

**THE PARODY OF SEXUAL DIFFERENTIATION IN EDITH WHARTON'S  
*THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY***

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In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her femininity. The fact remains that this masquerade requires an effort on her part for which she is not compensated. Unless her pleasure comes simply from being chosen as an object of consumption or desire by masculine "subjects". And, moreover, how can she do otherwise without being "out of circulation"?

—Luce Irigaray in *This Sexe Which is not One*

It was easier (...) for a wife to play such a part toward her husband. A woman's standard of truthfulness was tacitly held to be lower: she was the subject creature, and versed in the arts of the enslaved.

—Edith Wharton in *The Age of Innocence*

For a number of reasons, Edith Wharton is unusually important to any feminist revision of American fiction. Expatriated in France, she spent her life writing about women and issues concerning women. Although she has been underestimated in the rather skewed literary demography of the first half of the 20th century, her work has been reclaimed in the last two decades especially after R.W.B. Lewis's definitive biography and Cynthia Woolf's critical reassessment.<sup>1</sup> No longer the cold grande dame of the legend, certainly not the disciple of Henry James, recent research has reclaimed her as a complex, passionate artist whose work, in Scribner's terms, explored dramatic questions and touched areas of a woman's self that were largely uncharted by male writers, or at best, described in terms of alien standards (Scribner, 1987: 163).

This paper explores what Margaret McDowell has called “Edith Wharton’s lurking feminism” (McDowell, 1974: 523), examining *The Custom of the Country* as a critical paradigm of nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood. What we get here is not only a powerful attack on the notion of marriage as woman’s unique destiny—something which critics such as A. Ammons, J. Turner and A. Collins have already pointed out.<sup>2</sup> The convention of femininity as a stable category, equated with passivity, emotion, pliability and domesticity, is also undermined in a witty parody of established demarcations of gender. At the same time, *The Custom of the Country* provides an excellent literary background for a piece of social criticism on the perverted forms woman’s displacement assumes in patriarchal society.

*The Custom of the Country* represents one of the most important critical paradigms of what Edith Wharton calls “the whole problem of American marriages” (Wharton, 1913: 118)<sup>3</sup>, as well as a dark satire of that falsely idealized conception of woman as an ornament, a commodity to be protected, moulded or shown off within a structure of masculine control. One of the keys of the problem to which the novel refers is that, as Mr. Bowen admits, “the average American looks down on his wife” (p. 118). As this character explains, inviting a woman to share in the vital interests of the outside world is contrary to American custom. To compensate for her displacement, she is showered with material luxuries which are simply “the big bribe she’s paid for keeping out of some man’s way!” (P. 12).

Undine Spraggs represents “the monstrously perfect result of the system” (p. 120). In her insatiable climb from Apex to New York, Undine uses her father and her three husbands, making them “pay” lavishly for what she considers to be their financial obligations toward her. When they cannot or do not wish to fulfill Undine’s expectations, she brushes them aside. Although she does not understand “the principle” that underlies her position as a woman, she assumes it perfectly and, as she is capable of using the system to her own advantage, Undine is one of the few heroines who succeed in the leviathan that for Wharton was the society of her time.

M. Scribner has offered insights into Undine’s personality, arguing that her “sexual” conduct is associated with her upbringing as a girl, her consignment to a protected class as a woman, and her participation in a culture fixated on business (Scribner, 1987: 176). Valuable as a mark of male economic and social status, she is the perfect Veblenesque female, “required not only to afford evidence of a life of conspicuous leisure but even to disable [herself] for useful activity”. (Veblen, 1912: 125). In this vein, we can say with Bauer that Undine represents a world “become commodified” (Bauer, 1988: 93). In fact, her education has made her believe herself a piece of art in an acquisitive culture. Trained to adorn and charm, her beauty has always been considered as having meaning in itself; a quality to be displayed, moulded and sold in the right stall of the marriage market. “I never met with a lovelier form” (p. 5), the masseuse tells her, and on another occasion Undine’s mother says: “I guess my daughter’s only got to show herself” (p. 53). Referring to Undine as a shape, as a form, is identifying her as a passive and

submissive symbol in the western order of representations. However, the readiness with which Undine accepts her society's prescriptions places her also in a "privileged" position as she shows her complicity with the relations of power.

