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The Unpublished Writings of Edith Wharton

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The last thirty years have witnessed – in Cynthia Griffin Wolff's phrase – the "dazzling resurrection of [Wharton's] reputation" (xxiii). The major writing published in Wharton's lifetime is back in print, her work is taught at every level, and there has been a remarkable resurgence of scholarship on the life and work of a woman now hailed as one of America's greatest writers. Since 1975, no fewer than five major biographies of the writer have been published [R.W.B. Lewis (1975), Cynthia Griffin Wolff (1977, rev. ed. 1995), Shari Benstock (1994), Eleanor Dwight (1994), and, most recently, Hermione Lee (2007)]. We have seen a wealth of scholarship from the widest array of critical perspectives—"from formalism, deconstruction, feminist criticism, and gender studies, to cultural studies and new historicism (and old)" (Colquitt 262). The renewed fascination shows no signs of abating; a simple online search of the *MLA International Bibliography* at the time of this writing yields over 1250 results. Edmund Wilson's famous call for "justice" to Edith Wharton may appear, at last, to have been heeded.

As Wharton scholarship continues to evolve, an especially welcome development has been the extension of the oeuvre under consideration. While multiple individual editions of the most popular novels are currently in print, textual attention no longer rests exclusively on the usual suspects, most notably perhaps *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome*. In his influential essay, first published in 1947,

Edmund Wilson casually wrote off all of the author's work after *The Age of Innocence* (while making the breathtaking admission that he had read little of it).¹

Some of Wharton's later writings, however, have been acknowledged more recently as among the finest of her career, not least *The Buccaneers*, and a host of unsurpassed stories, including "Roman Fever," with which the author sealed her reputation as one of the most gifted exponents of the genre. Previously inaccessible works have become more readily available; a numbers of writings can even be viewed online. In 2005, Library of America published a major volume of Wharton's poetry in its American Poets Project, including the work of *Verses*, the collection printed privately when Edith Jones was just sixteen. The welcome two volumes of collected stories, edited by Maureen Howard in 2001, give easy access to most – though not all – of Wharton's short fiction. *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, edited by Frederick Wegener in 1996, brings together a fascinating selection of Wharton's reviews, essays, forewords and introductions, while the chance discovery, and subsequent publication/s, of the writer's account of her luxurious Aegean cruise in 1888 provided a valuable, unexpected addition to the travel writings.

Wharton scholarship has rarely been complacent, however. Even as revisionist studies are drafted, their authors frequently draw attention to continuing shortcomings and omissions. In her bibliographical essay for *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton* (2003), edited by Carol J. Singley, Clare Colquitt laments the absence of a

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complete collection of Wharton's works (253) and a complete record of the author's correspondence (256). Hermione Lee, meanwhile, concludes her expansive 2007 biography with a recognition that, "For all [the] massive interest among general readers and academics, much still remains to be done with the posthumous life of Edith Wharton," tasks including a multi-volume edition of the complete letters, and new, annotated editions of the works of non-fiction. "As I write, in 2006," records Lee, "most of [Wharton's] surviving manuscripts have not been edited and published" (753).

Indeed, while work published during Wharton's career is largely back in print - if not always in its ideal form - significant areas of neglect remain. Not least among these is the remarkable body of works unpublished in the writer's lifetime, resources that, more widely available, would further enhance understanding of the writer's life and career. Partly in gratitude for the award of an honorary doctorate in 1923, Wharton determined to offer her papers to Yale University, sealing a gift that would form the bulk of an unrivalled collection, now estimated at 50,000 items. As expected, the Beinecke Library at Yale holds complete and incomplete holograph and typed manuscripts for the majority of Wharton's published novels, stories, plays, and translations, from her early to her final works. Among the papers, however, are also manuscripts for work that Wharton would never finish. Some of these, while of undoubted interest, have fairly limited literary value, jotted musings extending at times to only a single page of prose. Other manuscripts, however, though generally unfinished, are very substantial writings, often much worked over by the author. These include a series of plays, life writings, and extensive manuscripts of important, unpublished early novels.

Some of the more eye-catching fragments have become well known. The controversial "Beatrice Palmato" was printed first as an appendix to Lewis' biography and reprinted by Wolff (who discovered the manuscript) two years later in *A Feast of Words*. Deemed "elegant pornography" by Lewis (525), the fragment initially attracted attention for an explicit content with which the writer's starchy "grande dame" image would implode, before being read in the context of the incest motif that marks a number of Wharton's works. There is the brief "French version" of *Ethan Frome*, charmingly described in *A Backward Glance* as a unique exercise to update a French vocabulary and style judged to be "the purest Louis Quatorze" (195). Alternative draft plans for *The Age of Innocence*, meanwhile, see Wharton bring Newland and Ellen together - through an affair or marriage - only for the union to fail.

Ironically, the more substantial manuscripts are less familiar. Longer works that cannot be expediently reprinted in the pages of a biography or the confines of a journal article have generally been seen only by those able to undertake individual research visits to the archives - not always a ready option for any Wharton scholar, but

especially perhaps for early career academics and those working outside the United States. Nevertheless, the absence of edited volumes of the unpublished writings can, for a time, be excused and explained: in reclaiming the reputation of a writer of prolific output, attention is inevitably directed first to the extensive oeuvre published during the author's lifetime. Thirty years after "resurrection," however, greater consideration of, and ready access to, this important body of work are long overdue.

It is welcome news, therefore, that Pickering and Chatto Press will issue two volumes of Edith Wharton's unpublished writings - volumes designed to underline the value of the work in its own right, provide a practical resource for those unable to visit the archives, and facilitate further discussion of a number of invaluable, neglected texts. Editing the volumes, I am all too aware that the project is rich in both potential headaches and academic rewards. There are troubling decisions regarding the selection of material, the treatment of draft versions and of significant textual variants, the dating of texts, occasional illegibility, and caution over editorial "intrusion" on and around the texts. The rewards, however, are greater: texts, which must not be simplistically claimed as lost "masterpieces" from the Wharton canon, often testify, nevertheless, to their intrinsic literary value. Of greater value at times, though, are the fresh insights the texts - generally abandoned as works-in-progress - reveal into the writer's creative processes and working practices, and the genesis of her career. On occasions the manuscripts stage rehearsals for later, more renowned writings; they reveal extensive work in genres other than those for which the writer is known, as well as displaying a readiness for experimentation, reminding the reader that Wharton so often proves to be a more "modern" writer than her conventional reputation would concede.

In many respects, the series of Wharton's plays housed at the Beinecke Library is a revelation of the collection, for the writer's role as playwright remains a tellingly neglected area of Wharton scholarship. In this, perhaps we may in part hold Henry James to account. Wharton academics have, after all, spent many years disputing the persistent representation of the younger writer as James' disciple or heiress - associations that Wharton felt herself obliged to contest intermittently throughout her career. Finally reaching a point of casting off that critical shadow, one might forgive a perceived reluctance to draw attention to another discernible link between the writers: that of an abortive playwrighting "career." Nevertheless, given the importance of playwrighting to the development of the author's oeuvre, it is regrettable that, save for an unpublished PhD dissertation by Celeste Michele Wiggins, there has been no study of Wharton's plays. Indeed, for many years, almost the only critical references to her playwrighting have been passing acknowledgments in the biographies. While Wolff subsequently offered a valuable re-reading

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of *The House of Mirth* in the context of Edwardian drama – a reading that serves to intimate the productive links still to be drawn between the novelist and the stage – critical attention has yet to turn its attention to primary, determined discussion of Wharton's plays.²

Certainly, Wharton's interest in the theatre reveals itself throughout her work. Theatrical settings and motifs are pervasive in her fiction: the perfect venue for Wharton's women to display themselves and be displayed, an elaborate scenario frequently enacted in the auditorium rather than on stage. Yet, in the early 1900s, the focus of the writer's literary endeavours appears to have been directed as much towards the theatre as to the novel. Though the balance shifted, the theatre—viewing, reviewing, and playwriting—remained a lifelong fascination, and important to her career. Her work in this genre includes the translation of Hermann Sudermann's *Es Lebe das Leben*, adaptations of *Manon Lescaut* and *The House of Mirth*, and nine original plays.

