

## Edith Wharton: An Heiress to Gay Male Sexual Radicalism?

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The American novelist Edith Wharton (1862–1937) began writing her short stories in 1891. Oscar Wilde’s trial for gross indecency was in 1895. I believe Wilde’s trial, and his plays, alongside the work of Walt Whitman, had a formative impact upon Wharton’s most substantial work, which followed the period of his greatest successes.

Throughout her post-1905 work, and to the end of her career, Wharton at times imitates Wilde’s phrasing, not always successfully. She attempts Wildean paradoxes: in *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), the household confidante Mrs Ansell notes that ‘[M]ost divorced women marry again to be respectable’, to which Mr Langhope, the heiress’s father, replies, nearly quoting Wilde, ‘Yes—that’s their punishment’ (Wharton 2004, p. 243). In a later conversation between the same two characters, Mrs Ansell asks, ‘Do you really mean that Bessy should get a divorce?’, to which Langhope replies: ‘divorce does not frighten me very much. It is as painless as modern dentistry’ (Wharton 2004, p. 280). In ‘The Reckoning’ (1902), in a Wildean aside, the narrator Julia Westall recalls that ‘[S]he had once said, in ironical defense [*sic.*] of her marriage,

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that it had at least preserved her from the necessity of sitting next to [her husband] at dinners' (Wharton 2007, p. 178).

The Wilde trial, with its focus on members of the demimonde seeking to blackmail one another, had echoes in Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905). The same theme—of stolen letters with sexually implicating content being used to blackmail a character—had also been central to the plot of Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893). Because of the conflict of social expectation—that Lily Bart must marry for money—as opposed to her sexual desire (she wishes to be with Lawrence Selden)—Lily tries to engage in blackmail. With letters stolen from their owner—as Wilde's (and Alfred Douglas's) letters had been stolen for the purpose of blackmail—Lily Bart seeks to blackmail the society matron Bertha Dorset into acknowledging her socially.

In 1903 Wharton met the writer Vernon Lee in Italy, and began to read John Addington Symonds. By 1905, she had begun her intimate friendship with Henry James and the circle of male homosexual writers around him, and by 1908, she was reading Whitman and Nietzsche, and she began her affair with Morton Fullerton. Through these influences, Wharton was drawn away from the moralism of one strand of the 'New Woman' framing of sexuality (and away from American discourses about sexuality in fiction, which were generally framed in moralistic terms in this period, regardless of the gender of the writer), and towards British and European aestheticism and sexual liberationism. It is after this period that we begin to see the multiple echoes and palimpsests of Wilde in her work.

As Wharton is drawn more and more firmly onto the Wildean/Whitmanesque path, the differences between her position and that of 'New Woman' sexual morality become ever clearer. In 'The Reckoning', *Summer*, *The Age of Innocence* and *The Gods Arrive*, her heroines do not act out the 'wrongs of' narrative. On the contrary, Wharton's heroines in these texts do indeed suffer for their decisions to live out a measure of sexual self-directedness; their sexuality does punish them, as it always punished the heroines of the 'wrongs of' school. But there the resemblance ends. Though they are sometimes victimised sexually, Edith Wharton's heroines are never sexual victims. She never presents the subject as regretting her sexual decisions, nor do her heroines assert that punishment has made sexual experience not worth having. Nor does the authorial voice ever take this moralising position. On the contrary; the

authorial voice finds the ‘abundant recompense’ in that experience, no matter how ultimately painful.

There are direct echoes of Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* in Wharton’s short story, ‘Autre Temps, Autre Moers’ (c.1920), where Mrs Lidcote, the central character, is a ‘ruined’ mother who returns from the exile forced upon her by her sexual transgression, in order to save her daughter Leila from scandal. ‘The Other Two’ is a Wharton short story about two ex-husbands, and one current husband, of the central female character. It illustrates a post-Wildean world in which the female sexual subject has escaped the patriarchal sexual economy and patriarchal sexual control. Indeed, the heroine of the story runs the sexual economy and the three men are subordinated to her sexual arrangements. Here is the sexual anarchy implied by Wilde and feared by critics of the New Woman and opponents of Wilde at his trial: here is a scenario of a world in which the dominant sexual law has broken down. Mrs Waythorn appropriates herself and her own sexuality.