A crucial term here to understand women's position is "object". Repeatedly Wharton gives evidence that one of Undine's special powers lies in her ability to play the role of an ornament. She has learned so thoroughly to experience herself as an object that is being observed that her sense of "self" is confirmed only when she elicits visual reactions from others. Hers is a narrow and literal adaptation of her society's images of women, a society which encourages girls to develop no more sense of identity than the desire to be seen to advantage.

'She says she wants me to dine with her next Wednesday. Isn't it queer?  
Why does she want me? She's never *seen* me!'  
Mrs. Heeny laughed. '*He* saw you, didn't he?' (p. 7).

Jenijoy La Belle has pointed out the frequency with which Wharton heroines equate their identity to what is reflected in the mirror. According to La Belle, this is a strategy full of critical implications, because in the New York of the turn of the century "men use conversation as a means of self-definition and self-projection. Women use mirrors" (La Belle, 1988: 62). The description of Undine certainly coincides with La Belle's observation, since she is a character defined "as a creature who exists totally within mirrors" (p. 42), or as a simulacrum where the image becomes not a reflection, but rather a substitute for reality. The mirror is both a vision of herself (her definition of what she *is*) and of how the outside world judges her. Since she was a child Undine had resorted to the mirror to rehearse gestures and "play lady ... and she still practised the same secret pantomime" (p. 22). For Undine even the act of speaking is reduced to the purely visual effect of the lips moving "in soundless talk" (p. 22). What is said is totally unimportant for her self-representations. She exists because others *see* her, and her essence is absorbed by the empty, blank surface of the mirror:

'So you're going to see the old gentleman for the first time at this dinner'  
Mrs. Heeny pursued...  
'Yes, I'm frightened to death!' Undine, laughing confidently, took up a hand-glass and scrutinized the small brown mole above the curve of her upper lip.  
'I guess she'll never know how to talk to him', Mrs. Spragg averred (...).  
'She'll know how to look at him, anyhow,' said Mrs. Heeny; and Undine smiled at her own image. (p. 86).

In recent feminist and deconstructive thought the sexual component that we take from the pleasure of looking has been associated with what Lacan has called "a phallic economy." (Lacan, 1977). Lacan's term could well be applied to

Undine's definition as a visual sign that so recurrently pervades the novel. Denied access to language, she must not speak, but rather she is looked at and talked about. Like in *The House of Mirth*, there is a persistent discourse about the heroine as an ornament or artifice. "People can't marry you if they don't see you" (Wharton, 1905: 35) says Lily's mother, summing up woman's displacement in a system in which only through marriage could she have access to the cores of social power. E. Ammons has pointed out how Edith Wharton loads the book with mercantile rhetoric to emphasize the crass, profit-seeking character of marriage, an institution in which women are property (Ammons, 1982: 210). However, instead of resisting passively as Lily Bart does, Undine barter herself in the marriage market, willing to become the sign of someone else's discursive practice. As an open, relational sign, Undine continually adapts and readapts herself until she reaches the "right form" that is excepted of her. In a way she is grotesque and kitsch but also necessarily protean, adjusting "to whatever company she was in, copying the others in speech and gesture as closely as she reflected in dress" (pp. 92-93). Capable of any distortion, any imitation or manipulation, Undine becomes the perfect product of patriarchal economy: willing to feign whatever men wish, nothing is essential for her except the will to succeed and the energy that drives her.

