen (now at once his fantasy and reality), May has become associated with deadening routine, "the whole chain of tyrannical trifles binding one hour to the next..." (176). Coming back to May is like life in death, like entering a stuffy room. One night, while sitting with her in the library of their ghastly greenish-yellow stone house, he opens the window for air, looks over the grid of Manhattan streets, and reflects, "I've been dead for months and months....What if it were *she* who was dead! If she were going to die--to die soon-- and leave him free! The sensation of sitting there, in that

warm familiar room, and looking at her, and wishing her dead, was so strange, so fascinating and overmastering, that its enormity did not immediately strike him" (236).

In Cather's novel the conflict is focused more deeply within the protagonist's psyche. Alexander had sown his wild oats in Paris with Hilda Burgoyne, to whom he returns a dozen years later, when he is feeling buried alive by career and marital responsibilities and routines. Cather combines Alexander's career and marriage by having him meet and become engaged to Winifred while working on his first bridge at Allway, Canada. This bridge has a "rather bridal look....It is over the wildest river, with mists and clouds always battling about it, and it is as delicate as a cobweb hanging in the sky" (17-18). "After he met Winifred Pemberton he seemed to himself like a different man" (29); he bridged over his passionate youth in Paris and London and wrote Hilda Burgoyne, "that everything was changed with him -- that he had met a woman whom he would marry if he could....He felt guilty and unhappy...for a time, but after Winifred promised to marry him he really forgot Hilda altogether" (28-29). One night on the bridge he offered to tell Winifred of his affair with Hilda, but she refused to listen to him.

Now the challenge of midlife for Alexander is the new bridge at Moorlock, Canada; it is "a test, indeed, of how far the latest practice in bridge structure could be carried," but it is "cramped in every way" and of "lighter structural material than Alexander thought proper" (37). It is thus strained like his life at this point, when he is "paying for success...in the demands made on his time by boards of civic enterprise and committees of public welfare. The obligations imposed by his wife's fortune and position were...distracting....for he was expected to be interested in a great many worthy endeavors on her account as well as his own....He found himself living exactly the kind of life he had determined to escape....It was like being buried alive" (37-38). Taking up with Hilda in London in mid-life becomes like having "a window...suddenly opened....as if all the smells of spring blew in to [him]" (101).

So the protagonists of both novels are caught in similar life-and-death conflicts. It might seem at first reading that fate intervenes in both cases to end the conflicts, but actually both novels revolve around the protagonists' choices aided by the sympathetic other women in their lives. The attempt to recover the missed life of passion involves, in each case, perspectivising life against death while acknowledging the futility of pursuing the elusive flower of life.

Wharton has Archer and Ellen meet in the archeological collection of the Metropolitan Museum where by a case of artifacts labeled "Use Unknown" Ellen reflects on the cruelty "that after a while nothing matters" (246). Among the mummies and sarcophagi Archer pressures her to come to him once before she returns to Europe, thinking that his love-making will convince her to run away with him. It is significant that Ellen decides to return to Europe to escape Archer and prevent a life of futility for both of them. She had been this route before and told him that there existed no country where they would cease

to be people unfaithful to others, who had broken promises and cheated in order to pursue the flower of life: "[W]here is that country?" she asks in response to his wish "to get away with [her] into a world where words like [mistress] — categories like that—won't exist." Ellen continues, "Have you ever been [in that country]?...I know many who've tried to find it; and ...they all got out by mistake at wayside stations; at places like Boulogne, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo — and it wasn't at all any different from the old world they'd left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous" (231). Archer is saved, then, by Ellen's flight *and*, on the brink of blurting out his intentions, by May's announcement that a child is on the way. But it is his own decision that seals his fate — it is too much for him to leave a pregnant wife; temperamentally he would be incapable, even if Ellen were willing, of running away. "O my dear," he exclaims to May after she makes her announcement, "holding her to him while his cold hand stroked her hair" (272).

In Cather's novel, Bartley Alexander, after hesitating to post a letter to his wife telling her about his renewed passion for Hilda, recognizes the futility of sacrificing stability and marriage to pursue the flower of life: "He seemed to see himself dragging out a restless existence on the Continent--Cannes, Hyeres, Algiers, Cairo--among smartly dressed, disabled men of every nationality; hurrying to catch trains that he might just as well miss; getting up in the morning with a great bustle and splashing of water, to begin a day that had no purpose and no meaning; dining late to shorten the night, sleeping late to shorten the day" (113-14). He realizes he would be pursuing "folly, a masquerade, a little thing that he could not let go," although he insists that he could let it go, while acknowledging that he had promised to be with Hilda in London at mid-summer, "and [that] he knew that he would go....It was impossible," he concludes, "to live like this any longer." He recognizes Winifred as his romance, as the woman who had given direction to his life: "In his feelings for his wife there was all the tenderness, all the pride, all the devotion of which he was capable. There was everything but energy, the energy of youth which must register itself and cut its name before it passes" (115). His visits with Hilda to the mummy room of the British museum make them both realize the preciousness of youth and life — "all the dead things in the world were assembled to make one's hour of youth the more precious" (33). More mature and aware than Newland Archer about the destructive route he is pursuing, Alexander had begged Hilda to stay away from him, which she at first refuses to do. But later, in New York, she agrees to marry anyone of her entourage of admirers in order to protect herself and him. Meanwhile, the strained Moorlock Bridge becomes Alexander's strained life, and it soon becomes the occasion of his death as it twists, collapses and tosses him into the rushing river underneath. As he struggles in the water he feels that Winifred is there with him, encouraging him to hold out, and he resolves "to tell her [about Hilda] and to recover all he had lost. Now, at last, he felt sure of himself....When he sank, his wife

seemed to be there in the water beside him telling him to keep his head....There was something he wanted to tell his wife, but he could not think clearly for the roaring in his ears. Suddenly he remembered what it was. He caught his breath, and then she let him go" (126-27), not (I think) to Hilda but to death. The unmailed confession letter Winifred finds in his pocket, water-soaked and illegible, its contents no longer relevant because at the last he affirmed his choice of her.

Cather thought too little of her first novel; not only is it cleanly structured and well-written, but it contains the wisdom of her own major work as well as that of Wharton, which it imitates and anticipates. Both novelists recognized the basic conflict between freedom and order, that there is no place one can go to escape responsibility for choices freely made, and that the flower of life, as Newland Archer reflects at the end, is "a thing so unattainable and improbable that to have repined [about missing it] would have been like despairing because one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery" (275).

Brigham Young University

#### Works Cited

- Cather, Willa. *Alexander's Bridge*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P—Bison, 1977. "My First Novels." *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*. New York: Knopf, 1949. 91-97.
- Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence*. New York: NAL — Signet, 1962.

## Corrections

Several typesetting errors distorted a passage in Alfred Bendixen's bibliographic essay in the last *Review*. The correct text appears below:

Nevertheless, some tentative conclusions can be offered. It is clear that there are some factual errors in Lewis's biography, but so far most of these seem to involve relatively small matters of detail. For instance, the name of Fullerton's blackmailing mistress may not have been Henrietta Mirecourt, but there is no reason to doubt her existence. That Wharton suffered from some kind of nervous breakdown in the 1890's seems undeniable, but the severity and duration of the breakdown may be open to some question. Pitlick's suggestion that there is more information to be found about the early years of Wharton's life is intriguing, but exactly how we shall have to modify our understanding of these formative years remains unclear.

Two errors marred the article, "Edith Wharton on Film and Television" by Scott Marshall. The correct text should read:

The young actor [John Lodge] appeared in several films under prominent directors: *Little Women* (1933, directed by George Cukor); *The Scarlet Empress* (1934, directed by Josef von Sternberg; . . .[etc.]

The correct name of Edith Wharton's dog is "Linky", not "Lindy."