Es Lebe das Leben—the title reluctantly translated by Wharton to *The Joy of Living* – and an aborted production of *Manon Lescaut* are briefly, and inaccurately, recollected in *A Backward Glance* (109-10). The former production enjoyed a successful run in New York, and transferred to London, while Wharton's privately expressed dislike of its star's acting style was diplomatically recast as professed admiration in the memoir. *The Joy of Living* is not a "lost" manuscript, however. Wharton's translation would be published in 1902, the ever astute businesswoman noting over thirty years later that it continued to feature "on a modest scale" on her royalty returns (BG 110). The manuscripts of both plays are available in the Beinecke archives and of interest not least for the tragic fates that befall both heroines (drowning and suicide by poison) which, as Wharton worked on the projects in 1901 and 1902, may have been a timely influence on the subsequent development of the character of Lily Bart, begun in 1903.

Wharton's surviving original plays offer greater insights, however, even though a study of these manuscripts confirms that, on balance, the American stage did not lose one of its most gifted playwrights to the pursuit of fiction. Several "plays" extend only to a few pages, notably the elaborate projected verse drama "The Banished God," and "The Children's Hour" in which a Catholic woman witnesses a miracle in church – the latter mercifully short. At least two of the surviving plays, however, represent further serious attempts to write for the stage, while in others the author appears less interested in producing a play per se than in honing her craft, at times undertaking significant revision. As such, all offer intriguing insights into Wharton's writing and forcefully rebut the repeated claim in *A Backward Glance* that she had never taken her dramatic impulses very seriously.

A social comedy titled *The Tightrope*, almost certainly Wharton's first play, composed in 1899/1900, has not survived. Its loss at a crucial stage in Wharton's

burgeoning career is to be regretted, though Lewis' supposition that "it may have been a dramatic version of what became *The House of Mirth*" (109) appears largely unsubstantiated. In the absence of *The Tightrope*, *The Man of Genius* represents Wharton's earliest extant play, and perhaps the most important. Composed one year before the writer published her first novel, *The Man of Genius* beautifully illustrates Wharton's intense interest in playwriting as she endeavoured to establish her reputation as well as challenging perceived wisdom on the focus of her literary output during this period.

Wharton wrote sixty-four pages of the comedy—two (almost) complete acts, along with detailed scenarios for Acts III and IV. It is perhaps surprising that Lewis should give the work only passing mention when he implies the reason it was never produced may have been that it was simply too good for the American stage: "*The Man of Genius*" was alive with subtlety and wit, and deep insight into the creative life: elements that in 1901 the New York stage, which at its most adventurous had yet to get beyond *The Count of Monte Cristo*, was not prepared to accept" (109-10). Indeed the play is a valuable, overlooked early work, its knowing, biting wit foreshadowing the tone of the narrative voice of later novels; and the revisions indicate the depth of the writer's commitment to the piece. With the play's protagonist a novelist, it also proves a notable early vehicle for Wharton to explore what would become a recurring theme of her fiction: the relationship between the artist and society, a theme that resonated through to two of her final novels, *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*.

Other plays are primarily noteworthy for the insights they may offer into the later fiction. Wiggins suggests that *The Arch* is an overlooked source for *The Custom of the Country*, the play providing the "'emotional and psychological ingredients' for a much larger satirical piece on the issue of marriage and divorce," with the drama's protagonist Rose mirroring many of the "qualities" of Undine Spragg (123-4). Three other plays are of particular interest for their relationships to short stories, notably *Kate Spain* inspired, like the story "Confession," by the author's fascination with the Lizzie Borden case. *Kate Spain* was begun, though, as a serious attempt to write for the stage, Wharton completing one act of the play in 1935—Benstock suggesting she had been inspired by the adaptations of her fiction for the theatre, including *The Old Maid* (444). For the pragmatic Wharton, by 1935 a prime motivation may also have been financial. Discovering that the Lizzie Borden subject had already been used, the author felt obliged to abandon the play, but wrote to Mary Cadwalader Jones from Sainte-Claire in March of that year that she had become "so absorbed" in writing the first act that she was not sorry to have done it. Wharton judged it "good practice" and she was open to Edward (Ned) Sheldon's responses to the act's "dialogue and construction" (*Letters* 584). An examination of both versions of the story offers a rare insight into the author's

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treatment of the same theme in different genres, as well as suggesting a "modern" fascination with perspective. The 1935 composition, meanwhile, evidences that Wharton's interest in playwriting - though undeniably less intense in later years - was not simply an early, short-lived phase, but one that spanned her career.

Turning to the manuscripts of unpublished novels, the Wharton archives again offer up a series of literary gems. While some drafts are little more than a page (and these will be outlined in an appendix to the volumes), substantial manuscripts include those of the formative work *Disintegration*, and *Literature*. Though her publishers may have been interested in a sequel to her first novel, the Italian period text, *The Valley of Decision* (1902), Wharton began instead *Disintegration*, set in contemporary New York and a work she had plotted before starting *The Valley of Decision*. (Thus, when Henry James urged Wharton to "Do New York!" the manuscripts reveal she already was). Wharton worked on *Disintegration* until the late summer or early autumn of 1902, writing more than seventy pages before setting the text aside in favour of other writings, including stories, travel writings, and what would become *The House of Mirth*.

While *Disintegration* has interested Wharton's biographers, only a single critical essay has been written on this intriguing manuscript. In part this must be attributed to the issue of access, a difficulty that publication in these volumes will ease. For Lewis and Benstock, *Disintegration* foreshadows *The House of Mirth*, the first of the author's New York society novels, with the manuscript offering a preparatory large-scale examination of social change and social pressure. Lewis labels it "at the least an invaluable rehearsal for *The House of Mirth* three years later" (107), while Benstock concludes, "*Disintegration* pointed the way to *The House of Mirth*" (125). In Wolff's reading, meanwhile, material for *Disintegration* would finally be reworked into the 1925 novel, *The Mother's Recompense*, with a shift in focus from the fate of the little girl in the unfinished manuscript to that of the conflicted mother in the published novel (95-6). Certainly the woman for whom writing was a "business" as well as a "passion" was not averse to revisiting unused or unexploited subject matter, lines, and ideas. Both comparative interpretations are compelling, if neglectful of the work itself, and bringing *Disintegration* into print will facilitate further discussion of this notable and sharply written early example of the New York society novel with which the author would make her name.

Wharton's planned novel *Literature*, subtitled *Man of Genius*, was designed as a portrait of the American artist in 1913. She began the novel in August of that year, the plot tracing the development of a young writer, Dicky Thaxter (who, among a number of false starts first writes an abject failure of a play). This ambitious manuscript was never completed, however, due in large part to the advent of the war and Wharton's tireless relief work. Nevertheless, there are eighty surviving pages and a detailed (nineteen-page) summary of the plot, both

requiring attention and analysis.

Literature is significant for many reasons, not least for its quality in its own right, the insights the unfinished work offers into Wharton's writing process, and the development of the author's *Kunstlerroman* motif. Of equal importance is the text's direct link to two of Wharton's final novels, the Vance Weston novels, *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* in which the writer comes of age. As early as 1953, in a rare analysis of this unpublished work, Nancy R. Leach writing in the journal *American Literature* concluded: "The insight it provides into her methods of writing and its similarities to her autobiography, as well as its relationship to *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* make *Literature* an important discovery. Its existence, its abandonment, and its final form will have to be taken into consideration in any final estimate of Edith Wharton" (353). More than fifty years later, full consideration has still to be achieved. Again, the issue of the manuscript's inaccessibility has proven a major factor in its neglect. While a partial draft is reproduced in Penelope Vita-Finzi's *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction*, it is to be hoped that publication of the full extant manuscript and summary of *Literature* will encourage renewed discussion of this important text.