Wilde wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray* between 1890 and 1891. Wharton engaged in several direct rewritings of this novel, including ‘The Portrait’ (c.1919) and ‘The Rembrandt’ (1922). ‘The Portrait’ centres on a painter who cannot bring himself to render the face of a scurrilous robber baron, Mr Vaid, even though a substantial commission depends upon it. The reason the painter cannot complete the portrait is that the robber baron is too evil. Wharton appropriates *Dorian Gray*’s moral world in relation to the visual arts, in taking wholesale a magical-realist dimension in which the final appearance of a work of visual art is affected by moral actions. It ends with a scene of his daughter throwing back the drapery in confrontation with the moral truth about her father, a direct echo of the last scene in *Picture of Dorian Gray*. In ‘The Rembrandt’, an art advisor keeps a secret about the worthlessness of a copy in order to do a kindness to an impoverished, genteel lady—but in the process corrupts his own reputation and his own soul. In both narratives Wharton appropriates and engages with Wilde’s construction of a painting as a mirror of, or catalyst to, moral decay.

Indeed, Wharton also rewrote *Lady Windermere’s Fan* twice—once, as we saw above, in ‘Autre Temps, Autre Moers’, and then again in *The Age of Innocence*. In this novel, which Wharton wrote in 1920, but which was set in the 1870s, there are direct equivalencies of Wharton characters to Wilde characters. The sexually jaded, worldly, ‘fallen’ but admirable Ellen Olenska corresponds to the sexually jaded, worldly, ‘fallen’ but admirable

Mrs Erlynne of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. The sexually and intellectually innocent daughter figure May Welland corresponds to the sexually and intellectually oppressed innocent daughter figure Agatha. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Mrs Erlynne sacrifices herself, in order to protect her daughter, and she does so by sacrificing her sexual reputation. In *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen Olenska also sacrifices herself, to protect her cousin May Welland, and she also does so by sacrificing her sexual reputation.

Far more interestingly than these generic echoes that simply reveal an intensity of influence, however, is what happens when Wharton uses Wilde to ask questions about the nature of female sexual liberation. Wharton used Wilde in order to engage in a necessary, indeed central, argument about what happens to the aestheticist/sexual liberationist project once it is undertaken by heterosexual women. One can almost hear Wharton frustratedly asking the shades of Wilde and Walt Whitman to theorise further on behalf of women who, in pursuing that ideal, risk pregnancy, unsafe and illegal abortions and forms of venereal diseases to which lesbians were not subject—taking the ‘case’ of heterosexual women’s reality into account. In ‘The Reckoning’, Wharton poses a challenge back to Wilde.

Many social historians, such as Lillian Faderman in *Surpassing the Love of Men*, have established that in the nineteenth century, both in Britain and in the United States, relationships between women that we would today identify as ‘lesbian’, were socially nearly normative; I would add that there was also no law prohibiting female-female sexual relationships before the twentieth century in either country. One could argue that prior to reliable contraception and safe abortion, heterosexual and lesbian women were more dramatically differently situated in terms of biographical and biological experience than they are today. Wharton’s work struggles overtly with the historical risks of the heterosexual female body, including risks of unwanted pregnancy and unsafe abortion.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry Wotton’s speeches about the overarching value of individualism and impulse, when he argues that ‘Pleasure is Nature’s test, her sign of approval. [...] I represent to you all the sins you have never had the courage to commit’, appal the painter Basil Hallward: ‘But surely, if one lives merely for oneself, Harry, one pays a terrible price for doing so?’ (Wilde 1989, pp. 106–107). This argument about sexual individualism and its costs is picked up directly as if in a counterpoint by Wharton in ‘The Reckoning’ which could be read

as a direct argument by Wharton in response to the provocation posed by Wilde and Whitman about female sexual autonomy. Wharton is drawn to the Whitmanesque/Wildean vision of sexual transcendentalism, but frightened too by its implications, as women would have been in the pre-Marie Stopes era.

The question that ‘The Reckoning’ poses in reaction to Wilde’s provocations is not merely a question: she knows that the answer, in ‘The Reckoning’ as in *Summer*, and *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Gods Arrive* (1932), is ruin. ‘The Reckoning’ is the tale of a ‘New Woman’ character who takes the Wildean project seriously and at face value: she embraces a Wildean/Whitmanesque vision of a sexually liberated and autonomous future—and ends up left by her lover for a younger woman, socially ostracised and alone.