# The Paradox of Desire: Jacques Lacan and Edith Wharton

Garry M. Leonard

For years, in commentaries on *The House of Mirth*, critics have, with varying degrees of generosity, granted Lily Bart a moral victory over the shallow society that has abused her. Correspondingly, Lawrence Selden has been seen as the weak male who might have saved her, but proved himself inadequate for this undertaking.<sup>1</sup> In the last several years, this fairly comfortable attitude about the "meaning" of their relationship has been considerably complicated: "Whether or not there is a workable reading of Lily," Michelson writes, "the interpretive problem is still a large one: to sort out the essential Lily Bart from her various masks...." Likewise, Michelson sees Selden as "an eerily modern creature who is unaware even of his own confusion. His republic of the spirit is an ideological anarchy...." Finally, Michelson offers an insightful summary of Selden's character that I find characteristic of the novel as a whole: "Neither Selden himself nor Lily nor anyone else in the novel can locate, among all the timely poses and pronouncements, the genuine sentiments and motives of the man." I would enlarge upon this observation and suggest that the "eerily modern" brilliance of this novel rests on Wharton's persistent and skillful refusal to provide a moral center—not just to Selden, but to experience and the phenomenon of consciousness as well. Michelson concludes his essay by identifying the theme of the novel as "the dilemma of 'reality' itself, the problem of finding a way...to the essential self, is woven deftly into the fabric of one of America's most genuinely ambitious modern novels."<sup>2</sup>

I would like to push this observation a step further and suggest that even the idea of "an essential self" is on trial in the fiction of Edith Wharton. I do not say that she deliberately set out to disavow the possibility of a "true self," but I would like to suggest that one reason her reputation has grown throughout the Twentieth Century is that she examines, with amazing subtlety, the difficulty—perhaps the impossibility—of discovering and maintaining an identity. I see a great deal of Wharton's work as "eerily modern" because of the way she intuits problematics of "identity" that have only recently been put into concrete discourse by thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan. In an essay published just this last fall, Julie Olin-Ammentorp applauds the advances made in Wharton criticism by the feminist approach, but she cautions against seeing the men in Wharton's novels as merely masterful victimizers. Instead, she suggests we examine the different ways that both are enmeshed in their struggle for being: "Wharton's point is not that Lily is victim, Selden victimizer, but that in spite of their different standing within the system, both are pitiable in their entrapment."<sup>3</sup> This seems a productive direction to take in Wharton criticism since it

allows us, for instance, to look at the relationship between George and Bertha Dorset—a relationship that can not be discussed adequately in terms of a male victimizer and a female victim (and it would be equally reductive to simply reverse the order and see Bertha solely as a victimizer). Lacan's theory of gender and sexuality involves seeing gender relationships in a dialectical framework, and I think his approach would be particularly useful when analyzing the exceedingly complex relationship of the sexes that is Edith Wharton's almost constant subject.<sup>4</sup> All I propose to do here, given space limitations, is analyze several interactions between Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden in light of a few insights gleaned from the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan.<sup>5</sup>

"Man has only to dream" says Lacan, "to see re-emerging before him that vast jumble, that lumber room he has to get by with . . ." <sup>6</sup> When man is not dreaming, according to Lacan, he seeks reasons to believe in the unity and coherence of his identity, since this belief will help him forget that lumber room where he first combined discordant images to form the myth of himself. "To be human," writes one explicator of Lacan's theory, "is to be subjected to a law which decenters and divides . . . the subject is split; but an ideological world conceals this from the conscious subject" (*Feminine Sexuality*, p. 26). The primary myth of this ideological world is the assertion that the terms "masculine" and "feminine" designate innate qualities in the male and female which, when brought together, perfectly complement each other in a manner that assures and preserves the separate identity of each. Lacan insists that "there is nothing corresponding to the terms masculine and feminine which can be directly grasped as such in our experience" (*Feminine Sexuality*, p. 107). Selden's initial fascination with Lily, I would suggest, is that he is amused to study her as a professional masquerading as "feminine" in order to "complete" or "guarantee" the masculine subjectivity of a man (the hapless Percy Gryce, for example); Selden has snuck behind the scenes of Lily's masquerade by deliberately disallowing himself as an audience for her performance (this detached pose fails him, as we shall see).

What deepens their relationship is that Lily is powerfully attracted to Selden's pose of being immune to her "femininity" because she, for her part, is weary of the duplicitous pose of being feminine. "What I want" she says to him, having accepted his invitation to tea, something she never would have done were she performing for him, "is a friend who won't be afraid to say disagreeable [things] when I need them. Sometimes I have fancied you might be that friend — I don't know why, except that you are neither a prig nor a bounder, and that I shouldn't have to pretend with you or be on my guard against

you.' Her voice had dropped to a note of seriousness...'<sup>7</sup> She wants to be his friend — outside the boundaries of “feminine/masculine” — and later she thinks about being his lover; but what destroys her is that she tries to be both. Late in the novel, her desperate solution is to psychically split herself in half — leaving the “real” Lily with Selden, and then pursuing her destiny elsewhere as a performer and illusionist. The solution fails because her masquerade of femininity is the only “self” she has; even her death will be just one more *tableaux vivants* for Selden.

Lacan likens the situation of a man in love to that of the magician “putting the rabbit into the hat so as to be able to pull it out again later.”<sup>8</sup> In this analogy, the woman is the empty hat. The man places the myth of his coherent identity within her, and then pulls it out before his own wondering eyes. To fulfill her function, a woman must disappear behind the masquerade of femininity. Lacan signified this paradox by writing “The Woman,” and then crossing out the word “The”: “. . . reduced to being nothing other than this fantasmatic place, the woman does not exist. Lacan’s statement . . . means, not that women do not exist, but that her status as an absolute category and guarantor of fantasy is false” (*Feminine Sexuality*, p. 49). Lily’s fascination with Selden is that, since he shows an amused disdain for her performance as “The Woman,” perhaps he will permit her to be a woman — something she knows nothing about because an actress who has never been offstage can hardly expect to know who she is when she is not performing. Lacan’s point is that a woman’s performance *becomes* her myth of a unified identity because a man depends on this performance in order to believe in *his* identity: “Images and symbols *for* the woman cannot be isolated from images and symbols *of* the woman. It is representation . . . of feminine sexuality . . . which conditions how it comes into play . . .” (*Feminine Sexuality*, p. 90). That is, representation constructs a category within which feminine sexuality is visible. Lily is delighted that Selden seems to see something in her besides the masquerade, but the reality is he does not see her at all until he “falls in love” with her after seeing her pose as “The Woman” in her *tableaux vivants*. When she asks him to help her after this event, he replies “I can only help you by loving you,” which is true — but it is no help at all (p. 145). This makes the relationship of Lily and Selden more subtle than previously allowed: she is attracted to him because she interprets his indifference to her feminine masquerade as love for whatever part of her is not part of the performance. As Selden “falls in love” with Lily, she is alarmed because he is falling in love with her presentation of herself — something that he has given her to understand he finds despicable — and yet he has proven unable to love anything else about her.

“In the life of a man,” Lacan says, “a woman is something he believes in. He believes there is one, or at times two or three, but the interesting thing is that, unable to believe only in one, *he believes in a species*, rather like sylphs or water sprites” (*Feminine Sexuality*, p. 168, my emphasis). When Selden sees Lily in her *tableau* (posing as the representation of a

representation!) he decides he has seen the “real” Lily Bart, and that he loves her. He goes to find her — so he can look into her eyes, and she can look back at him — so his belief in himself will be confirmed by her gaze. For the first time he believes in her. He does not look through her as a woman, but “sees” her as “The Woman.” As such, she has created that magical realm for him where both water sprites and unified masculine identities exist. As Selden goes in search of Lily, Wharton makes it clear that the gaze from her he is hoping for is not at all unique: “if Selden had approached a moment or two sooner he would have seen her turning on Ned Van Alstyne and George Dorset the look he had dreamed of capturing for himself.” But as it turns out (“Fortune willed,” Wharton tells us), the men have cleared out as Selden arrives: “Lily was therefore standing alone when he reached her; and *finding the expected look in her eye*, he had the satisfaction of supposing he had kindled it . . .” (p. 144, italics mine.)<sup>9</sup>

In seeking Lily out to gaze into her eyes, Selden is, to cite Lacan’s metaphor, pulling the rabbit of his identity from the hat, while forgetting that it is he who put it there. Lily then reads in his eyes the secret of *her* identity as a guarantor of *his*: “She read, too, in his answering gaze the delicious confirmation of her triumph, and for the moment it seemed to her that it was for him only she cared to be beautiful . . .” (p. 144). She reveals *her* desire as being a desire *to become the satisfaction of his desire* and thereby establish her identity as ‘feminine’ by authenticating his identity as ‘masculine.’ And yet Wharton has been explicit about the fact that Selden’s gaze is based on a false assumption about Lily’s gaze, and thus implies that Lily’s assumption about herself that she reads in his return gaze is equally false. But this is the sort of misrecognition that Lacan finds essential in the fantasy waltz undertaken by a man and a woman in the sexual relationship (a misrecognition that is not present in the candid, unromantic meeting in Selden’s apartment, and so there is no sexual tension). Wharton’s fantastic description of how the two lovers perceive their surroundings emphasizes the fact that they are lost in mutual illusion: “The faces about her flowed by like the streaming images of sleep . . . Selden and Lily stood still, accepting the unreality of the scene as a part of their own dream-like sensations . . .” (p. 144). Lily’s dilemma is that she must appear to be what she is not in order to be loved as what Selden only imagines she is. If she accepts his love of her masquerade, then she disappears in order to become visible for him; if she refuses to “present” herself to him, he analyzes her performance for other men in a distant, amused way, *but he does not see anything* except her professional expertise. Becoming “The Woman,” then, as the *tableaux vivants* scene makes clear, is a performance. But if we follow Lacan’s point, images and symbols *for* a woman become images and symbols *of* “The Woman”. Either she accepts and conforms to this representation, or she will not be represented (nor loved) at all.