Though often credited with making a late start to her career, Wharton was gripped by the "story-telling fever" from early childhood (BG 50). Taking a backward glance, the septuagenarian gives a witty, often quoted account of the reception of her first (lost) juvenile novel and its acerbic reception from her mother in her memoir, a recollection that reveals more about Wharton's still unresolved issues with Lucretia than the untitled text (BG 50). For surviving juvenilia in prose, researchers must look outside the Beinecke to the University of Virginia and the Lilly Library at Indiana University. Between the autumn of 1876 and January 1877, the fourteen-year-old Edith Jones, using the pseudonym of David Olivieri, wrote a complete thirty thousand-word novella, *Fast and Loose*, and an accompanying set of mock reviews.

While clearly the work of a juvenile, *Fast and Loose* is a highly engaging novella, revealing many of the hallmarks - both stylistic and thematic - of Wharton's mature writing, and offering an early display of the author's complex female characterisations in its feisty young heroine, Georgie Rivers. Of equal interest is the set of hostile "reviews," exuberant, showcase pieces, parodying the style of contemporary periodicals. Invaluable to scholars as the only substantial fiction written before the author was nearly forty that survives, *Fast and Loose* would resonate with Wharton well into maturity, prompting her to encode references to the novella in a number of later published works.

Among Wharton's final works is her official memoir, published in April 1934 when the seventy-two-year-old's long and prolific career was drawing to a close. Discreet and often evasive, *A Backward Glance* is known for constructing a largely public persona, the writer offering a limited account of her life and art. Indeed the approach would lead a number of contemporary reviewers to

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conclude that one figure appeared curiously absent from the memoir: Wharton herself.

In the intervening years, however, hidden, more revealing accounts of Wharton's life have been uncovered, though one suspects the disclosure of at least some of these would have distressed the author. Explicit letters to Morton Fullerton, which Wharton was at pains to try to retrieve, were purchased by the University of Texas at Austin in 1980. A selection was published in a special issue of the University's *Library Chronicle* in 1985, and later in the *Letters* edited by R.W.B. and Nancy Lewis. More recently, "The Life Apart," the secret "love diary" of 1907/8, now housed at the Lilly Library at the University of Indiana, was printed and discussed in an issue of *American Literature*.

Indeed, the fascination with Edith Wharton has often presented a dual focus: life, and work. Each decade has added to the store of biographical knowledge, offering insights into the private life the author herself so purposefully evaded in her published memoir. The more colourful "facts" of Wharton's life continue to intrigue: the question of her paternity; the - at best - difficult relationship with her mother; a series of nervous breakdowns; the disastrous marriage to a manic-depressive who embezzled his wife's money, embarked on a series of affairs, and set up home in Boston with a mistress. We know of the writer's secret extramarital affair, the escape from America and subsequent exile to France, the great friendship with Henry James and with many of the luminaries of her age, the memorably calamitous encounter with F. Scott Fitzgerald, the hard-headed business-woman playing off one publisher against another, the phenomenal relief work during World War I, increasing ill health, the decline of her reputation... This is often the stuff of fiction itself.

It has become clear, though, that for a time Wharton herself considered a more revealing representation of her life than the tight-lipped narrative of *A Backward Glance*, and here again the unpublished writings come into their own. The intriguing, earlier (and sadly unfinished) account in the unpublished manuscript, *Life and I*, gives a valuable indication of that which was lost through her later act of self-censorship. A lively recollection of the author's early years, the fifty manuscript pages of *Life and I* promise a fuller, less guarded text, an intriguing counterbalance to the official memoir. Instead, Wharton ultimately chose to offer her readers in 1934 only a "glance" of the inner life, but the manuscript was preserved for future generations of scholars.

None of the original plays, incomplete novels and life writings, and juvenilia outlined in this essay was published in Wharton's lifetime, and almost all of this material has remained unpublished since. *Life and I* was finally published in Library of America's 1990 volume, *Edith Wharton: Novellas and Other Writings*, though the memoir fails to make the main body of the text, printed as "appendix" to the volume with a single paragraph outlining the background to the text. In 1993, the University of Virginia Press followed its 1977 publication of

Fast and Loose (the edition now long out of print) with a single volume that contained both *Fast and Loose* and *The Buccaneers*. (Though a very welcome publication, edited by Viola Hopkins Winner, the determined pairing of Wharton's first novel with her last appears less than ideal, the volume's introduction almost inevitably forcing a number of links between the two texts).

Though Wharton scholarship continues to thrive, greater attention to the abundance of unpublished writings is long overdue. Seventy years after the author's death, these new volumes will make widely accessible a body of her unpublished work for the first time. It is hoped that in their representation and discussion of the richness, variety and complexity of Wharton's unpublished writings, the volumes will contribute to the ongoing scholarly process, extending our knowledge and understanding of this "extraordinary" writer and her works. Even as she filtered recollections in *A Backward Glance*, the ageing author was acutely aware that her reputation had diminished as she came increasingly to be regarded as an anachronism in the modern literary age. Discouraged by her critics and their "densities of incomprehension," the writer was prompted to muse, as early as June 1925, on whether her work was "nothing" or "far more than they know" (*Letters* 483). The wealth of unpublished writings serves to remind us that, with Edith Wharton, there is always "far more"

As the writer finalizes the content of the volumes (to be arranged thematically: the first presenting juvenilia and plays; the second, novels and life writing), she would welcome comment concerning materials Wharton scholars feel should (or should not) be included in the representations of unpublished writings. Please email suggestions and comments to: L.Ratray@hull.ac.uk

Notes

¹Wilson opens his essay "Justice to Edith Wharton" with the claim: "Before Edith Wharton died, the more commonplace work of her later years had had the effect of dulling the reputation of her earlier and more serious work" (19). Later in the same essay, however, he tellingly concedes: "I have read only one of Mrs. Wharton's novels written since *Old New York* [...]" (28).

²In the second edition of her biography, *A Feast of Words*, published in 1995, Wolff includes the essay "Lily Bart and Masquerade" (413 - 36).

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Wharton and Trollope: *The Way We Live Now* in *The House of Mirth*

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In her introduction to the 1936 edition of *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton emphasized the remarkable transformation of the New York world she had portrayed in 1905. To suggest the magnitude of the change within thirty years, she recalled the transformation of English society during Trollope's career; she noted "conditions so abruptly modified that the resplendent Duke of Omnium of Framley Parsonage [1861] would have seemed an almost legendary figure to the society described in *The Way We Live Now* [1875] and *The American Senator* [1877]" (265).

For Wharton in 1936, *The House of Mirth* was "The way we lived then," but given the characters and situations portrayed in *The Way We Live Now*, it is not surprising that she thought of Trollope's novel when writing an introduction to *The House of Mirth*.

At the center of Trollope's longest novel is the financier and speculator, Augustus Melmotte, of obscure origin, who uses his enormous wealth and power to buy a position in London society and a seat in Parliament. He is married to a woman "said to have been a Bohemian Jewess" (1: 30). Although scorning the Melmottes as crude and vulgar, fashionable Londoners flock to their lavish parties in their mansion in Grosvenor Square (like the Wellington Brys' tableaux vivantes) because "Everybody goes to their house" (1:202). As one London hostess explains to her husband: "' Going there when the Emperor of China is there, or something of that kind, is no more than going to the play'" (1: 302). When peers are in financial difficulties, they condescend to attend the Melmottes' ball, and others follow. "Where the Duchess of Stevenage went all the world would go" (1:29). In *The House of Mirth*, the wealthy insider, Gus Trenor, tolerates the Jewish speculator, Simon Rosedale, because "'He's going to be rich enough to buy us all out one of these days'" (130).

In both novels, the new rich transform their city houses into stage-like settings. For the Melmottes' ball in Grosvenor Square "the broad verandah had been turned into a conservatory, had been covered with boards contrived to look like trellis-work, was heated with hot air and filled with exotics at some fabulous price." Inside, "the lobbies were grottoes rich with ferns. Walls had been knocked away and arches had been constructed" (1: 34). At the Wellington Brys' New York mansion, Lily Bart incarnates Reynolds's portrait of Mrs. Lloyd on a stage constructed within the ball-room, itself a stage like an Italian pleasure-hall, so "rapidly-evoked. . .that one had to touch the marble columns to learn they were not of cardboard" (212).