One must cast a glance backward at Joris-Karl Huysmans’ 1884 novel *À Rebours* to read the gender politics of ‘The Reckoning’. Huysmans’ nihilistic novel explores the logical consequence of following the Decadent search for sensation for its own sake, in the absence of other values, to its logical, excessive conclusion. In *À Rebours*, an excess of sensual stimulation leads to the hero’s descent into isolation, chaos and a kind of sensory burnout. The text explores extreme possibilities of a man’s withdrawal from nature; it addresses openly the previously tabooed subjects of male hostility to women and domesticity. One can argue that the writing of *À Rebours* became possible because technology and modernity allowed the development of certain kinds of misogyny, or certain kinds of isolation from bonds with women, that social conditions did not allow for previously.

This is the nightmare scenario that underlies *fin de siècle* anxiety about male homosexuality and about ‘New Woman’ sexuality, but it is also an anxiety that informs Wharton’s dark insight in ‘The Reckoning’. But Wharton is asking a fundamental female heterosexual question: if you say ‘yes’ to self-expression, what, if any, are the protective limits? If everything becomes permitted, why keep any promises? If any sensory gratification is valid, why bond with any one person? It’s an argument about the implications of sexual transcendentalism that we are still having today, in almost exactly the terms that Wilde first posited it and Wharton first interrogated it: if we open the door to ‘liberation’ for men and for women from the double standard, from the burdens of domesticity, and so on, do we not usher in ultimately a dystopia of narcissism and loneliness?

It is in some of the short stories that Wharton's engagement with Wilde is most direct, and, understandably, most angry at times. In 'The Reckoning', the Wildean hypothesis of liberated social arrangements is played out over the complete arc of a heterosexual relationship—leaving the woman who has embraced his credo in a traditionally victimised and abandoned position at the end. It is as if Wharton is dramatising the Wildean hypothesis or provocation as an algebra equation on a literary blackboard—but substituting 'woman' for one of the terms, and showing that the end sum is the same old position of seduction, betrayal, disempowerment and enslavement to a merciless biology. She is not rejecting the Wildean call—but merely, with the love of truth that characterises her polemic, showing how in following it, the same path leads women to different end points than it leads men—and that the end point for women is mined by many of the traditional sexual traps and punishments that have always awaited women who have 'transgressed': abandonment, loss of love, loss of social place, loneliness.

'The Reckoning'—even the title carries the double meaning of an algebra or mathematical sum in which a real bottom line cost is totalled up after a hypothetically new kind of equation—is the story of a female sexual liberationist, Julia Westall. Julia Westall, now married to a leader of the sexual avant-garde, the magnetic and dashing Clement Westall, had left her stodgy, conventional first husband, John Arment, because he was locked, and locked her, in the ways of the past. Her current husband, a Wildean sexual liberation propagandist, offers a message to the adoring society ladies around him that conflates the provocative message of Wilde himself in 'The Critic as Artist', and in his newspaper interviews, with the somewhat more commodified version of that message that Morton Fullerton's letters reveal he communicated to the women and men around him, himself.

Conventional gender norms ensnare Julia, as she sees the sexual knowledge that seduced her, also seducing her younger rival. This existential threat makes Julia, in a moment of great authorial irony, suddenly side with conventional norms about protecting young women from the sexual knowledge that could come to challenge her own security. It is Una Von Sideren for whom Clement will leave Julia; a young woman who had approached Julia as a role model for the sexually-awakened woman. Wharton identifies sexual textuality with sexual arousal and experience—the young woman was aroused by the speech of Una's husband—yet sees it as potentially destructive as well as potentially liberating.

After Julia hears from her husband that he is, in a very unrevolutionary way, leaving her for a younger, prettier and less intellectually gifted woman, this erstwhile female sexual *avant-gardiste* finds that she has fallen—inevitably, as many of Wharton’s female readers will have recognised—into a traditional wifely posture in a highly traditional scenario:

Life could not be broken off short like this, for a whim, a fancy; the law itself would side with her, would defend her. The law? What claim had she upon it? She was the prisoner of her own choice. She had been her own legislator, and she was the predestined victim of the code she had devised. But this was grotesque, intolerable – a mad mistake, for which she could not be held accountable! [...] She had been allowed to go free when she had claimed her freedom [...] Ah, but the difficulty lay deeper! [...] She was the victim of the theories she renounced. It was as though some giant machine of her own making had caught her up in its wheels and was grinding her to atoms. (Wharton 2007, p. 186)