Lacan teaches that the myth of a heterosexual gender complementarity permits the ‘male’ to believe in the fiction of a complete and unified identity. At the same time, this myth relegates the ‘female’ to an identity limbo where she is taught to mask her lack



of identity in order to guarantee the spurious certitude of the 'male'. The cultural praise she accrues to herself for successfully doing this helps to mitigate the vertiginous effects of denying the problematics of her own identity. A man feels his masculine subjectivity is complete because he believes "The Woman" objectively sees what he in fact can only imagine himself to be. Correspondingly, the 'female' experiences the coherency of her identity in accordance with how convincingly she "guarantees" the mythical completion of masculine subjectivity. A man must forget that this female 'subject' which authenticates his unity is merely reflecting back to him the myth of his own coherency which he projected on to her in the first place, and a woman must forget that a man is in love with a performance that allows her sexuality to be "visible" (though only as a representation).

Lacan compares the paradoxical situation of a woman seeking to determine her value in the sexual marketplace to pieces of furniture trying to determine, for themselves, their authenticity and market value in an antique store. Subjective experience is disallowed as a source of authentication, and a woman enters a hall of mirrors where she is forced to construct an image of herself based on her reflection in a wide variety of mirrors — all of them distorted:

Who will authenticate it? The dealer's word is not gospel . . . no piece of furniture can guarantee its own authenticity.

Imagine now a piece of furniture which struck by this inability to certify its own authenticity, lights on the idea of the stamp, which the other pieces of furniture seem equally deprived of . . . But it would need only one piece of furniture to bear the stamp for the situation of all the others to change completely. Each one would rig itself out with the same stamp and . . . sing out its own exchange value, its use value... (*Feminine Sexuality*, p. 133).

In the *tableaux vivants* scene, it is Lily who triumphs when she appears to the crowd as the valuable piece bearing the stamp by which all the other pieces will be judged: "so skillfully had the personality of the actors been subdued to the scenes they figured in that even the least imaginative of the audience must have felt a thrill of contrast when the curtain suddenly parted on a *picture* which was simply and undisguisedly *the portrait* of Miss Bart" (p. 141, italics mine).

In the Lacanian theory of desire, the man does not simply desire the woman; he must imagine himself as the cause of her desire if she is to be of any use to him. Women are taught to pose in deep reverie for the approving gaze of the man who is then free to supply *himself* as the cause of her desire. Because "The Woman" is constructed with reference to a male sign, the didactic purpose of "feminine education" cannot fail to be that a woman must learn how to masquerade as "The Woman" — in order to be loved — in order to *be*, at all: "[The Woman] lends herself readily to the perversion which I hold to be The Man's. Which leads her to the well-known Masquerade . . . the on-the-off chance of being prepared so that The Man's fantasy can find its hour of truth

in her."<sup>11</sup> Selden's "hour of truth" arrives at the height of Lily's masquerade: "he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, *catching for a moment* a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part . . . it was as though her beauty . . . had held out suppliant hands to him from the world in which he and she had once met *for a moment*, and where he felt an overmastering longing to be with her again" (p. 142, italics mine). After they kiss, Lily and Selden both reveal the same intuition, though they act on it in different ways. She breaks from him and flees the room, and he does not attempt to follow: "He knew too well the transiency of exquisite moments to attempt to follow her" (p. 145). How did he know, since he has never kissed her before? He knows because he has achieved identical "moments" with this species he believes in as the authenticator of his identity. How is it that he knows this "too well"? Because this masquerade has failed before (with Bertha Dorset?), and even in the midst of finding his "hour of truth" in Lily, he expects it to fail again.

So, from a male perspective, femininity becomes a symptom — something that protects the male from unbearable knowledge because it tantalizes him with what appears to be the whole truth about himself. She becomes, for him, something ineffable. Of course, despite his impulse to "know" what this symptom disguises from his view, the success of the feeling of mastery depends upon a woman remaining enigmatic, because what she actually hides from him is not the whole truth about himself at all, but the falsity of his fictional unity. The gift he wishes to believe she is forever on the point of giving him (verification of his unified identity) is a thing she does not possess. For Lily, the only conduit to love, to "reality," is to appear to be something she is not, to masquerade as 'feminine' — and then retreat before the performance calls attention to itself. "The Woman," Lacan tells us, "will reject an essential part of her femininity, notably all its attributes, through masquerade. It is for what she is not that she expects to be desired as well as loved" (*Feminine Sexuality*, p. 84). A woman is urged to be "The Woman" even though this leads to, as Lacan puts it, "a quasi-total extinction of sexual life, except possibly in the domain of verbal parade. An extinction which the women in question are not even aware of, but which strikes them as quite normal, that is, as belonging in the order of things. In short, they do not see it as having the value of a symptom *but rather as adding to their 'value'*" (*Feminine Sexuality*, p. 128, italics mine). Lily is intuitively frightened of this anesthetizing process, yet in her early play for Percy Gryce, "adding to her value" while extinguishing her sexual instincts (no gambling, no cigarette smoking) is precisely the strategy she outlines for herself: "she determined to be to him what his Americana had hitherto been: the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it" (p. 51, italics mine). In a single sentence, as my emphasis demonstrates, Lily converts herself from "she" to "it," in a process that I would argue approximates Lacan's description of the "quasi-extinction of sexual life" that a woman undergoes to become "The Woman."

When Lily goes to Selden's apartment for the final



time, she is no longer in costume. His "light tone" Wharton's narrator tells us (Lily is too exhausted and desperate to notice), is "the mere effort to bridge an awkward moment." In stark contrast, Lily has "a passionate desire to be understood. In her strange state of extra-lucidity, which gave her the sense of being already at the heart of the situation, it seemed incredible that any one should think it necessary to linger in the conventional outskirts of word-play . . ." (p. 322). Just as when she visited him the first time, he mechanically offers her tea. Instead of seeing this as a focal point for coquetry (as with Percy Gryce), Lily dismisses the offer with the simple truth: "I drink too much tea." Lily then announces her shocking strategy to divide herself in two — to leave the part of her that is unrepresented as "The Woman" in the apartment with Selden, and then to move forth with Bertha Dorset's letters to reap permanent benefits by masquerading as 'feminine.' He asks once more if he can help her and she replies, "Do you remember what you said to me once? That you could help me only by loving me? Well — you did love me *for a moment*; and it helped me. It has always helped me. But *the moment* is gone — it was I who let it go" (p. 326, italics mine). With this pronouncement, she abandons the strategy of "splitting herself," drops the packet in the fire, and leaves — unable to belie the "truth" of their "moment," which, as Wharton has been careful to imply, is not real, but rather the moment that keeps reality at bay. When Selden gazes at the dead Lily Bart, he reiterates the importance of their "momentous reality" which makes the rest of their experience illusion: "It was *this moment of love*, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction" (p. 347). This is clearly only Selden's perspective, since this same moment that he describes in such mutually affirming tones has in fact *been brought about* by Lily's "extinction." Selden was not able to "save her" because he only knew the Lily "of the moment" and she has, as she says "let go of the moment." Her hope had been that he would discover and love whatever part of her remained unrepresented beyond the masquerade of "The Woman." But he is no more able to see this part of her than he is able to see that "The Woman" on the bed before him, who he believes has communicated for him "the word which made all clear" is a corpse.