No less important in fashionable life is the country house, where prospective marriage partners meet and

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assignments take place, but where the newly rich are rarely welcome. Rosedale never appears at Bellomont. The Melmottes are invited to the Longestaffes' estate Caversham but only because Longestaffe needs Melmotte to buy one of his properties. Georgiana Longestaffe is outraged that "we should have condescended to be civil to the Melmottes down in the country. In London one does those things, but to have them here was terrible!" (1:197). Outsiders who do not inherit country houses and cannot buy them are obliged to rent them for the summer, as the Sam Gormers in *The House of Mirth* "[take] the Van Alstyne place at Roslyn" (373), where Lily Bart spends a weekend in her descent to social oblivion.

In Trollope's world of fashion, marriage is a business transaction: when Melmotte's daughter Marie is "thrown into the matrimonial market" she is "trafficked for" by impecunious noblemen eager to exchange a title for a fortune (1: 107). Young women who are not heiresses may have less to offer, but marriage is the only future a woman in society can contemplate. Foreshadowing Lily Bart, Trollope's Georgiana Longestaffe, aged twenty-nine (2:94), still unmarried after twelve years on the London marriage market (1:304), in desperation compromises herself to advance her own interests by going to visit the Melmottes during the London season. She is then snubbed and shunned by her old friends. Her brother comes to the Melmotte house to tell her, "you oughtn't to be here" (1:238) and to demand that she leave the house. Likewise, Selden comes to the Emporium Hotel and all but commands that Lily leave her place as social secretary to the Western divorcee, Norma Hatch. "You are to let me take you away from here" (450), he instructs her.

Georgiana's words to her brother describe the plight of the marriageable woman familiar to Lily Bart. Georgiana says to him: "A man is so different. You can go just where you please, and do what you like. And if you're short of money, people will give you credit. And you can live by yourself and all that sort of thing" (1:238). (And have affairs, she might have added.) As she grows older, her ideal marriage partner descends on the social scale. At twenty-five "she 'move[d] her castle in the air from the Upper to the Lower House" (1: 301). In her extremity she decides to marry Mr. Brehgert, good-natured and prosperous-- a "very good man of business"-- but a "fat, greasy man" (2:91) a "commercial Jew" with "hair dyed black, and beard and moustache dyed a dark purple colour" (2:92). To her astonishment, he withdraws his offer of marriage when she refuses to accept his condition for marrying her. (He will not immediately maintain a house in London as she demands). Likewise, Lily Bart's ambitions "had shrunk gradually in the desiccating air of failure" (44). She, too, is rejected by the man she once scorned, when she refuses to accept the condition for marriage that Rosedale imposes--that she reinstate herself in society, presumably by blackmailing Bertha Dorset.

Georgiana lacks the beauty and grace that set Lily apart from other women, but the parallels between the situations of the two characters are so striking, they almost seem evidence that Wharton had read *The Way We Live Now* before she wrote *The House of Mirth*, especially when we remember that she was a lifelong reader of Trollope's novels. But whether or not *The Way We Live Now* influenced the writing of *The House of Mirth*, it is instructive to bring the two novels together. As the Cather scholar Merrill Skaggs has observed, "Sometimes books talk to each other, as well as people do."

For instance, we may see Rosedale in a different light when he is compared to Melmotte, who is repeatedly referred to by numerous characters as a gigantic swindler, thief, city adventurer, and monster. Unlike Melmotte, who is portrayed as he manipulates, threatens, and deceives his fellow speculators at meetings of one of the companies he directs, Rosedale is never seen at his place of business; no one calls him a swindler or suggests that he might go bankrupt (as Melmotte eventually does). Rosedale is never accused of failing to pay his debts or evading his creditors or forging signatures on legal documents--acts which Melmotte almost routinely performs. Rosedale accepts the sordid basis of relationships in the house of mirth, but he seems guilty of nothing more heinous than being "glossy-looking" (21) and striving to gain a place in society.

In some ways Rosedale is more like Brehgert than like Melmotte. "Audacity" and "arrogance"--words often used to describe Melmotte--are not applied to Rosedale or Brehgert. Both men are prudent and patient but capable of direct speaking. Brehgert "was a man who always asked for what he wanted; and having made up his mind that he wanted a second wife, had asked Miss Georgiana Longestaffe to fill that situation" (2: 92). Rosedale is equally blunt in proposing to Lily: "'I've got the money . . . and what I want is the woman--and I mean to have her too'" (283). When shunned at a social gathering, Brehgert exhibits "the customary good-humour of his people" (2: 96). As he explains in a letter to Georgiana, "I am not a man easily offended" (2: 273). Rosedale acquiesces at Lily's gracious dismissal of him after his proposal, "disciplined by the tradition of his blood to accept what was conceded, without undue haste to press for more" (288).

Trollope portrays widespread corruption infecting areas of city life that Wharton does not portray (such as men's clubs, editors' offices, government circles); the class structure is more rigid in England than in New York; anti-Semitism is more virulent in Trollope's novel, but in many ways *The House of Mirth* is a darker novel than *The Way We Live Now*. A moral framework exists in Trollope's novel, in which such words as conscience and love have their accepted meaning. Characters such as Marie Melmotte, Hetta Carbury, Paul Montague, and Roger Carbury can say "I love you," without being sentimental or calculating. In Lily Bart's world, love is generally regarded cynically as something to be feigned, derided or deliberately evoked in another person. Thinking how

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herself "What if she made him marry her for love, now that he had no other reason for marrying her?" (388). Except for Gerty Farish, characters do not even pretend that marriage is anything but a business deal. Speaking of Percy Gryce, Judy Trenor says to Lily, "we could none of us imagine your putting up with him for a moment unless you meant to marry him'." (119).

Trollope wrote in his autobiography of *The Way We Live Now*: "I had ventured to take the whip of the satirist into my hand" (225). As a satirist, Trollope is unsparing but not cruel. He finds most of his characters, however flawed, capable at times of good sense and worthy acts. He desired that "my readers might recognise human beings like to themselves, and not feel themselves to be carried away among gods or demons" (*Autobiography* 96). He judges Lady Carbury, who "had no ambition to write a good book, but was painfully anxious to write a book that the critics should say was good." "The woman was false from head to foot, but there was much of good in her, false though she was" (1: 17). Wharton's satire is more merciless. She favors the epigram, sharp and pointed; she often nails her characters with a devastating figure that precludes any possibility of change: Percy Gryce "looked like a clever pupil's drawing from a plaster case"; Gwen van Osburgh's "countenance had no more modelling than a face painted on a toy balloon" (76).

Both novelists invest one character with the attitudes of an earlier society. Trollope's Roger Carbury becomes harsh and overbearing in his denunciation of the vices of modern society, relentless in his futile courtship of Hetta Carbury, but he is a man of unflinching integrity and principle, "a man of high honour and noble courage" (2:15). Old New York is represented by Lily's aunt, Mrs. Peniston, who is unflinchingly self-absorbed, ungenerous, small-minded, unforgiving, cold as the "glacial neatness" (58) of her drawing room, immovable as "a piece of furniture which had been screwed to the floor" (59).

The reader of *The Way We Live Now* knows from the beginning that Melmotte will fall into disgrace and ruin. He himself knows that he could come to "terrible destruction" (2: 104) and has made provision if the catastrophe should come. But he does not think of himself as fated, nor do any of the characters feel themselves moving inexorably to an appointed end.

In contrast, the narrator and characters in *The House of Mirth* often think and speak in terms of fate—sometimes referring to the determining power, more often to one's appointed lot or destiny, from which one cannot escape. Almost always, fate portends something negative. In the first scene in his library, Selden compares Lily's sapphire bracelet to "manacles chaining her to her fate (10)" He suggests to her, "Perhaps you'll meet your fate to-night at the Trenors'" (18). Lily contemplates marriage to Percy Gryce. "It was a hateful fate—but how escape from it?" (39). She asks herself, "Why had she failed? Was it her own fault or that of destiny?" (44). After the scene at the Trenors' house, she feels herself pursued by the Furies; she hears the "iron clang of their wings" (239), as earlier she had imagined herself in "the great gilt cage" of society

and "heard its door clang on her!" (86). As Lily's rival for Selden's love, Gerty Farish feels "the inevitableness of her own defeat" (268). "A dull face invited a dull fate" (262). In her eyes, Lily has the mythic power of the siren who "loves her prey." "[Selden's] infatuation seemed a fatal necessity" (268).