Her own ‘new pact’ of freedom and sexual choice—of Wildean liberation, her own right to leave her conventional husband and the deadly pact of their marriage—had turned on her like a ‘great wheel’, that metaphor of being trapped in time and biology that is so familiar, in a Jungian sense, to women when they think about sexual and emotional freedom. Her ‘freedom’ to which she had pledged a Wildean allegiance, had turned into her husband’s right—now unstoppable, without social constraint of any kind, without the opprobrium against infidelity and divorce that both inhibits individual freedoms and sustains marriages—to a ‘whim’ and ‘fancy’ for this not-radical, not ‘new world’ choice of a younger, prettier and less demanding acolyte for a wife.

Extraordinarily, the story ends with Julia seeking out her first husband, whom she had left with a callous blitheness when she had first been swept up in Clement’s advocacy of Wildean freedoms and her right to a highest allegiance being to her own self’s sense of pleasure and expression. She seeks his forgiveness (‘Clement’ has, going by his name, ‘always already’ forgiven himself). She is aware of the ‘horrors’ of the conventional domestic drawing room that once constrained her. Julia’s dialogue with her former husband has the feel of a theoretical treatise or a polemic, questioning what happens in real life to real women when they embrace Wildean ‘freedoms’ and allow their

men to do the same. The logic of the outcome, Wharton may be arguing, is the risk of emotional chaos and destruction that weighs more heavily on heterosexual women than on heterosexual men. This may be because a higher law—an ‘inner law’, which goes above the material law, and also above the Wildean law of attraction and play has not yet seized the day.

As feminist theorists of sexuality would perceive again and again as they would come ‘anew’ to this theoretical crisis about the implications of sexual liberation for heterosexual women versus heterosexual men, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (and they would have to keep ‘arriving’ at this problem, since prior female sexual-liberationist theoretical work around this problem, such as this work by Wharton here, tends to be ‘erased’ by the culture), a masculine vision of sexual and emotional freedom may not be sufficient for real liberation for heterosexual women. There may be further sexual-liberationist work to be done than Wilde’s and his acolytes’ such as Fullerton’s (and Westall’s)—and it may be, perhaps, this call to a higher emotional ‘inner law’ that is not subject to the ‘whims’ of impulse and attraction, but a progressive, not regressive, new ethics that acknowledges the body in the context of will and emotional commitment.

At the end of the story, Julia leaves their former home; her former husband makes a gesture as if to reach out to her but ‘the footman, who was evidently alive to his obligations, advanced from the background to let her out’. Julia is not yet in the new world she has barely glimpsed; she is in a world of incommensurate choices for women: conventional, stifling security, or liberationist existential danger: ‘The footman threw open the door, and she found herself outside in the darkness’ (Wharton 2007, p. 192).

In reading Wharton as a manifesto-maker for a female version of the male homosexual liberationists’ credo, we should keep in mind the ways, obvious in retrospect, that women could not engage as unequivocally with this imaginative call as many of their male peers could. The risks male writers ran in heeding Whitman’s and Wilde’s call were legal. But the risks run by heterosexual women were often of another kind: bastard children, illegal abortions, more severe prognoses for contracting venereal diseases, the risk of passing on the consequences of such diseases to their children, permanent social exile, the loss of children in a divorce, the loss of sustenance itself. But this tension—a woman writer allured,

but terrified, by the attraction of the Whitmanesque/Wildean vision of sexuality—plays out in Wharton in different ways than it did in, for example, Christina Rossetti.

In her letters to Fullerton, this tension appears as a discourse in which Wharton's most private voice connects the possible fulfilment of female sexual desire with the fulfilment of a female artistic self—a most Wildean view—but simultaneously reveals her fears that this same fulfilment of female sexual desire will lead to a form of annihilation of self in other ways. Her fictions and short stories often shine a light on this incommensurate reality: depicting, as in 'Autre Temps, Autre Moers' and *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), heroines who choose sexual and thus creative fulfilment, but who pay the price with social annihilation. Given the time, with its opening and closing legal and social doors in relation to gender norms, its shifting and contested legal and social limits on sexuality, for both genders, both this hope and this anxiety were utterly realistic, and engaging with both were necessary work for an imagination as potent and a social-critical sensibility as subversive as Wharton's.