Being just a form involves both lack of identity and instability of meaning. However, Edith Wharton also plays with Undine's plasticity to distort the fixed "place" woman has been ascribed by culture. Wharton's use of clichés from fashion magazines —Undine borrows her gestures from *Boudoir Chat*— shows us how Undine constructs herself in terms of representations of a codified system. But she is also presented as an open, mobile figure that defies the closed definitions of the Western system of representations. Undine's energy, tenacity, ambition and total lack of maternal instinct not only disrupt nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood but also prepare us to abandon simply binary oppositions of the male/female dichotomy, in clear anticipation of current critical discussion in feminist thought.

Wharton's close analysis of the relationship between Undine and her first husband, Ralph Marvell, is crucial to understand the contradictions that surround the idea of "woman" in the symbolic structures in the West. Although she is ambitious, calculating, cold and aggressive, Undine must appear to be delicate, sweet and passive to satisfy the expectations of a man who, like in a game of reversed mirrors, does not have those "masculine" qualities that he is supposed to have either.

Ralph is, so to speak, the reverse side of Undine. C.G. Jung tells us that the hero requires action (Jung, 1982). However, Ralph's attitudes and physical gestures reveal his intrinsic passivity and his class-inherited inertia. While Undine moves from place to place with kaleidoscopic speed —in a sort of a malicious vengeance on the sedentary traits of *the angel in the house*—, Ralph likes to lie down and contemplate life from a passive, expectant position. We discover him, for example, on his honeymoon, "stretched on his back in the grass" (p. 81), dreaming of an ideal place where he can "sit and look at a green water-fall [and] lie in wait for



adjectives” (p. 85). The movements of his mind also have an air of fatigue: “he could do charming things, if only he had known how to finish them!” (p. 45). Even the most important events of his life, such as the divorce and the battle for the custody of his son, are branded with that same deadly lassitude.

From the beginning of his relationship with Undine, Ralph is attracted to her as the living embodiment of the myth of personal salvation. At their first meeting, Undine seems to him to be “still at the age when the flexible soul offers itself to the first grasp ... To save her from Van Degen and Van Degenism: was that really to be his mission—the call for which his life had obscurely waited?” (p. 49). Ralph’s views of women are clearly paternalistic. He believes in the myth of Perseus and Andromeda and he imagines himself riding his horse Pegasus, breaking the chains that bind Undine, whom he envisages as “a lovely rock-bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her” (p. 50). As Cynthia Woolf has observed, “it is always a vision that Ralph pursues.” (Woolf 1977: 236). More important than any positive attributes Undine may possess are the qualities she is expected to be without. When his wife is not with him, the image of her is more gratifying than her presence has ever been. A brief, banal letter conjures up “the vision of their interlaced names, as of a mystic bond which her own hand had tied” (p. 174). He imagines her sitting at her desk, like a schoolgirl, “palpably before him ..., frowning and a little flushed, her bent nape showing the light on her hair, her short lip pulled up by the effort of composition” (pp. 174-175). It is indeed a conventional and suffocating ideal of femininity, a male fantasy that casts woman in the impossible role of seductive nymph and powerless child.

Ralph’s vision of Undine as passive and pliable, like a voiceless, inert form awaiting the artist’s hand that will mould her and give her meaning—the myth of Pygmalion—entails for Ralph a mystery with endless possibilities of creation.<sup>4</sup> However, the same pattern that underlay “The Other Two” (1904) appears now to show us a nightmarish flexibility that Wharton makes us perceive as the grotesque obverse of the archetypal ideal. Having been excluded from the creation of culture, Undine counteracts, reifying herself as an artifact within culture. As a relational sign, Undine knows that her value depends on her position in relation with the central sign-man.<sup>5</sup> So Undine adopts her husband’s code to impell her legitimation (to overcome her position as non-subject) and enter into the privileged text that for her is “the best society”. When she realises that “she had given herself to the exclusive and the dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous” (p. 111) she decides to leave Ralph. The irony underlying this is that Undine invokes “the custom of the country” to obtain a divorce, secretly manipulating the image of a destitute, motherly, house-bound femininity that supposedly defines her.