The operation of fate in *The House of Mirth* may be understood in light of Wharton's statements about the construction of a novel. In *A Backward Glance*, she stated: "It is always a necessity to me that the note of inevitableness should be sounded at the very opening of my tale, and that my characters should go forward to their ineluctable doom like the 'murdered man' in 'The Pot of Basil.' From the very first I know exactly what is going to happen to everyone of them, their fate is settled beyond rescue, and I have but to watch and record" (204).

Wharton made this statement almost thirty years after completing *The House of Mirth*. But no other novel of hers better illustrates her dictum that the "note of inevitableness" should be sounded at the very start. Her "rule" that "the first page of a novel ought to contain the germ of the whole" (*Writing of Fiction* 39), her maxim that "no conclusion can be right which is not latent in the first page" (*Writing of Fiction* 78) are perfectly illustrated by the first page of *The House of Mirth*, portraying Lily Bart "in the act of transition," in a railroad station, having missed her train, standing irresolute, "apart from the crowd" (3), letting it drift past her, and first seen through the eyes of the character, Lawrence Selden, who best defines her function as a beautiful ornament to be seen and admired.

So much is clear. But the statement in *A Backward Glance* is ambiguous. "Their fate is settled beyond rescue." Settled by whom? By the interplay of character and circumstance? By the will of the author?

A number of early reviewers, as Martha Banta has noted, saw "Wharton's authorial hand as Fate's surrogate" (xx). The tightly constructed plot, in which Lily's every attempt to regain lost ground further compromises her, makes her decline seem inevitable—according to the reviewer in the *Outlook*, as if Wharton had forged "an iron chain of fate" around her heroine (Tuttleton 112). The reviewer in *The New York Times* called *The House of Mirth* "a tragedy of our modern life, in which the relentlessness of what men used to call Fate . . . a power beyond their control, is as vividly set forth as it ever was by Aeschylus or Shakespeare" (Tuttleton 121).

Lily's character—her conflicting desires, her lack of foresight, her impulse to seize the remedy nearest at hand—all conduce to her ultimate end. But Wharton has created a world in which Lily seems doomed to fail. Unlike Trollope and Jane Austen, Wharton portrays a society in which there appears no man with wealth and position who is not repulsive or mindless. There are no Darcys or Knightlys or even any Nidderdales or Roger Carburys in *The House of Mirth*.

Nor does Wharton offer Lily any palatable alternatives to life in fashionable society. The women who befriend Lily and have made workable lives for themselves—Gerty Farish, Carry Fisher, and Nettie Struther—do not represent

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plausible courses for Lily. Gertrude Farish, a single woman with a worthy vocation, might have been presented as a desirable alternative to Lily's precarious struggle for existence, but Wharton refuses to let Gertrude play this role, giving her an ugly name, making her typify "the mediocre and the ineffectual" (142), a sentimentalist full of "chirping enthusiasms" (142), "a parasite in the moral order, living on the crumbs of other tables, and content to look through the window at the banquet set for her friends" (241). Wharton's conviction that "a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys" requires the destruction of Lily Bart (Backward Glance 207).

The sense of fatality in *The House of Mirth* depends upon the focus of the novel on a single character. Virtually nothing happens that does not in some way affect Lily Bart; no character appears who is not connected to her. In *The Way We Live Now*, the character and fortunes of Melmotte dominate the novel; but they are entwined with a number of subsidiary plots. The narrative moves from one group to another—from the Carburys, to Paul Montague and Mrs. Hurtle, to the Longstaffes, the Melmottes, the Damask Monograms, and the young men of fashion gambling at the Beargarden. Each of these groups is connected to characters from other groups, but not even Melmotte links them all. What happens in one household, even Melmotte's, does not necessarily determine what happens elsewhere.

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton claims a god-like omniscience, saying of her characters, "from the very first I know exactly what is going to happen to every one of them." In his autobiography, Trollope disclaims such knowledge. "When I sit down to write a novel I do not at all know and I do not very much care how it is to end" (165). He argued that fictional characters have their own impulses which may resist the novelist's control, just as "the rustic driving his pigs to market cannot always make them travel by the exact path which he has intended for them" (93). But the structure of *The Way We Live Now* is more intricately designed than might appear. All paths lead to the one climax, Melmotte's suicide by poison, after which there is a "general purgation of evil," as one critic has observed (Edwards 182). In the spirit of comedy, most of the characters are in happier circumstances at the end of the novel than they are at the beginning. The marriages of Hetta Carbury and Paul Montague; Georgiana Longstaffe and an impoverished curate; Lady Carbury and her editor, Mr. Broune; and Ruby Ruggles and John Crumb release these characters from miseries that have tormented them. Lily Bart's fate, foreshadowed on the first page, seems determined from the start, and her fall is inexorable as she descends into poverty and death.

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Shopping for Survival: Conspicuous Consumerism in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Ellen Glasgow's *The Wheel of Life*

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"I Shop, Therefore I Am" has become a playful post-modern slogan of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, boldly emblazoned and readily available on mugs, T-shirts and postcards, parodying the Cartesian original while maintaining a mischievous energy. The activity of shopping forms an intriguing component in the work of Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow, where female characters routinely engage in shopping in an effort to escape the confinements of their narrow existences. *The House of Mirth* numbered eighth in the top ten bestsellers of 1905, dropping only to ninth position when Ellen Glasgow's *The Wheel of Life* entered in tenth place the following year. At the time of publication, various articles and reviews drew the two texts into comparison, "It is as if she [Glasgow] had wandered through the doleful corridors of *The House of Mirth*," protested the *Literary Digest* reviewer in 1906 (Scura 110). On the same day, *Outlook* magazine duly noted that, "There are broader contrasts of character than in *The House of Mirth*, though not quite the same sureness of touch, the same sense of intimacy with the most elusive aspects of a well-defined though loosely ordered social group" (Scura 111). Writing for the *North American Review*, Louise Collier Willcox commented that "The large play of life, the quick pulse and rush of emotion make Miss Glasgow's book all quiveringly alive while Mrs. Wharton's is a carefully veiled, fatally truthful picture" (Scura 114). In *Dial*, William Morton Payne complained that Glasgow "had been even less successful than the writer [Wharton] with whose *The Wheel of Life* is brought into inevitable comparison" (Scura 110).

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This exploration of consumerism intends to analyze the changing role of women within a materialist-centered culture, reconsidering *The House of Mirth* through an appraisal of *The Wheel of Life*. Recent studies involving consumerism and nineteenth-century literature have proven illuminating for the Wharton scholar. For example, Tim Armstrong interrogates Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) in terms of light, desire, the body and electricity (placing an intriguing emphasis on Thorstein Veblen's theories in terms of waste functioning on the symbolic level of social hierarchies) and makes a particularly interesting reading when compared with *The House of Mirth*. Complementing Armstrong's research, Kathy Peiss offers an intriguing and useful analysis of the growth of a female consumer culture, particularly in America's beauty industry, in "American Women and the Making of Modern Consumer Culture." Lillian S. Robinson's exploration of Lily's standing in the marriage mart discusses how Lily's beauty is both her greatest asset and her undoing, whereas Wai-Chee Dimock explains the consequences of Lily's naïve Baudrillardian assumption that she is operating within a schematic based on the consumer principles of "exchange value," hoping to gain something from her time with the Dorsets while, in actuality, Bertha registers only "use value," willing to discard Lily when she has served her purpose. In addition, Lori Merish's work examines *The House of Mirth* within the context of naturalism and encompassing the significance of Lily's visibility and her status as a commodity. Building on some of the excellent work already completed on Wharton and consumerism, I would like to examine the relationship between *The House of Mirth* and *The Wheel of Life*. This relationship appears to have been neglected by much criticism, yet I believe it is possible to read (or re-read) Glasgow's novel as a direct response to Wharton's text. My argument here falls into three parts: a brief examination of the historical context, a consideration of the theoretical impact of Thorstein Veblen, and, finally, an analysis of the textual evidence. Drawing on the popular naturalist fiction of the "fallen woman," including Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1875), Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Chopin's novella, *The Awakening* (1899), Wharton and Glasgow effectively re-write the traditional narrative for a modern consumer audience. Although Wharton did not use these novels as sources for *The House of Mirth*, it should be acknowledged that she was writing within a specific trajectory of literature that explored the intricacies of the female psyche. Though frequently disparate, these two texts share unique common ground: written early in the career of their author, set in the chaotic New York panorama, and employing creative heroines and unsatisfactory "heroes."