But as insensitive as Fullerton was as a lover in the relationship, and later as a cad outside of it, he served magisterially, in a literary dimension, as a male muse to this writer. Wharton's work, after her relationship with Fullerton, defines in text after text a seductive, desirable male love object whose role in the narrative is to serve as a locus of projection, idealisation, obsession, and source of inspiration to the female lover and artist, sometimes at the expense of this subject's (now object's) own complexity and humanity, in just exactly the (much-criticised) ways in which male artists have used the female muse figure and the male gaze. These letters prefigure scenes of Wharton's sexually transgressive heroine Halo Tarrant delighting in observing the beauty of her lover Vance Weston in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*; just as they prefigure the scene of the sexually transgressive heroine of *Summer* (1917), Charity Royall, unseen by her own beautiful lover Lucius Vance, hiding in the ivy outside of his window, like a voyeur or even a stalker, and observing him in the lamplight, in a room described with the language of Eros and intimacy. Wharton uses male figures as sources of aesthetic and erotic inspiration in relation to her female lovers/artists, in a way that is parallel to Wilde's painter, Basil Hallward, using the beautiful Dorian Gray as a

muse for his own creative gift in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; in the way that Wilde draws on Hellenic sculpture in ‘The Critic as Artist’; in the way that Walter Pater in *Greek Studies* releases an almost ecstatic rush of literary description to depict in the reader’s imagination the beauty of the naked male form in Aegean sculpture as a provocation to his critical imagination.

Wharton’s use of the same gazer/gazed upon trope—casting the beautiful male body as creative muse that Wilde also used as a spur to transcendental creativity, suggests that perhaps ‘objectification’ of this kind cannot be dismissed simply as a product of sexism, but may rather be a far more complex and allegorical yearning of the artistic imagination that transcends gender and perhaps even culture. The female erotic muse figure in heterosexual male writing is assigned the role of eliciting male creativity; the beautiful male muse does the same for the male homosexual transcendentalists. We should not be surprised though we may find the issue complicated that a male muse serves the same purpose for heterosexual women artists.

Women’s writing about Eros, dating from Wharton, will have a strain of emotional (as opposed to legal) fear and needy dependency that the male homosexual transcendentalists do not share in their work—and we can surely speculate that the physical ‘bondage’ of childbirth that a woman of Wharton’s period risks is one reason for this difference in literary styles. For when Wharton imagines losing that connection, she invokes the opposing language of ‘liberation’—the language of slavery, indeed, ‘bondage’. Wharton fears that her freedom is his bondage. When the artist is taken in the arms of her lover, she feels—and writes—that she has no more will. Thus, she explains, since she needs to communicate a message clearly, she must do so in writing rather than within the reach of touch—touch annihilates clarity of speech. This dilemma, of how a woman can speak to a man about her ideas, even as she is in an erotic relationship with him, resurfaces in Wharton’s fiction. In the male homosexual transcendentalists of desire, ideas and Eros are coextensive; Wilde and Whitman both describe sexual connection as emerging out of, or extending, intellectual connection. Indeed, the male sexual transcendentalists’ charm and their enduring influence derive from the ringing affirmation of self and individual vision through sexual awakening.

But for this heterosexual woman writer, in the fictive world, as in the social world, one’s status as a speaker to a man is at cross purposes with one’s role as a female lover of a man. Again and again in *Summer*,

Charity Royall will try to speak to Lucius Harney, to communicate something important to him, and he will be unable to hear her—her self will be diminished because of the static caused by his physical lust for her. Verbal and sexual connection with the male lover work, in *Summer* and in Wharton's private letters, tragically to undermine each other (Wharton 1988, p. 145).

The tension between the realisation of pleasure and the potential loss of self, clarity, autonomy, and signature, is the conundrum posed to the female imagination by the nature of female sexual experience. From Wharton's prose in the later novels, notably the confident voice in *Summer* and the assertive characterisation of Halo Tarrant's attachment to her lover in *The Gods Arrive*, we see that female sexual awakening can create voice and autonomy; yet from Wharton's personal papers we see that in relation to a living man—one who is frustratingly not subject to the authorial will—erotic awakening, with the dependency it can entail, can also threaten to annihilate the artist's self, vision and will. This seems to me to be a female writer's problem; male literary accounts, both homosexual and heterosexual, of sexual awakening, do not tend to draw upon language of submission, loss of will, yielding, loss of boundaries or loss of self. Hence the appeal of Nietzsche as a complement to Whitman in Wharton's pantheon, as being the darker but the more reliable guide into states of freedom. Is this distinction in literary phrasing about sexual transcendence—the male-homosexual tradition of sexual transcendence as divine revelation of self, the female heterosexual tradition of sexual transcendence as a loss of or overwhelming of a sense of self—biologically inflected? Male writers of any sexuality do not tend to describe sexual transport as a loss of self. If there is indeed something unique to the female physical experience in a passionate sexual context that can lead to a sense of loss, even if momentary, of identity, boundaries, will and self, then it poses even more of a problem to the female artist than it does to the female philosopher or theologian.