‘Society Leader gets Decree’

‘Says Husband Too Absorbed in Business To Make Home Happy’ (p. 194).

It is worth noting Edith Wharton's use of myth to erode the gendered sphere that culture has assigned to woman. In *The Age of Innocence* (1920) she made use of the figure of Diana, the deity of fertility and nature, to portray an idea of femininity that is often more vacant and frozen than warm and alive. Likewise, through the myth of Undine, with its associations with water and the moon, Edith Wharton appears to be referring to the more sinister qualities of that "shapeless undulation" of the *eternne féminine*. On the other hand, the fact that she has chosen this mythical figure—an ancient nemesis of men, the siren—seems to be highly symbolic. Let us remember that Hélène Cixous has associated water with the deconstructive arena par excellence: the locus where differences of gender are erased, parodied or undermined (Cixous, 1975: 39-54).

One version of the Undine theme is that on the sea sprite who wishes to obtain a human soul through marriage to a mortal. T.L. McHaney has shown that Wharton read *Undine* by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué and that she used its plot motifs to counterpoint the thematic patterns of *The Custom of the Country* (McHaney, 1974: 180-186). Although several critics have pointed out that the Undine myth acts as an index to cultural changes in marriage,<sup>6</sup> it seems clear that Wharton also used it as a subtle parody to emphasize the inherent contradictions of woman's lack of position in *fin de siècle* American society.

After her divorce, Undine finds that she must marry again because, without a married name, she has no identity and no social status. "Her new visiting-card, bearing her Christian name in place of her husband's, was like the coin of a debased currency testifying to her diminished trading capacity" (p. 361). Indeed, Wharton's sarcastic distortion of the myth is seen in Undine's second marriage, when she chooses again the "wrong" mortal, this time preferring a French aristocrat instead of an enterprising bourgeois. If for Ralph Undine was a lovely and helpless Andromeda, De Chelles treats his wife as a beautiful possession acquired to enhance his virility and perpetuate his blood line. Following his family custom, he takes her off to St. Desert, where Undine must live shut-off with her mother-in-law and a number of female relations, while De Chelles intermittently disappears "on business" to Paris. The inertia of Undine's life there is the counterpoint for the activity displayed by her husband, and her loneliness and boredom in the French chateau act as an underlying comment on that custom that masquerades woman's atrophy caused by seclusion and imposed leisure, passing it off as "one of the prerogatives of affluence" (p. 9). In the freezing castle of St. Desert the status quo reinforces Undine's extremely marginal position: her husband makes all the decisions relevant to the outside world and her mother-in-law, "whose head", her son says, "is as good as a man's" (p. 283), has authority as far as the house is concerned.

De Chelles's ritual deference towards his mother does not gainsay the deep inequality between the sexes evident in Undine's second marriage. The women of his family, "minor members of an invisible whole" (p. 289), embroider silently and submissively, weaving through generations some ancestral threads that Undine

cannot see. After it becomes clear that she is not going to have any sons —De Chelles always talks of “sons”, not of “daughters”—, her position in the family deteriorates dangerously. Conservative to the very end, De Chelles has realised that his investment has not produced the required dividends and he refuses to invest any more capital or emotional energy in Undine. As a European husband, he cannot understand the American “custom” of using luxuries to compensate woman for her displacement because, as Jean Turner has pointed out, “an autocrat at heart ... he assumes that she would never disobey him” (Turner, 1975: 154).