Ellen Anderson Gholson Glasgow, in contrast to Edith Wharton, has garnered a considerably more subdued reputation on the literary circuit; Frederick McDowell has described her as "possibly the most neglected novelist in her generation" (3). Born in 1873 in Richmond, Virginia, she began writing at an early age. *The Wheel of Life* was completed during a particularly difficult period in her life,

and she later disclaimed all knowledge of this work, writing to Bessie Zaban Jones in April 1938, "that was not a good novel, and I have long since disinherited it" (Rouse 238). The New York City setting was a departure for Glasgow, who had previously set her work in the South, such as in the tobacco fields of *The Descendent* (1897) and the Southern counties she later returned to in *Virginia* (1913). One of Glasgow's few biographers, E. Stanly Godbold, Jr., maintains a similarly harsh view of his subject's New York experiment, describing the novel as "a vague and rambling story of immorality and boredom among the socially elite in New York City. She said that she did not know whether her own life went into her work, but it was a book that was 'wrung from life itself' and was not likely to be either understood or popular" (71-72).

Less commercially successful than *The House of Mirth*, despite the novel's rather rueful acknowledgement of consumer pleasures, *The Wheel of Life* follows the lives of two women, Laura Wilde, who "wrote vague beautiful verse that nobody ever read" (Glasgow 5), a moderately successful and financially independent poet and her childhood friend, the ironically named Gerty Bridewell, a celebrated beauty who has been married to the unfaithful Perry for five years as the narrative commences. The structure follows the impetuous engagement of the cerebral Laura to the worldly, vain and charismatic Arnold Kemper and her subsequent realization that their relationship cannot endure. The novel ends as she joins intellectual publisher Roger Adams, who has most conveniently just been widowed, and who has loved her from afar for many years.

In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton uses her text to condemn consumer culture and critique a consumer society, while Glasgow acknowledges the lures of consumerism but concurrently appropriates it as a potential space for female rebellion and refuge, as shopping becomes a female haven secluded from the intrusiveness of the sexualized male gaze. Lily's shopping, existing in a hidden and rather shadowy subtext, provides the fine clothes that maintain her increasingly precarious social position. There is a wealth of criticism interrogating Lily and her society as consumers extraordinaire, yet the reader is never actually privileged to witness one of Lily's shopping trips. We see her emerging from the shops and meeting Gerty Farish², working at Madame Regina's and indulging Gerty's naïve dreams of opening a "green-and-white" shop, yet we never actually observe Lily handing over her closely guarded funds (Wharton 221). In addition to the hand-me-downs from figures such as Judy Trenor and Mrs. Penistone, Lily *must* spend time shopping, as her piles of bills from the dressmaker and her fondness for French designer Jacques Doucet testify. In the same way that we are not allowed to see Lily sit down to play at bridge (although we are aware she suffers heavy losses), the reader remains carefully edited from scenes of hedonistic consumerism. Wharton manipulates perceptions of her heroine; sympathy for Lily's predicament would be lost during a chapter when she prevaricates over dresses, or debates which style of hat to buy. The pathos of Lily's plight lies in the fact

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that the reader remains carefully shielded from these instances of spending. Ironically, Wharton ultimately denounces such consumerism, but Glasgow peppers her text with scenes of consumer practice, allowing Laura to enjoy instances of spending as a respite from the hostilities of the marital market. Shopping is celebrated as a method of relaxation, rather than edited from the narrative as a shameful practice.

The recognition of a specifically gendered form of consumerism essentially became apparent after the Civil War, with a heavier dependence on goods which could be bought externally rather than home produced. The 1870s and 1880s witnessed the rise of the New York department store and continued developments in the art of window dressing and displaying goods to entice female customers, a mode of shopping which crucially exerts no pressure to buy. Part of Broadway and some of Sixth Avenue became known as "Lady's Mile" because of the vast array of shops designed specifically to welcome the female consumer (Taylor 288). Department stores at the turn of the century were essentially a "women's city club," often offering cafes, lavatories, live music, baby care facilities and art exhibitions: women could even pause in their shopping to enjoy a hot bath (Benson 85). With higher levels of service and personal attention from staff for customers, consumers learned to be ever more demanding while enjoying their new heightened consequence and privileged status. With the possibility of finding a communal female space within the ever attractive department store, shopping increasingly became a potential arena for female independence. By the 1890s, the department store was the premier focus in American trade and retail, with stores such as Macy's, John Wanamaker's, and Marshall Field's growing in both stature and profit margin (Benson 31). As Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner have argued:

In shopping, women were not simply victims of capitalist advertising but were taking an opportunity for autonomy and personal expression. Although shaped by class and gender relations, the lure of consumerism reflected an emphasis on pleasure rather than duty in the pursuit of personal meaning and family responsibility. (395)

With the publication of Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* in 1899, the term "conspicuous consumption" was famously born, as Veblen attacked, amongst other things, affluent women who functioned primarily as ornaments for their husbands' wealth, the garish wearing of riches normally associated only with the nouveau riche. In Veblen's opinion, this vulgar display of wealth from the most prominent families in society made them a target for analysis. It is useful to note just how often Wharton actually employs the term "conspicuous" in *The House of Mirth*, published only six years after Veblen's ground-breaking study. While with Lily on the train to Bellomont, tedious millionaire Percy Gryce is "secluded in the shelter of her conspicuous-

ness" (Wharton 18). Thinking about Lawrence Selden, Lily observes that "she had never mistaken his inconspicuousness for obscurity" (Wharton 52). Being seen, being noticed and being "conspicuous" are intrinsic components in Wharton's rendering of what came to be known as the Gilded Age. A member of Lily's social group because he is amusing company rather than rich, Selden cannot compete with more affluent men who would vie for Lily's hand in marriage. Lori Merish interprets the situation as similar to the developing role of the New York window shopper, perpetually "just looking"; Selden utilizes the same non-buyer's principles in his scenes with Lily: "it is precisely because he can't afford (but appreciates) Lily that Selden best enacts the dynamics of visual desire in consumer culture" (Merish 259).

Veblen employed further social critique as he categorically dissected the contemporary fashion scene. After offering his thoughts on the unsuitability of female bonnets, "making work impossible," the impracticalities of female shoes with "the so-called French heel" and cumbersome skirts and "the rest of the drapery" women customarily wore, he turned his attention to the popular affection for the female corset. Veblen claimed that the key to an understanding of the garment was its discomfort, which rendered its female wearer unable to work, thus subjugating her to the position of household decoration. This clearly displayed to the world that her husband's wealth was sufficiently in excess to keep her contentedly domesticated, provoking Veblen to declaim:

The corset is, in economic theory, substantially a mutilation, undergone for the purpose of lowering the subject's vitality and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work. It is true, the corset impairs the personal attractions of the wearer, but the loss suffered on that score is offset by the gain in reputability which comes of her visibly increased expensiveness and infirmity. It may broadly be set down that the womanliness of woman's apparel resolves itself, in point of substantial fact, into the more effective hindrance to useful exertion offered by the garments peculiar to women. (106)

While medical evidence has since proven that the corset was indeed a mutilation and often twisted and deformed women's bodies beyond recognition, Veblen's concentration on "visibly increased expensiveness" reveals his preoccupation to be focused on issues of conspicuous consumerism rather than women's health. His argument urges that the female corset was literally robbing women of their life-force, leading them to an early "infirmity." Veblen's argument, however, does not take into account domestic workers, who also would have worn corsets, and were presumably able to carry out their chores while so attired. Although he highlights the "womanliness" of female apparel while examining the corset as a construct of female submission, Veblen neglects to interrogate the issue of sexuality. This deconstruction of the corset defines it as a curiously de-sexualized symbol of a woman belonging to a man. David Riesman suggests that Veblen simply did not perceive the link between female fashion and female

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sex appeal, despite his insistence on woman as decorative object. The corset was designed to emphasize female curves and offer a streamlined silhouette of a woman's body (enhanced by "tight lacing," as Lily would have worn), an attractive temptation for the male surveyor. Developing this perspective, Elizabeth Ammons maintains that Wharton and Veblen share a similar view of the female figure as a "prized domestic trophy . . . a symbol to be studied, a totem of patriarchal power" (29). Both Veblen and Ammons (unlike Wharton and Glasgow) effectively silence the individual, translating her as a symbol rather than autonomous being. Instead, Wharton and Glasgow give voice to the corseted female figure in their creation of Lily Bart and Laura Wilde.