What if one paradox at the heart of female sexuality and creativity, as some heterosexual women writers' work suggests, is that the very qualities that determine the tools of the artist—will, self, boundaries, consciousness, identity—can be swept away by sexual passion, even if momentarily, in an erasure of sense of self that can also be intensified by the prospect of unwanted pregnancy and possibly lethal abortion?

Fullerton had told Wharton she would write better for having learnt about her own sexual response. Indeed, she did write better about the

relations between men and women after the experience of awakened sexual love, and in later work she as much as states this: her philosophical position post-1910 is that women are better for the experience of sexual love. She presents this highly countercultural argument frequently as she counterpositions the sexual and literary ‘blank slate’ anti-heroines such as May Welland with the ‘impure’ but imaginatively rich fallen women heroines of her oeuvre, from Madame Olenska to the near-prostitutes and kept women of the *Old New York* novellas (1924). In taking up this highly dangerous and novel position for a woman writer in this period, she will take up the banner that Wilde had necessarily let fall after his imprisonment and then his death: she will, fifteen years later, echo him, occupy his same rhetorical and argumentative ground about the correlation between female sexual experience, wisdom and character, and will pay homage to the heroic near-prostitutes and kept women of Wilde’s three signature plays, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Seven years after her affair with Fullerton ended, Wharton would have Charity Royall also assert proudly her own identity, even though it has elements of ‘fallenness’ in it, and assert her allegiance to her sexual awakening. Wharton portrays Charity as having the egotism of an artist, and the shamelessness of a woman who rejects the sexual double standard: Charity, like Wilde’s heroines in the ‘fallen woman’ plays, proudly claims her identity and her past, even though the society around her defines it as ‘shameful’. Wilde’s three most successful plays also represent female protagonists who are proud of their identities and histories in the face of social norms that would define both as negative, because they are fallen.

‘What did it matter where she came from, or whose child she was, when love was dancing in her veins, and down the road she saw young Harney coming toward her?’ Charity asks herself (Wharton 2001, p. 160). Charity’s sense of her significance as an erotic agent and subject is more important than more superficial markers of heritage, social status and occupation. Charity claims her subjective perception and her autobiographical history proudly, even though her mother is an archetypal ‘fallen woman’, actually a prostitute. When Lucius Harney and Charity Royall go up into ‘the Mountain’—that place outside of respectable social norms—and encounter the promiscuous, degraded, impoverished Mountain people who are her real tribe, she refuses to disavow the truth of her antecedents: ‘I ain’t—I ain’t ashamed. They’re my people, and I ain’t ashamed of them’, she sobs (Wharton 2001, p. 166). She is able

to stand up for her identity even when her guardian calls her a whore: ‘It helps me not to care a straw what lies you tell about me’, she retorts (Wharton 2001, p. 179).

Subsequent to the affair with Fullerton, there was a shift in how Wharton represented her heroines. Wharton began to position them as gazing at the objects of their desire, and as initiating erotic contact. Wharton had been reading Nietzsche in the summer of 1909; eight years later, on the eve of a war that posited the destruction of the traditional, repressive world in which she had been raised, in *Summer*, Wharton creates a Nietzschean figure of female sexual assertiveness in Charity Royall. Indeed Wharton’s 1908–1909 letters to Fullerton have explicit echoes of Nietzsche as well as of Wilde, or rather, of the credo of the seductions in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: ‘How strange to feel one’s self all at once “*Jenseits von Gut und Bose*” [Beyond Good and Evil ...] It would hurt no one—and it would give me my first last draught of life [...] Why not? I have always laughed at the “*mala prohibita*”—“bugbears to frighten children”. The anti-social act is the only one that is harmful “*per se*” [...] And, as you told me the other day—*and as I needed no telling!*—what I have given you is far far more’ (Lewis 1993, p. 221). Though the letter is a fragment, we can guess that the conclusion is another Wildean assertion that love trumps conventional morality, that the value of experience trumps the dullness of ‘goodness’. In the character of Charity Royall, Wharton constructs a heroine who repeatedly insists upon her right to sexual pleasure; upon her right to defend herself against sexual assault and incest; and one who self-consciously articulates what amounts to a series of manifestoes on the rightness of her own identity as a sexual being. Indeed, in this figure Wharton creates an almost supernaturally empowered defender of female sexual integrity.