University of Rhode Island

## Call for Help

For a scholarly, culturally contextualized biography (under contract to Scribner's), Shari Benstock requests information on all aspects of Wharton's life and work, especially references beyond standard biographical sources and to unpublished materials. Biography will cite Wharton scholarship and scrupulously acknowledge any assistance. Write to: Professor Shari Benstock, 9 Island Avenue, #1614, Miami Beach, FL. 33139-1360.

1. Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1953; Geoffrey Walton, *Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation*, (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), 1970; R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). Carol Wer-shoven, *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton* (East Brunswick, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), 1982. Although these books have significant differences in their theoretical approach and their conclusions, they offer a representative sampling of how pervasive a view of Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden this is.
2. Bruce Michelson, "Edith Wharton's House Divided," *Studies in American Fiction*, Volume 12, Number 1, Autumn 1984, pp. 199-215.
3. Julie Olin-Ammertorp, "Edith Wharton's Challenge to Feminist Criticism," *Studies in American Fiction*, Volume 16, Number 2, Autumn 1988, p. 241.
4. Here I would like to add that a more detailed approach to the dialectical relationship between the 'masculine' and 'feminine' genders will allow us to see Wharton, even more decisively, as a writer who has gone beyond merely chronicling a certain 'social milieu.' A Lacanian approach might, for instance, further explain the mythical resonance of a work like *Ethan Frome* (I am working on just such an essay). In this novella Wharton details a lifestyle she could not have known personally, but her success at doing so should not be surprising if we understand that her subject matter is human sexuality and its relationship to society — regardless of whether her setting is Fifth Avenue or an obscure New England village.
5. What I utilize in this essay represents only a small portion of Lacan's theory and is not to be taken as the whole of his theoretical framework.
6. Jacques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), p. 159. All subsequent references to this volume will appear in the text.
7. Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: The Library of America, 1986), p. 9. All other quotations from this volume will be cited in the text.
8. Jacques Lacan, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, ed. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), p. 64. All subsequent references to this volume will appear in the text.
9. To see this as flirtatious or wanton on Lily's part would be to take the position of the Duke in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," who also protests that he destroyed the last Duchess because she gave the same look to every man. Misogyny is often the refusal on the part of a man to recognize the influence of his "masculine" identity needs on the construction of "femininity." Masculine subjectivity requires that the gaze which affirms unity must be unique; it is up to a woman — masquerading as "The Woman" — to make this fiction appear as fact.
10. Jacques Lacan, *Television*, p. 64. Quoted in Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction. Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 42.

# Justice to Teddy Wharton: Louis Auchincloss's "The Arbiter"

Adeline Tintner

If Judith Funston<sup>1</sup> would like to see someone's comment on Louis Auchincloss's explanation of the Wharton divorce ("Teddy Wharton, soon to be shed for having bored his brilliant spouse," a quotation from the New York Times Book Review of *Henry James's Letters IV* by Auchincloss), here it is. I speak only as a reader of Auchincloss, not for the author himself, since I doubt whether he would ever claim that "The Arbiter" gave the explanation of the divorce between Teddy and Edith Wharton. It is an explanation and one that no one who has read all the biographical material, in addition to the recently published letters, can deny its plausibility. In fact, Auchincloss refers to that aspect of Teddy once more in his review of *The Lewis' Edition of Wharton's Letters* in *The New Criterion*, May, 1988, when he discusses the love affair with Fullerton when Edith was "forty-six, and her marriage to the boring and neurotic 'Teddy' Wharton was foundering."<sup>2</sup> That need to shed a spouse usually occurs the other way around, when a husband, becoming famous, finds his wife no longer adequate to his position and divorces her, to marry what we used to call the sports-car-model wife. That, of course, is not justifiable, but it is understandable. In the Whartons' case, the shoe was on the other foot and it was Edith who grew. Teddy, who stayed in his groove, broke down under the pressure. But Edith always felt a responsibility to him, was aware of the social amenities of marriage in her circle, and Auchincloss has given that his full acknowledgement in his admirable life of Wharton written in 1971, four years before the Lewis biography appeared. In that book he makes it quite clear there is something to be said on both sides and he tries to be fair.

Here is how I should sum up the story of her marriage: she and Teddy were married at a time when she had no reason to believe that she would not always be satisfied with the social life of a New York society matron whose spouse Teddy seemed perfectly qualified to be. This life rapidly bored her, and Teddy, a neurasthenic, lacked the ability either to dominate her or to interest her. She took up travelling, decorating, and finally writing to compensate for the frustrations of her married life, and in doing so she discovered that she was made for a totally different existence. Teddy's near-lunatic temper and their childlessness made a bad situation impossible. In the end the only thing she could do was to cut loose and start afresh, in a new country, without a spouse. Who in 1971 can cast the first stone at her?<sup>3</sup>

Auchincloss, the biographer, is trying to be fair to both Edith and Teddy, but handling the facts in a strict biography is one thing and making a case for

someone like Teddy in a fictional account of the crucial years of Edith's marriage is another. For Auchincloss, the writer, actually has written the early life of Edith Wharton twice: once in his factual account and once in a fictional account, a privilege to which he is entitled as an inventor of stories. He himself justifies this transmutation of literal facts into fictional form when he considers Edith's use of Walter Berry for the figure of Mr. Culwin in "The Eyes." He allows that a writer can make a figure of horror from someone for whom he has the greatest feeling of admiration and sincere love, since "such a characterization is perfectly consistent with the deepest friendship that a novelist can feel. Edith herself, in *Hudson River Bracketed*, would create a wholly sympathetic novelist's character who deliberately uses every emotional experience, however personal, however intimate, as grist for his fictional mill. She knew that thus novels are made."<sup>4</sup>

Thus short stories are also made, and Auchincloss's "The Arbiter" is an example of this process. It is one of a collection of a number of tales called *The Winthrop Covenant* joined together as specific illustrations of the Puritan conscience, each of which is independent of the others. "The Arbiter" is a fine story and a very successful illustration of his use of what Auchincloss knew about Edith, her marriage, her husband and her circle (it was published in 1976, the year after Lewis's *Edith Wharton*) to invent a tale with these basic biographical ingredients, but with an alteration of some facts, a bias permissible to a writer of fiction.

In the tale, Teddy appears as Bob Guest and is the person with whom the main character, the author and the reader are most sympathetic. The main character of this story is a member and descendant of the Winthrop family, for the collection of stories is united by the fact that the Winthrops had originally received a covenant from God, who would protect them in their Pilgrim colony if they did not sin. The persistence of this collective conscience of members of the family through three hundred years, from the time of their arrival on the New England coast, is the joining element of the nine tales. The one devoted to the Teddy-Edith relationship is connected to the Winthrops through the main character in the tale, Adam Winthrop. Anyone knowing *A Backward Glance* will see that Adam is a revival of Egerton Winthrop, the Winthrop Edith knew as a young woman and who, according to her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, meant so much to her as a mentor and friend in the years during which she was learning her craft. Egerton is described as "an old friend of my family. A widower with grown children, he lived in 'a charming house' " and "was a discriminating collector of works of art, especially of the 18th century."<sup>5</sup> Although the real Egerton Winthrop was fixed on social life, Edith "saw only the lover of books and pictures, the

accomplished linguist and eager reader whose ever-youthful curiosities first taught my mind to analyze and my eyes to see." Although a generation older, he "directed and systematized my reading, and filled some of the worst gaps in my education" (BG, 94). He was part of the group who "were active in administering the new museums, libraries and charities of New York....In our little group Egerton Winthrop's was by far the most sensitive intelligence, and it transformed my life to find my vague enthusiasms canalized...he was full of wisdom in serious matters. Sternly exacting to himself, he was humorously indulgent towards others....I found him, in difficult moments, the surest of counsellors" (BG, 96).