In both texts, shopping has an important function. It is a form of female rebellion for Laura Wilde, while Lily's mythical shopping expeditions for clothes operate as a metaphor for female constraint. Lily Bart's sad fate (for once, her shopping cannot save her) contrasts with Laura Wilde's, who manages to negotiate her way through consumer perils. During her famous exchange with Selden discussing marriage at the appropriately named *Benedick*, Lily debates the restrictive rules of society:

If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop. (12)

The ornamental female presence and the attention to surfaces, clothes and decoration highlight Lily's predicament. Women function as models of the latest fashions rather than self-governing subjects; Kathy Peiss argues that the decorative female body symbolized a space where separate spheres were united: "places in which 'private' and 'public' met - the clothed body, the well-furnished parlor - were accepted, indeed celebrated, as sites of commodity culture" (314). Usually the body must be clothed and kept modestly hidden but costumes such as Bertha Dorset's elaborate gowns paradoxically draw attention to the female form. Wharton mourns the fact that Selden's "shabby" coat will never be remarked on; he will always be valued for his person rather than his physical attributes. Lily both recognizes this fact and abides by the rules Veblen's "predatory culture" dictate. She must continue to be a decorative and attractive spectacle in society if she has any hope of making the advantageous marriage that would save her from humiliating penury and social stigma. For Lily Bart then, social survival necessitates shopping and provides a way of maintaining appearances and ignoring her financial obligations. By continuing to dress exquisitely and "conspicuously," Lily transmits a defiant message to an avaricious society fully aware of her financial situation. The pressure to look eternally exquisite, Lily's boxes of Doucet dresses and determined clinging to her increasingly marginal social position, all contribute to her eventual demise. The thought of not spending (even though she is bankrupt), of being considered

"dingy," remains anathema to her. The simple deferment of the purchase of a dressing-case leaves Lily feeling, as Wharton points out, "unusually virtuous" (87). On this occasion, Lily has just received funds from Gus Trenor and ironically hesitates over the dressing-case only because she is waiting for the bill for a new opera cloak, "and the resolve made her feel much richer than when she had entered the shop" (Wharton 87). Delaying any purchase can be considered a rarity for the materialistic Miss Bart.

Glasgow employs shopping as both literal and metaphoric occupation more frequently than Wharton, and conversely posits consumer activity as a sanctuary from emotional torment. Prior to her engagement to Arnold Kemper, Laura impulsively decides to temporarily experience life as her friend, Gerty Bridewell, a trophy wife:

Then it occurred to her that she would follow Gerty's example and seek a distraction in the shops, and she took a cab and drove to her milliner's, where she tried on a number of absurdly impossible hats. She bought one at last, to realize immediately as she left the shop that she would never persuade herself to wear it because she felt that it gave her an air of Gerty's "smartness" which sat like an impertinence upon her own individual charm. (Glasgow 266)

Recognizing the benefits of retail therapy long before it became a popular consumer advertising slogan, Glasgow here allows her heroine a moment of comfort spending. Laura symbolically rejects the hat which so reminds her of Gerty's smart lifestyle, deciding it would be "an impertinence" to her, foreshadowing her decision not to follow Gerty into matrimony, and gamble her happiness over the female status attained through marriage. Laura's quest to "seek a distraction in the shops" reveals how low she rates consumer activity, while for Gerty, shopping for a new hat can be the object of a whole day's outing. For Laura, this attention to superficial appearance can only ever serve her as a distraction from contemplating the increasing problems surrounding her engagement. The hats are all "absurdly impossible" implying frivolous and highly fashionable items (which Lily Bart would no doubt have adored) that Laura perceives as impractical and silly, literally "absurd." The fripperies of fashion are here shown to be a triviality for the figure of the serious female artist. Laura's realization that she will never wear her new hat "because it gave her an air of Gerty's 'smartness'" reveals, despite her love and affection for Gerty, that Laura values her independence and peace of mind too highly to settle into a role of decorative domesticity like her friend. Through the character of the enigmatic Gerty Bridewell, a potential vision of what life might have been like for Mrs. Lily Rosedale can be explored.

A similar scene occurs after Laura breaks her engagement to Arnold Kemper, as she revels in visiting a milliner: At the moment it seemed to her that hats offered as promising an aid to forgetfulness as any other, and she threw herself into the pursuit of them with an excitement which enabled her, for the time, at least, to extinguish the fierce hunger of her soul in supplying

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the more visible exactions of her body. (Glasgow 426)

Glasgow here examines the benefits of literal retail therapy, which eases Laura into "forgetfulness" for a short but blissful period. The search for a hat to purchase provides her with an objective that distracts from her heart-break and even allows her to experience a feeling of "excitement." Shopping in this context functions as a retreat from harsh reality, in a similar context to Chopin's short story, "A Pair of Silk Stockings," where Mrs. Sommers has the noblest of intentions when venturing out to the shops but is swiftly seduced by consumer pleasures. In fact, this therapeutic buying provides a distinct contrast to Laura's behavior during her engagement, at first actively rejecting her aunt's claims that, "there can be no happy marriage . . . not founded upon a carefully selected trousseau" (Glasgow 401). Mrs. Payne's belief that the bride's clothes ensure the success of the marriage relegates all responsibility for nuptial bliss firmly to the woman. The conviction that a woman must dress always to please and thus secure the attention of her husband angers the independent Laura: "If his love for me depends on clothes, I don't want it" (Glasgow 401).

The notion of the "makeover" in consumer ideology represents an important and unexplored field for academic research, yet Glasgow, writing in 1906, identifies that a change in outer appearance can function as a catalyst for a deeper emotional awakening. While there remains always the danger that consumers can become addicted to the thrill of the purchase, becoming "shopoholics" in the truest sense of the term, the reader knows the intelligent and complex character of Laura stands in little danger of succumbing to this temptation.

Unlike Lily Bart, whose fortune is partly based on her appearance, Laura has a measure of economic independence through her career as a published poet. Although Lily must marry in order to ensure financial security, Laura experiences no such pressing necessity. Mistress of the family home (when Lily Bart can only ever be a guest), Laura has a place to live, an inheritance and a small income, allowing her a certain autonomy. She could quite easily remain single and live comfortably in the house if she so wished. The pressures exerted on Laura are emotional, the need to please her well meaning but frustrating relatives in addition to her demanding fiancé. From this perspective, Laura's relationship with consumerism directly challenges Veblen's schematic. She has no need or wish to display either herself or her moderate wealth as she consciously chooses not to engage in the marriage mart (Kemper pursues her and not the other way round). Surrounded and comforted by family, unlike the solitary figure of Lily, Laura remains secure in their support and affection and has the fiscal liberty and status both as a woman of independent means and as a poet. Laura has no need to marry unless she actively chooses to.