Nominally though, this is a story about female victimisation. Charity Royall was, rather mysteriously, adopted by Lawyer Royall, a dour, negative authority figure, and his now-deceased wife, taken from her surviving, impoverished mother on The Mountain (who, as the narrative progresses, we learn is a loose woman or perhaps even professional prostitute), and brought up in the small hamlet of North Dormer where nothing ever happens and from which no one ever seems to escape. Charity is positioned as being penniless, completely dependent upon Lawyer Royall, and with no relatives, mentors or professional options, which makes her blazing self-defence and insistence on her right to an autonomous sexuality all the more implausible in reality, but all the

more plausible if we read her as being a kind of dream work Wharton was conjuring toward another kind of world than the one that existed when she wrote this novel. In this way, Charity Royall is an act of magical invocation of a better world in which to house female sexuality. The utopian and dystopian quality of the narrative is underscored by Wharton's clearly symbolic, even allegorical names for her characters and places: 'Charity', *caritas*; 'Royall', king, patriarch; 'Lucius', light; 'Dormer', sleeper.

The story opens with Lawyer Royall drinking too much and trying to force his way into Charity's room, for sexual purposes. With strength for the time of this writing, Charity repudiates her would-be assailant, shames him, and insists on protection from his further encroachments, demanding that he hire a woman to keep house, essentially as security. Throughout *Summer*, Wharton describes Lawyer Royall in terms of sexual revulsion from a female perspective: he is described in unattractively violent and tumescent terms: his 'rumped grey hair stood up above his forehead like the crest of an angry bird' and 'the leather-brown of his veined cheeks was blotched with red' (Wharton 2001, p. 171). The scene of a fearless and guiltless female response, within the fantasy world of fiction, to an attempt at incest or sexual assault, is far different from the cowed, guilty reactions of contemporary young women in similar 'real-life' situations, such as that recounted in Freud's case history of 'Dora', or in Virginia Woolf's account in her letters of the incest she experienced at the hands of her brother; and it is difficult to name another such scenario in the 1910s of female sexual resistance in another novel of the period.

In my reading, while there is certainly a great cost for Charity's sexual self-assertion, this is not a novel about victimisation but about resistance. Charity is not only portrayed as a sexual avenger with 'her own revolts and defenses' [*sic.*] (Wharton 2001, p. 154); Wharton also depicts the girl as an artist. We receive a highly nuanced presentation, through Charity Royall's eyes, of the connection between female desire and artistic perception. In the Whitmanesque tradition, Charity Royall is a mystic sensualist who is a woman of the earth; she is scarcely educated, and, though implausibly, Wharton describes her as working as a librarian and we can recall the erotic description in Wharton's memoir of the library of her childhood as a place of blissful and unmediated innocent feminine sexual pleasure. She is also represented, in dream logic as being barely literate, which in the long feminine literary tradition equating literary

knowledge with sexual knowledge, suggests that she is sexually unawakened too.

Yet in scene after scene, in a narrative that parallels awakening creative and sensual consciousness in male protagonists ranging from the voice of Whitman's 'Calamus' poems, to Jude in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Wharton represents Charity Royall's physical desire as being intimately connected to her artistic vision. If one unpacks Wharton's at times oblique prose, one can see Charity embody the same challenge that Wilde had issued, if less directly, in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance* two decades before: the confrontational proposal that there are worse—that is, far more immoral—things a woman can be than a whore. We can hear the Wildean argument that being an unjust, brutal or obtuse person, as 'respectable' as one might be, is actually more shameful and dirtier than being simply sexually transgressive. One can also hear the echo of the Wildean assertion that it is lack of imagination or narrow-mindedness that actually sully the soul, rather than sexual expressiveness. Wharton makes the case, as Wilde had done in his plays of 1892–1893, that the 'proper' choices—those of forced chastity, forced marital servitude to a boor, or merely generalised hypocrisy—are actually morally dirtier than a life of conscious prostitution lived with inner integrity. As radical as that message was in 1892 and 1893 from a homosexual male playwright's pen, it was just as radical, and virtually unprecedented, from a woman's pen in 1914.