R.B. Lewis has seen Egerton Winthrop as the model for Sillerton Jackson, the gossip-loving New Yorker in *The Age of Innocence*, and Edith herself noted in her autobiography that "the more I ponder over our long friendship the more I despair of portraying him; for never...have an intelligence so distinguished and a character so admirable been combined with interests for the most part so trivial." It may be this sentence in *A Backward Glance* that acted as a germ for Auchincloss to decide to take the admirable part of Winthrop and to portray him with certain changes. He emphasizes in his reconstruction of Egerton his other more commendable qualities—his taste as a collector especially of eighteenth century paintings, and his role as an "arbiter elegantiarum." He makes this "arbiter" of behavior a serious art collector married to a wife with whom he has little in common (Egerton actually was a widower) who had made a close friendship with the young Ada Guest, the Edith character. He changes Egerton's interest in New York fashionable life to a deep desire on the part of Adam Winthrop to advise Ada not to go to Europe, but to stay in New York. "Everything you need for your act, Ada, is right inside of you."<sup>6</sup> He tells her that her "bluebird, like Maeterlinck's, was at home" (WC, 150). (In this passage, Auchincloss also has introduced some elements from Henry James, who advised her to stick to her own "backyard.") Adam Winthrop remains in this story as her advisor and mentor, not as a gossip-monger. Another bit of material about Egerton from Lewis's biography was the image of life having "its characteristic setting a prison cell."<sup>7</sup> Auchincloss seems to refer to this when Adam's wife Violet accuses him of having made her a prisoner in his museum-like house, "You've walled out life, Adam" (WC, 136).

Bob Guest, Ada's husband, like Teddy, is usually broke, though, unlike Teddy, he was always a heavy drinker. He enters the tale by trying to get, as was his custom, a loan from Adam Winthrop who is about to pay one of his regular visits to Ada, the talented writer who helps support herself and her spend-thrift husband by publishing her poetry and fiction. But the Bob we see seems to be the result of a decision on the part of Auchincloss to create a figure like Teddy, but one who presents his case with an articulate perception that Teddy did not have and who knows he will be an unhappy man if he goes to Paris with Ada, who wants her own circle away from

an arid New York, as Edith had done at the turn of the century. He goes with great reluctance because he knows that since she will be surrounded by an intellectual group he will have no activities congenial to himself. With great intelligence he describes the history of their marriage as having been the attraction of a "dashing New York clubman" for "a Miss Nobody from Boston," a conversion of Edith's origins. "But the real truth is that she was a genius and I was already a drunk," he confesses. He admired her for not leaving him and for writing and bringing in "most of the money on which we lived" (WC, 153). Her mentor Adam tries to get Ada to change her plan because of the harm it would do to Bob and he suggests her getting a house in the country where Bob could be with his dogs and his riding. Ada, in her self-interest, won't hear of it. Adam tells her that "Bob cares for you," to which she answers, "Has he ever tried to care about anything that interests me?" Adam responds, "He can't, Ada. It's beyond him." Adam believes that "the best soil and the climate for her are right here in New York" (WC, 155). She then confesses that she is leaving New York because he and the other figures who admire her, including an architect based on the figure of Stanford White, are all "dry, Adam, all of you!" (WC, 156). Adam recognizes that she will make use of him too as material for fiction. "The future will be full of university theses written about the question of who is the model of the arid dilettante, the cold epicure, the bloodless formalist, who appears so frequently in the novels of Ada Guest" (WC, 157), as indeed Egerton has come to be so considered.

The next scene is three years later when, after their move to Paris, Bob returns to talk to Winthrop at their club, The Patroons', and, although there have been stories of his drinking in Paris and his philandering, he now orders lemonade. He tells Adam he has decided to give Ada a divorce and explains how Ada had developed a salon of "expatriates with artistic leanings." Although Bob did what was expected of him, "she found what she called my Philistinism unbearable," but what finally broke him down was "the condescending kindness of her new friends." Here he describes quite accurately the behavior of the group, including "an old bachelor Percy Hunt" (shades of Percy Lubbock) which did condescend to Teddy. "I began to be maddened by my gentle treatment as Ada's illiterate husband" (WC, 159). He adds, "I was made to feel a brute, a cad. When I came into the parlor they all stared at me as if I were a mad dog. I took up with other women, whores mostly....And do you know what I began to understand, Adam? Ada was putting it all on. She was deliberately acting the martyred wife to her gallery of wizened dilettantes. She was determined to get rid of me, to drive me out and to be the wronged spouse to boot. Oh, yes, however wronged, she had to be right!" (WC, 160). He decides, therefore, to give her the divorce so that she can write. He wants her to achieve a great place in literature for, if she doesn't, "where are you and I....What have we been but early chapters — or maybe footnotes — in the great biography?" (WC,

161). This reflects authorial prescience on the part of Auchincloss for this is what they have been, with changes and distortions—really footnotes in the pages of Lewis's biography, published a year before this story. Yet, at the end of the tale, Winthrop does not have the same high opinion of Ada's gifts as Bob does and he considers her capable of "meanness." He calls her "vulgar" and tells Bob that she has "treated you in the worst possible taste."

This tale, of course, is an invention in which Auchincloss has postulated a scenario where Teddy is the victim of Edith, one who voluntarily gives in to the pressure of her genius which compels her to live her life according to her needs and not her husband's. It is a possible Teddy angle, if Teddy could talk the way Bob Guest does, if Teddy could think in such subtle and self-negating terms, and if Teddy could sacrifice himself to her superiority. He obliges Ada because he thinks she is better than he is and, in spite of Adam Winthrop, who has a Puritan conscience to satisfy because of the terms of his presence in this book, the reader has to agree with him. The most striking fictional distortion lies in the behavior of Ada as presented by the otherwise intellectually improved Bob. Her pretending to be acting the martyred wife for her friends in order to "drive me out and to be the wrong spouse to boot," has been invented by Auchincloss for his fictive Edith, and is not to be considered as something that really took place, although this Ada surely has many recognizable traits of Edith's character and the events in Ada's life are close to the events in Edith's life. (Ada's trio of New York friends resembles the circle that Edith describes in *A Backward Glance*. Her small house on Park Avenue, which, in her autobiography, she calls "the smallest of small houses" (BG, 93), is reflected in Auchincloss's story when Adam visits her in a "tiny brownstone." She begins by writing historical novels, one about St. Luke composing his gospel instead of one about 18th century Italy.)

This is also not the real Teddy, but the way Teddy might or could have been, just as Ada is not the real Edith, but the way a rather "vulgar" Edith might have been. Adam Winthrop ends the tale by saying to Bob, "Yes, she's very vulgar. The way she has treated you is in the worst possible taste" (WC, 161). And this reconstructed Egerton Winthrop claims that he would "Never!" change places with her. We are quite sure the real Egerton Winthrop probably would have, for he continued to be a close friend, though a generation older than she was, throughout his life. I, as a reader, see that this is a tale of a gifted woman married to a handsome, indolent, drinking, constantly broke man, which is what Teddy finally became. By a manipulation of the facts for a story of Edith and Teddy's life, especially at the time when Edith went to Paris in 1907, it justifies the plight that Teddy was in, married to a woman way beyond him in brains and talent, who is capable of handling her life and needing to free herself from her bondage to a boring and frustrating husband. In our day this marriage would have been ended shortly after it had been made. But Edith had her inherited feelings about divorce and a sense of responsibility to her husband, herself and society. It was actually only after she fell in love with Fullerton that her marriage

became unbearable. It was a situation in which no real blame can be attached to either of the partners, though one can also feel for the rejected male as one would have felt for the rejected female, if the case had been the conventional one. The role models were here reversed.

As a balance to Edmund Wilson's essay, "Justice to Edith Wharton," Auchincloss has allowed himself a fantasy of "Justice to Teddy Wharton," if Teddy had not been the utter bore he really was. Bob Guest, the Teddy clone, is therefore not a clone, for he is much superior, and, as such, he dominates the tale and wins our respect. It is a vote against Ada Guest, but then Ada is *not* Edith, although the case is perilously close. It is implied that Ada might not be the genius her husband thinks she is, and the Winthrop of this tale rejects Bob's interpretation of their role in relation to each other. But, although the tale is not a true report, and I am sure Auchincloss never meant it to be considered true, it is a very good story. Created as an analogue of the real triangular relationship, the fictive and imagined one makes an especially effective read. In its sheer ingenuity and great story-telling skill, the story reminds me of Henry James's tale about another divorce case around the same time, the W.K. Vanderbilt case, where certain facts are dramatized and exaggerated to create "The Special Type." In this sense, the story by Auchincloss continues the James-Wharton tradition of social comment.