It is also interesting to note that while women buying for the self are categorized as narcissists, men buying items for themselves are seen as collectors. Percy Gryce's notorious collection of Americana, Selden's library and Arnold Kemper's fleet of racing cars do not obviously link them to

the consumer culture so embraced by their female counterparts, yet all are avid consumers of rarefied material objects. Being perceived as connoisseurs or collectors of artifacts (despite Selden's protests) positions them as superior consumers; their interests are disguised as intellectual pursuits, neatly exemplifying the double standard. These collections are all intended for the private sphere (as another addition to their collection and for personal enjoyment), while female purchases (such as elaborate outfits, hats and accessories) are bought to enhance their standing in the public sphere. Lily's debts and rumors of her behavior dutifully reported by Grace Stepney, influence Mrs. Peniston in altering her will, leaving all capital to Grace rather than Lily. However, despite the role she has assumed for Mrs. Peniston's benefit, one of Grace's first acts as she comes into possession of her inheritance is to furnish a new wardrobe for herself, "rustling with the best quality of crape" and rising in her mourning clothes of "sable wrath" at Lily's request for a loan. In accordance with Veblen, Grace's new financial independence allows her to translate herself into a product by immediately putting her wealth on display, parading her "grief" in a fashion-conscious manner (Wharton 197, 180). Although Grace's clothes and actions are socially appropriate to nineteenth-century mourning customs, she assumes the role of a moral exemplar in order to criticize Lily. Now living by the same set of consumerist social rules for which she punished Lily and ruined her chances of inheritance, Grace effectively steps into the vacant space left by Mrs. Peniston to both judge and censure Lily, and Grace's new wardrobe (mourning clothes made from the finest materials) elegantly illustrates her hypocrisy.

While Lily dresses to attract, Laura's dresses in *The Wheel of Life* are continually associated with muted, sober and inconspicuous autumnal shades, such as her "pale bronze gown" and "coffee-colored lace" (Glasgow 18). Kemper appreciates her restrained sense of style, remarking to the exquisitely costumed Gerty, "I've had enough of fluff and feathers, and I like the natural way she wears her clothes" (Glasgow 86). According to Veblen's model, Laura's dress makes other characters seem over-adorned, such as her aunt, Mrs. Bleeker, who is "grotesquely gorgeous with her winking diamonds and her old point lace" (Glasgow 35). Lily Bart's clothes, such as her revealing outfit in the notorious *tableau vivant* scene, are designed to attract attention, to draw male eyes to the beauty of her body and the implied promise of sex. Laura has no such need to display herself and, ironically, this deliberate removal from fashionable feminine wiles provides part of her attraction for Kemper. Like Lily, Laura also stands out from the ever-eager feminine crowd but for completely different reasons. Laura's disinclination to be adorned with "winking diamonds" again challenges Veblen's theories, as does her refusal to exist as mere object and decoration.

Glasgow neatly highlights the gendered consumer race when Gerty reveals she must hurry to her dress-maker, Camille, as "she has just got in some new French gowns and she has promised to give me the first

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look" (Glasgow 257). The gowns are French and like Lily's allegiance to Doucet, Gerty recognizes the consumer value of European chic. Like Lily's revealing outfit in the *tableau vivant*, Gerty receives young playwright George St Trent in a state of artful disarray:

Gerty rose from the circle as he advanced while the pale green flounces of her train rippled prettily about her feet. Her hair was loosely arranged, and she gave him an odd impression of wearing what in his provincial mind he called a "wrapper" - his homely name for the exquisite garment which flowed, straight and unconfined, from her slender shoulders. His mother, he remembered, not without a saving humor, had always insisted that a lady should appear before the opposite sex only in the entire armor of her 'stays' and close-fitting bodice. (Glasgow 70-1)

Gerty, imagined as Venus arising from the waves of her social circle, is fully aware of the effect of her "unconfined" dishabille upon the impressionable Mr. Trent and savors the power of her overt sexuality, flirting with him for the remainder of his visit. As Trent's wry remembrance of his mother's opinions on the niceties of female attire illustrate, clothing was both an "armor" and protection for women while simultaneously utilized to attract men. Just as the style, color, and material of the clothing is important, so too is an occasional lack of sculpted style, illustrated in Gerty's wrap and Lily's costume for the Reynolds re-enactment. As a married woman, Gerty is not censured for this form of display, but Lily pays a heavy price, drawing a powerful parallel with ideologies of dress and how this reflects on perceptions of female respectability, morality and good character. Ironically, the lack of a corset in both these instances (an absence enjoyed by Gerty and Lily), suggests limitations to Veblen's corset analogy; women are translated to decorations in the male presence regardless of their costume.

Unlike Lily's misguided dealings with Trenor and Rosedale, Laura often succeeds in instances of social transaction. When she discusses her love for Gerty with Kemper, he is surprised by Laura's frank admission of affection: "But I thought all women hated one another" (Glasgow 184). Ignoring Kemper's reference to the competitive consumer culture of the marriage market which places all women in direct competition, Laura acknowledges that men have created and now control this environment, "That's because men have ruled the world in two ways . . . they have made the laws and they have made the jokes" (Glasgow 184). Laura's shrewd observations serve to enhance her attractiveness for Kemper:

Her championship of her sex amused even while it attracted him - he saw in it a kind of abstract honor which he had always believed to be lacking in the feminine mind - and at the same instant he remembered.... the petty stings he had seen dealt at Gerty by her less lovely acquaintances. (Glasgow 185)

Glasgow's underlying message promotes female solidarity within the social arena; unlike the repeatedly obtuse Selden, Kemper's awareness of the rules of feminine competition highlights his appreciation of Laura's critique

of this practice and his social acuteness. Written from his male perspective, Glasgow captures perfectly his tone of slight condescension: "her championship of her sex amused him." The unnamed women responsible for the "petty stings" aimed at the beautiful Gerty cannot harm her reputation. Gerty's marital status (in contrast to Lily Bart's position) will always provide her with the protection of her husband's name.

Laura benefits from Gerty's unswerving support throughout the text (this sense of female companionship in Glasgow's novel is entirely absent from Wharton's work) and also benefits from the emotional support system provided by her relatives. Laura exists in the intellectual Bohemia of New York, and all Glasgow's characters belong to this social stratum; their wealth, in contrast to the old money of Wharton's Van Osburghs and Van Alstyne, is new money made through the stock exchange and business tips. Composed of authors, poets and publishers, promoting the ideals of intellectual exchange, Glasgow's New York does not represent the type of society Lily Bart would ever move in.

In conclusion, consumerism consistently places female subjects in the position of commodities, yet the site of consumerism can paradoxically offer a form of resistance to patriarchal control. Lily Bart is financially dependent on others; shopping is for her a pleasure and a necessity; she is socially defined by her clothes; she has a lack of familial support and is a celebrated beauty but ultimately perishes. Laura Wilde is financially independent; shopping is for her a trial but also a place of refuge and recovery; she is socially defined by her poetry; has a wealth of familial support but ultimately survives. Lily believes she must shop in order to maintain her role and position in society to attract a wealthy husband, but Laura's financial security ensures her future and she has no real concern for her appearance. Both resist marriages that could be advantageous; Lily refuses Rosedale's coolly focused matrimonial business proposition and Laura's realization that Kemper wishes only to possess and thus diminish her heralds the end of her engagement. Even though Laura Wilde is on the verge of suicide after ending her engagement, Glasgow compromises on her ending by allowing Laura the chance of happiness with patient suitor Roger Adams. Through an analysis of Glasgow's novel, the underlying consumer principles of Wharton's work are highlighted. Glasgow's promotion of female solidarity, the more positive ending for her heroine, and her alternative route through consumer culture can be utilized to explore Wharton's decisions in writing *The House of Mirth*. Denying her readers a conventional happy ending, Wharton does not allow Lily's covert shopping to save her but despite Laura's blatant embrace of cathartic consumer practice, Glasgow allows her to negotiate a safe path through the consumer cycle.

Notes

¹ Ellen Glasgow, Letter to Bessie Zaban Jones, April 18th 1938.

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2. Gerty Farish, who works for her living, is characterised by her lack of care for current fashion, with "the 'useful' colour" of her gown and "the subdued lines of her hat" (Wharton 70-1). Wharton implies that the more ostentatious the outfit, the less worthwhile the person underneath. This is further exemplified by Bertha Dorset's extravagant gowns, paralleling Gus Trenor's clothes which are significantly tight and uncomfortable (Wharton 72).

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