In the scenes of lovemaking in the farmhouse ruin, Charity is portrayed as being reborn and redeemed through a sexual awakening, connecting in the Wildean/Whitmanesque tradition, identity, nature, spirituality and sexuality, as Wharton's private letters to Fullerton reveal she herself felt that she had been: 'The only reality', writes Wharton, 'was the unfolding of her new self, the reaching out to the light of all her contracted tendrils' (Wharton 2001, p. 214). After she becomes an awakened sexual being, Charity integrates her knowledge, sexual and intellectual, and begins to attend to what stirs or diminishes her own sexual response: 'Sometimes she envied the other girls their [...] long hours of inarticulate philandering [...] but when she pictured herself curling her hair or putting a new ribbon in her hat for Ben Fry or one of the Sollas boys the fever dropped and she lapsed into indifference' (Wharton 2001, p. 152).

Harney, of course—true to his role in the 'wrongs of' plotline—does eventually leave Charity. The worst, as in so many of Wharton's fictions

about ‘fallen women’, really does take place. But again Charity faces the truth of her situation; that of a poor girl seduced and abandoned by a middle-class man without euphemism and without regret for her sexual experience: ‘She had given him all she had—but what was it compared to the other gifts life held for him? She understood now the case of girls like herself to whom this kind of thing happened. They gave all they had, but their all was not enough; it could not buy more than a few moments’ (Wharton 2001, p. 223). Even when she understands that she is pregnant, she does not abandon the experience she has gained. By remaining true to the avowal of her pleasure, in a critical and novel way in the tradition of representations of female sexuality in women’s fiction, Charity has remained true to herself.

Charity at length went to consult an abortionist, and fled at the prospect of sacrificing her baby. ‘Her soul recoiled from the vision of the white-faced woman among the plush sofas and gilt frames. In the established order of things as she knew them she saw no place for her individual adventure’ (Wharton 2001, p. 243). Wharton is making a hermeneutical and theoretical point here about female sexuality and women’s writing: a woman can have the Whitmanesque epiphany about the unity of mind and body, of the carnal and the divine, but, as Wilde himself found to his sorrow in 1895, there was still ‘no place’ in the social world to house that epiphany.

Charity faces—and considers—becoming an actual prostitute in order to support her child; she had considered and rejected a visit to an abortionist. She tries to escape to her mother and the mountain, but her mother is dying a grotesque death, portrayed as if she has been worn out from sexual slavery, and there is indeed no escape. At the time Wharton was writing, there were no alternative endings if a woman dared step out of her constrained sexual role. After this crisis, there is indeed no exit for Charity; her would-be abuser/father/lover, Lawyer Royall, comes to get her back and she gives in; ‘for the most part she had only a confused sensation of slipping down a smooth and irresistible current; and she abandoned herself to the feeling as a refuge from the torment of thought’ (Wharton 2001, p. 263). Reader, she marries him. The deed is done, in an atmosphere of ‘unreality’ (Wharton 2001, p. 272).

The ending is implausible: Wharton has Charity concede, improbably, that Lawyer Royall is a good man after all. Having made the case that there is no escape for a woman like Charity, it is as if Wharton cannot bring herself to linger long on the no-escape resolution that awaits her

formerly brave, formerly independent heroine. Wharton seems to give up, finally, on narrative just as her heroine did on hope. Yet up until the last three or four pages of her text, when the punishments for female sexual assertion inevitably introduce themselves, Wharton succeeded in creating a vivid polemicist for female sexual rights. By the time some of these most sexually radical Whartonian works were being created, both Whitman and Wilde had been dead for over a decade. Both reputations were in eclipse and neither writer consciously or overtly cultivated female sexual-revolutionary heiresses or mentees. But Wharton nonetheless picked up the banner these radicals—radicals we would now identify as gay men—had left to posterity, and used their provocations, challenges and rhetorical strategies to imagine a way forward even for female sexual liberation within the context of an awakening artistic consciousness.

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