New York City

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## Correspondence

Dear Editor:

The issue of the *Edith Wharton Review*, Vol. VII, No. 1, on page 2 has a note about the "Colloquy" at St. Brice-sous-Forêt held in 1987 by the French "Friends of Old Saint-Brice." It describes this as "part of the international celebrations of the 125th anniversary of Edith Wharton's birth."

This is quite wrong. It was not a "celebration" of birth but a commemoration of death. The old timers of St. Brice were remembering Edith Wharton's neighborly spirit at the Pavillon-Colombe, her generousities, her benefactions, her sensitive gestures to the town and even the time when she sued the City Council for wanting to divert a stream that would have deprived her gardens of water. In a word they were recalling her sense of community in this once charming suburb north of Paris.

The texts of the various papers given in their recent publication are headed "Colloque de Cinquantenaire" — that is the 50th not 150th year, since her death in 1937. The whole meaning of the French observance is distorted if it is attached to the celebration of Mrs. Wharton's birthday — a different kind of observance.

Leon Edel

## Book Reviews

Kristin O. Lauer and Margaret P. Murray, *Edith Wharton: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography*. New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1990. 528 pages. \$65.

Only those who have worked on annotated bibliographies can fully appreciate the labor involved: the countless hours spent in tracking down sources and verifying references, the difficult decisions that must be made about scope and format, the enormous effort required to ensure that the work of other scholars is presented with objectivity and fairness, and the apparently endless nightmare of proofreading and avoiding error. Kristin Lauer and Margaret Murray therefore deserve special praise for having produced a superb annotated bibliography of Wharton criticism. This volume clearly supersedes all previous attempts to chart the course of Wharton scholarship. It is accurate, thorough, and easy to use. Every serious Wharton scholar will want to own it.

In organizing their entries, which number over 1200, Lauer and Murray have rightly emphasized the needs of users. Their bibliography is sensibly divided according to subject and genre — a much more useful format than the chronological method too often employed by bibliographers. Thus, the critic interested in what has been said about any single one of Wharton's works can immediately find the most relevant citations. Furthermore, the sections on individual books wisely separate reviews, introductions, and critical articles. Scholars with broader or more general interests will also find themselves well served by this book's organization, by the separate chapters on biography and literary relationships, and by the authors' decision to distinguish criticism written up through 1938 from more recent work. There are also separate indexes for authors, titles, subjects, and works. In short, this bibliography provides an exceptionally well-organized guide to the work done on Edith Wharton up through 1987.

The annotations are also fuller than usual and therefore more useful than usual. For the most part, the authors provide an objective summary of each critic's argument, but they occasionally editorialize by proclaiming an article to be "striking" or "insightful" or "excellent." Some of these judgments seem a bit generous to me, and there are a handful of other articles that I believe deserve more praise and more attention. Nevertheless, the annotations provided by Lauer and Murray are generally accurate and reliable.

Lauer and Murray clearly present their work as a "selective" bibliography, but whatever omissions there may be appear relatively unimportant. Wharton was so often reviewed that it would be almost impossible for any bibliographer to include all of them. Lauer and Murray decided to offer annotations only for the reviews listed in Springer's earlier bibliography and Patricia Plante's 1962 dissertation. The resulting sampling provides a useful overview of the ways in

which her books were received. The authors also attempted to list and describe the introductions and afterwords written for the various paperback editions of Wharton's books; I'm aware of several that they have missed (including Auchincloss on *The House of Mirth* and Ammons on *Summer*), but these omissions are relatively unimportant. No lengthy bibliography can hope to be completely free of error, but my own careful search of the text has uncovered only a few trivial slips, (a misspelled name and a few erroneous cross references). Wharton scholars will be impressed and delighted by the thoroughness and accuracy of this bibliography.

There are a few minor matters that need to be addressed. The primary bibliography in this book is meant largely to aid the user of the secondary references and not to serve as a definitive source. I wish, however, that the authors had included information on the first serial publication of Wharton's books. Moreover, they provide reprint information for only a few of Wharton's works, and the sections on nonfiction books and on collections contain information that should be in the secondary bibliography and that is not listed in any of the indexes. The seven listings in the section on manuscript material fail to indicate the vast amount of unpublished material (including unfinished stories, novels, and plays, as well as letters) awaiting researchers in the Beinecke Library and other repositories.

This annotated secondary bibliography will make our work much easier. We can now have at our fingertips a clear and reliable guide to the world of Wharton scholarship from its beginning up through 1987. This book is testimony to the great amount of first-rate work that has been done on Edith Wharton, but it is also a striking reminder of how much remains to be done. Thus far, *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *Ethan Frome* have received the bulk of the critical attention. *The Reef*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *Summer* have each been explored by a few insightful critics in the last two decades, but these novels deserve much more detailed study. We have had a handful of perceptive essays on Wharton's ghost stories and on some of the short novels that make up *Old New York*, but, for the most part, critics have still failed to recognize Wharton's mastery of the short story and the short novel. There are, however, some encouraging signs that scholars are beginning to turn to these and other neglected aspects of Wharton's career, including the travel books and the late novels. Justice to Edith Wharton requires that we read, study, and think seriously about all of her work. It also requires that we continue to explore her consummate artistry, her skillful manipulation of character and plot, her subtle renderings of setting and scene, and her insights into society and psychology. The great age of Wharton criticism is just beginning.

Alfred Bendixen, California State Univ., Los Angeles

Susan Goodman, *Edith Wharton's Women's Friends and Rivals*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1990. 208 pp. Paper, \$10.95; cloth, \$27.50.

Edith Wharton's writings "present a model of female cooperation, which runs like an underground railroad throughout her work." So argues Susan Goodman in *Edith Wharton's Women: Friends & Rivals*, a significant addition to the burgeoning critical and scholarly focus on Edith Wharton as both woman and artist. Through her bold — often controversial — assertions, Goodman seeks both to illustrate and to unravel the many-sidedness and subtlety of Wharton's personality and achievement. As the title indicates, women in Wharton's real and fictional worlds can be both friends and rivals: in her book Susan Goodman demonstrates the intertwined but conflictual nature of Wharton's professional and sexual identities — which sometimes inhibit her relationships with other women — and traces a pattern throughout Wharton's autobiography, letters, novels and short stories, concluding that "the supposed rivals become the means for each other's moral growth, as they realize that being true to another woman means being true to oneself." Goodman avers that in Wharton's fiction women must learn not to "go back" — Lily Bart's phrase — on each other; they must sustain, not betray one another.

In the opening sentence of a provocative introduction, Goodman confronts the major stumbling block, from 1947 to 1986, for feminist admirers of Wharton. Citing both Percy Lubbock's and Janet Malcolm's assertions of Wharton's dislike of and "venomousness" toward women, Goodman instantly taps more nails into the critical coffin of Wharton's supposed masculinist or misogynist views. Further, Goodman argues that despite Wharton's aligning of herself with the male literary tradition, no one can justifiably accuse her of writing as, in Q.D. Leavis' phrase, "Henry James's heiress." Wharton not only admired such female writers as George Eliot and George Sand, but portrayed women who could never have achieved an "Emersonian self-reliance" of the "American Adam" status which R.W.B. Lewis accords the national literary hero. Instead Goodman notes that despite her identification with Hawthorne and James, Wharton began her writing career by refashioning the Demeter-Persephone myth in *Bunner Sisters* (1900). Moreover, Goodman sees Wharton's appropriation of Grace Aguilar's title *The Mother's Recompense* as a "first and significant step in her identification with a women's literary tradition. *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* further the journey."

Contrary to some of the major feminist critics who view Wharton's women "in isolation" and as "primarily competitive," Goodman sees "her heroines struggling to define themselves through connections with other women." Goodman's striking characterization of Charlotte Lovell in *The Old Maid* (1924) seems emblematic of a myriad of Wharton women, each "one of a great army of silent and subversive women" who represent "a lurking threat" to society and its definitions and constrictions of "reality." Through Wharton's major fiction Goodman traces

two frequently interwoven plots: "the marriage plot and the increasing dependence of women not on men but on each other."

Goodman clearly delineates her methodology — "biographical, feminist, and to some extent psychobiological" — and characterizes her approach as "circular and textured" rather than "linear and chronological," and her techniques succeed admirably, given the complexities, subtleties, ambiguities and ambivalences of her subject. Specifically, Goodman uses two personal, autobiographical sources in Wharton's life: *A Backward Glance*, focusing on Lucretia Jones, mother and rival; and the letters between Wharton and Sara Norton, the woman friend whose sympathy and understanding provided "a safe forum."

Goodman's reading of *A Backward Glance* sees Wharton writing in both a male and a female tradition, while her analysis of the letters persuasively argues that Wharton's friendship with Sara Norton was "possibly a model for Wharton's fiction," and may constitute a "rebuttal" to her image as one who cared little for other women. Through her line-by-line analyses of selected passages, Goodman notes that in *A Backward Glance* "one voice speaks for the part of Wharton that would always remain the misunderstood, unappreciated and abandoned child, forever angry and competitive with her mother . . . [t]he other speaks for the more assured and successful adult able to sympathize with the mother...." In Wharton's letters to Norton, Goodman again finds two voices giving "double messages" but asserts

G A R L A N D

## EDITH WHARTON

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\* Kristin O. Lauer and Margaret P. Murray \*

Containing over 1,000 annotated entries of work done on Wharton in English, French, German, Italian, and Japanese, this volume offers the Wharton scholar a reliable compilation of the scholarship from the appearance of *The Decoration of Houses* in 1897 through the publication of *The Letters of Edith Wharton* in 1988. Individual chapters annotate bibliographical studies, contemporary studies, studies of the individual works, studies of Wharton's literary relationships, biographical materials, booklength studies and essay collections, general articles from 1938 to the present, dissertations, and mentions in literary surveys. Indexes by subject, author, title, and reference to Wharton's work make the information readily accessible. The primary bibliography includes lists of Wharton's novels, short stories, poetry collections and individual poems mentioned in the secondary bibliography, nonfiction books and essays, important manuscript materials, and major collections. A preface explains the procedures followed by the compilers and an introduction discusses Wharton criticism.

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that the tolerance and generosity of the friendship "provided a forum for the testing" of Wharton's critical voice. In fact, Goodman herself provides a model for plumbing the depths of Wharton's texts, biographical or fictional, repeatedly demonstrating that "the historical course of Wharton's life dominates the surface text, but emerging memories threaten to deform" the autobiography, the letters and the fiction, revealing more about Wharton than has heretofore been suggested. On these grounds Goodman moves forward with her interpretations of the major novels, showing similar conflicting voices within and among the women characters therein. She finds that although the "voice of the deprived child" controls the earlier works, after *Summer* (1917) in which the daughter claims the mother, the voices of mothers and daughters become increasingly less contentious as each seeks to fashion individual identity and to act independently.

By pairing the fictional heroines, contends Goodman, Wharton "establishes a dialectic and provides each a model for change." In her discussion of *The House of Mirth*, for example, she suggests that Lily's aligning of herself with Bertha Dorset "marks the beginning of Lily's closer identification with her own sex as well as her moral rise" and that Bertha thus becomes the "source of Lily's salvation." In *The Custom of the Country*, Undine Spragg and Indiana Frusk, although rivals and competitors, are also best friends who "understand each other." By the time Wharton wrote *The Reef*, rather than "go back" on each other — as did such pairs as Bertha and Lily, or Mattie Silver and Zeena Frome — Anna Leath and Sophy Viner see in each other "their evolving selves" and together, in Goodman's view, form "the novel's one true marriage" which "threatens" both the authority and the identity of their lover George Darrow. The theme that women should not "go back" on each other continues throughout Wharton's major works, culminating in *The Buccaneers*.

Connected to her discussions of mother-daughter relationships and paired heroines are Goodman's fine insights into the male narrators and protagonists, calling into question their credibility and reliability. In *Ethan Frome*, for example, life with Ethan renders Zeena and Mattie broken and ruined, but both Ethan and the male narrator, blind to women's realities, instead tell "the wrong story." Linking this problematic male narrator with Newland Archer of *The Age of Innocence*, Goodman demonstrates Wharton's subtle illustration of the "limitations" of the male point of view. Like Ethan and the male narrator, Archer makes the mistake of seeing both May Archer and Ellen Olenska as "types," denying them their individuality and acting as "sole author" of their stories. Goodman presents a strong case for May's complexity and her similarity to Ellen, concluding that May "emerges as the novel's true heroine." Likewise, in an original reading of *The Reef*, Goodman convincingly compares the relationship between Sophy and Anna with the one between Wharton and Katherine Fullerton. Just as Wharton and Katherine Fullerton never acted as rivals over Morton Fullerton, instead consistently supporting and respecting each other's talents, Sophy and Anna realize more in common with each other

than with George: "neither Sophy's nor Anna's sexual awakening is nearly as profound as the awakening to their similarities."

Only occasionally does Goodman's "circular" approach appear to hinder or obscure the clarity of her interpretation, as in *The Mother's Recompense*, her most problematic chapter and, like Wharton's novel itself, open to stimulating debate. Most of Goodman's interpretation favors Kate Clephane's daughter Anne as Wharton's alter ego who "mothers" the erring, misguided Kate. Although Goodman notes briefly that part of Wharton may also be incorporated into Kate's portrait — "the part that longed for a child" — she views the ending of the novel as "unsatisfactory." At this point Goodman's interpretation raises more questions than it answers. For example, how much more of Wharton appears in the portrait of the mother Kate rather than the daughter Anne — the Wharton who, like Kate, is "reborn" in her late thirties with the writing of her first novel; who, like Kate, had a mid-life affair with a younger man; and who, like Kate and other Wharton heroines, made an independent decision to remain an expatriate? Examining the endings of both *The Mother's Recompense* and *The Buccaneers*, Goodman ultimately finds that they represent the limitations of Wharton's representations of women: they either choose exile, like Kate in *The Mother's Recompense*, or marry, like Nan in *The Buccaneers*, Goodman concludes her chapter on *The Mother's Recompense* with Virginia Woolf's observation that no alternative to the marriage plot was possible until a woman could write Mary Carmichael's line, "Chloe liked Olivia" and accept its social, political and sexual ramifications. Her criticism of Wharton is that, unlike Mary Wilkins and Ellen Glasgow, Mary Austin and Willa Cather, Wharton "offers no replacement" to marriage or exile.

Thus Goodman's assertions raise some crucial and fascinating questions for Wharton studies. Is exile in fact a loss to be interpreted negatively, or is it a strength embodied in Wharton's most independent women who — like the author herself — renounced the strictures of a society utterly insensitive to their needs? What were Wharton's views on the marriages of her close friends? What of the "rivals" in Wharton's life other than her mother and the oft-cited Marion Bell of Lubbock's *Portrait of Edith Wharton*? What of her other close women friends, Mary (Minnie) Cadwalader Jones and Margaret (Daisy) Chanler? And will a comparative study of Wharton with other women writers necessarily find her lacking, or will it help illuminate the legitimate differences among American women writers and their remarkable diversity of women characters?

These questions, far from suggesting a weakness in Goodman's work, result rather from its very strength and originality. Goodman's is a valuable book which postulates that Wharton's power lies in her "persistent effort to make all relationships between men and women and women and women more honest and more inclusive, as she more closely approximated the poles in her own life that were characterized by her relationship with her mother and her friendship with Sara Norton." Certainly Goodman has provided numerous and diverse keys to unlock the significance



of the gender issues submerged in Wharton's work. Sometimes controversial, always thoughtful, Susan Goodman's book will become (Wharton would like the word) a touchstone for further studies of gender issues in Wharton's life and works.

Abby H.P. Werlock, St. Olaf College

**Penelope Vita-Finzi, *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990. 172 pp. \$38.38.**

Writing about Henry James's requirements for composition, Edith Wharton cautioned that "it should at least be borne in mind that no reader who takes the theories of a great artist too literally is ever likely to surprise his secret." She might as well have been writing about herself, for, as Penelope Vita-Finzi demonstrates in *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction*, the author's own practice did not always match her dogmatically classical precepts. Her "intuitive knowledge of an inexplicable, subjective quality coming from an unknowable source within the individual artist" (2) clashed with her passion for "order, harmony, proportion, discipline and absolute standards" (4) grounded in tradition. "One must know Titian and Giorgione to enjoy the intimacy of the Friulian Alps," she writes in *Italian Backgrounds*. But in *A Motor-Flight through France* she asks, "Is there not room for another, a lesser yet legitimate order of appreciation?" Wharton's own portrait of an artist, Vance Weston, in *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) and *The Gods Arrive* (1932) dramatizes this conflict between the conscious artist, concerned with technique, and the romantic, possessed of "the seeing soul."

Vita-Finzi traces the evolution of *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* from the first drafts of *Literature* into the published novels. The critical study falls into two parts: the first reviews Wharton's theories of writing fiction, expressed privately in letters, diaries, and notebooks and publically in formal essays, short stories, travel pieces, *The Decoration of Houses* (1898), *A Backward Glance* (1934), and *The Writing of Fiction* (1925); the second details her actual process of composing. Wharton's position reflects her preference for nature (her own included) tamed by art, "inspiration ordered by reason, originality founded on tradition, feeling controlled by discipline" (23). Citing their disregard for structure, a story-line, and living characters, she disliked the fiction of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and D.H. Lawrence. She liked — to give a partial and arguably inconsistent list — the work of Marcel Proust, Sinclair Lewis, Anita Loos, Theodore Dreiser, and Collette. Above all, she declared in *The Writing of Fiction*, "verisimilitude is the truth of art, and any convention which hinders the illusion is obviously in the wrong place."

Vita-Finzi provides a valuable service by ordering and compiling all the author's statements about a general principle. For example, discussing the importance Wharton placed on characters like Anna Karenina, Père Goriot, and Tess of the D'Urbervilles, who seem to step from the novels named for them and live with us as real people, she refers to "The Vice of Reading" (1903), *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), "Visibility in Fiction" (1929), "Tendencies in

Modern Fiction" (1934), "A Reconsideration of Pro-ust" (1934), and "Permanent Values in Fiction" (1934). According to Vita-Finzi, Wharton is too often "either shrill and didactic or unsubstantial" (39), "confused not only about the nature of the techniques used to achieve verisimilitude, but also about the possibility — or even the virtues of — producing a clearcut theory" (46). Wharton's ambivalence is itself interesting. Does it stem from her awe of the "central mystery?" Is it related to the form that she thought such discussions must assume? Would drafts of Wharton's fiction at the time yield possible reasons for the discrepancies? How much is Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) indebted not only to Henry James's *Prefaces* but to evening chats with Edith Wharton?

Vita-Finzi's greatest strength is also her greatest weakness: she lets Wharton speak for herself — sometimes too much. Her commentary is often a summation of large excerpts from Wharton's texts. Although occasionally marred by awkward transitions and an elusive focus, I preferred the chapters that contained more of Vita-Finzi's own voice. Presenting previously unpublished material, she clearly outlines the process of Wharton's writing; for example, Vita-Finzi suggests that characters' names preceded situation. Contrary to the novelist's assertion in *A Backward Glance* ("any character I unchristened instantly died on my hands"), Wharton did change names without tragic results.

Before reading Chapter Three, I would suggest reading the appendices which include "Extracts from Edith Wharton's Notebook 1913"; "Scenario of *Literature*, with four facsimile pages"; "Chapter Summaries for *Literature*, with four facsimile pages"; "Facsimiles of extracts from ms draft of *Literature*"; "the first and second typed drafts of *Literature*; as well as "Comparison of extract from ms draft of *Literature*, with typed draft." From them, Vita-Finzi's deductions emerge: Wharton wrote the scenario before she planned the chapter summaries (most likely written in one sitting); early revisions tend toward reorderings, paring, and compression: "One of the most important functions of her careful planning appears to be to select and place scenes to give them the greatest significance and dramatic effect" (86). Later revisions, usually word substitutions, were kept to a minimum. Vita-Finzi concludes that Wharton was far from being the mere recording instrument that she describes in her autobiography. Placing the artist and her artist figures in a social context, her last chapter contains a discussion of "Souls Belated" which refreshingly focuses on Ralph Gannett, a promising novelist, rather than Lydia Tillotson, the married woman he supposedly rescues from a suffocatingly conventional marriage.

*Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction* leads the way for similar studies about the genesis and transmutations of Wharton's craft over the course of a long and prolific career. From its pages, the novelist emerges scrupulously honest and painstakingly meticulous. Finally, to the vision of the defensively inartistic society matron, Vita-Finzi offers an alternative: Wharton propped in bed with scissors and paste close at hand.

Susan Goodman, California State Univ., Fresno

Allen F. Stein, *After the Vows Were Spoken: Marriage in American Literary Realism*. Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1988. 329 pp. \$28.

In his introduction to *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, R.W.B. Lewis contends that Wharton was perhaps the first American writer to make what he calls the marriage question exclusively her own. "She made," he goes on to say, "almost everything of it":

It is not only that her treatment of the question . . . displays so broad a range of tone and perspective, and so keen an eye for the dissolving and emergent structures of historical institutional and social life with which the question was enmeshed. It is that the question, as Mrs. Wharton reflected on it, dragged with it all the questions about human nature and conduct to which her generous imagination was responsive.

It is this question of marriage, especially as it reflects human conduct, which Allen F. Stein examines in *After the Vows Were Spoken: Marriage in American Literary Realism*. Stein's work is actually a study of five authors. In addition to Wharton, he discusses William Dean Howells, Henry James, Kate Chopin, and Robert Herrick. Over half of the book, though, is devoted to James and Wharton.

Finally, Stein considers the benefits to be derived from marriages in Wharton's fiction. In "The Mission of Jane," for example, Wharton shows that "however unhappy a marriage may be, it can allow two people to comfort each other in the face of any greater unhappiness the world may heap upon them." And Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, by accepting the fact of his marriage to May, also accepts "the community and traditions to which it links him and the responsibility of working to maintain order even at the cost of his own personal pain." Stein concludes that "largely unproductive of joy as they are, marriage and marriages, Wharton believes, must last."

Near the end of the book Stein draws an interesting distinction between James and Wharton. Both believe, he says, that one can undergo moral growth through enduring a painful marriage. James envisions the character who undergoes such growth as one set apart, as one who has undergone an intensely personal experience. For Wharton, however, such moral growth has no personal dimension. Moral growth makes one a better person because it makes one a better citizen.

If some of Stein's arguments seem a trifle pat, his study does provide an interesting overview of the institution of marriage as a facet of literary realism in America and places Wharton squarely within the context of her contemporaries.

In the introduction Stein says that his study is an attempt "to show how effectually these writers worked to prove the truth of W.H. Auden's assertion . . . that 'any marriage, happy or unhappy, is infinitely more interesting and significant than any romance, however passionate.'" Stein suggests that Wharton's stories of marriage perpetuate the "Jamesian vision of marriage as invariably imperfect but invariably of potential value as well." According to Stein, in Wharton's fiction marriage makes people grow by forcing

them to confront pain by disabusing them of their illusions. A second standard element of Wharton's marriage fiction is that it reveals the paucity of choices open to people. The third element which Stein cites, and one which he says somewhat palliates the grimness in these stories, is "the redemptive capacity of the sensitive mates here to put aside delusory hopes and grimly accept what must be accepted."

Stein establishes three categories of marriage story in Wharton's fiction and devotes a chapter to each. First, he looks at stories of marital entrapment beginning with a discussion of several short stories including "The Fullness of Life," "The Journey," and "Joy in the House." He concludes this chapter with a discussion of *Ethan Frome*. In this novel, he claims that Wharton's allegiances are clear:

one must strive for order; and this must be carried out even in the face of determinism that [Wharton] sees as operative, for, rightly or wrongly, she does not regard moral responsibility as incompatible with a restricted will. The establishment of routine, of order, by carrying out ordering responsibilities imposed by the severe demands of marriage is thus a goal to strive for . . . Without such order, Wharton believes, a difficult existence can only be made more difficult.

Stein next looks at stories in which marital problems must be subordinated to social feelings. In particular, he discusses *The House of Mirth*, *The Fruit of the Tree*, *The Custom of the Country*, *Twilight Sleep*, and *Hudson River Bracketed*. He concludes here that despite the failure of so many marriages in these novels, Wharton continues to believe that matrimony provides potential benefits along with the pain. Stein quotes Frenside in *The Gods Arrive*: "We most of us need a framework, a support — the maddest lovers do. Marriage may be too tight a fit — may dislocate and deform. But it shapes life too, prevents lopsidedness or drifting."

Dale Flynn, University of California, Davis.

#### "Politics of Maternity" *con't.* from page 9

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