The procedures used by Undine, both to attract De Chelles and finally to leave him, provide the reader with further ironic insight into the inadequacies of conventional assumptions concerning the concept of “womanhood”. One of the principles into which female identity has traditionally been materialized is the idea of maternity as the essence of femininity. *The Custom of the Country*, however, undermines this concept of femininity as a stable and *essential* difference, using a game of falsifications to establish that “masculinity” and “femininity” are categories constructed through social ascription and cultural practice. During her relationship with Ralph, Undine manipulates her “femininity”, projecting a small-town vulnerability that others often mistake for chastity. In her first divorce proceeding, she is given the custody of her son, when the novel makes it clear that Ralph is more affectionate and better endowed to look after him. With the same calculating coldness with which her father operates on Wall Street, Undine makes use of her supposedly maternal instinct to get custody and later be able to sell it to Ralph’s family. Once she is divorced, Undine uses her son to emphasize her femininity, pretending to be a devoted and defenseless mother so that De Chelles will marry her. During her second divorce trial, Undine accuses him of brutality and cruelty to herself and her small son. When in the final pages of the novel she marries again, she claims that she is merely seeking the protection of her first love.

Undine’s most reprobable actions have too often been explained in twentieth-century criticism as a proof of Wharton’s dissatisfaction with the forces which at the turn of the century were shaping America. However, she is not just an abstraction of “materialism incarnate” (Nevious, 1953: 152); certainly not the product of “the partial emancipation of women”, as has been suggested (Nevious, 1953: 149). The most acute targets of Wharton’s complex satire are directed towards the ironies of the female condition and the way in which a corrupt society distorts character.<sup>7</sup> Undine’s failure as a mother, her restlessness and lack of maternal concern, reads both as a parody of nineteenth-century sexual demarcations of gender and as a powerful attack on American social standards. Furthermore, her arts of deception and manipulation recall what Jane Gallop terms “the myth of Woman as essentially a liar” (Gallop, 1980: 274) and reveal the extent to which Edith Wharton was aware of the enslavement of women in her society and how enslavement necessitates deception and the ritual of exclusion. Tainted by suffocating conceptions of gender —as Wharton’s heroes also are—, she can

submit to her culture's most visionary ideals of women and become a stultified, self-effaced Mrs Spraggs, or twist them to her own advantage and be a callous, carnivalistic Undine Spragg Moffatt Marvell de Chelles Moffatt.

The novel closes with another marriage for Undine, this time to the American magnate Elmer Moffatt. The fact that she ends up with the man who was her first husband—an early marriage that was soon annulled—degenerates the mythical code latent in the novel, absorbing the aspirations of the original structure yet surviving only as it mockingly repeats itself without resolution. Throughout these unstable attempts, the only thing that seems to perdure is the energy that drives Undine to hoist herself up to a privileged position, assuming the patriarchal images of women and exploiting them to her own advantage. Elizabeth Ammons has called her “a modern warrior Queen” (Ammons, 1980: 107). Yet her social victory is also a spiritual defeat; what Page Dubois would call a metaphorical *sparagmos*, “a dispersion and dissemination of forms without meanings” (Dubois, 1986: 379). Stripped of intrinsic qualities, turned into an ornamental simulacrum, Undine “triumphs” because in the nightmarish land that Edith Wharton's parody attacks, the woman who succeeds is she who can best manage her image in hologrammatic and cunning use of femininity.

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## Notas

<sup>1</sup> See R.B. Lewis, 1975; Cynthia G. Wolff, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> See Elizabeth Ammons, 1980; Jean Turner, 1975; Alexandra Collins, 1983: 197-212.

<sup>3</sup> Subsequent references in the text are to the Penguin edition and will be cited by page numbers.

<sup>4</sup> For a useful perspective on Ralph's attitude, see Judith Montgomery's "The American Galatea", (1971: 890-99) where she argues that the Pygmalion and Galatea myth is central to many of the relationships in American fiction. Although she discusses the myth in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, she does not apply it to *The Custom of the Country*.

<sup>5</sup> We are reminded here of Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man ... She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential". Quoted by Nelly Furman (ed. Greene & Kahn, 1985: 64).

<sup>6</sup> See Alexandra Collins, 1983: 199; Richard Lawson, 1974.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Lawson (1977: 49) has provided useful insight into Undine's character when he recognises that "since she is a woman, the avenues by which she can pursue this goal in accord with her considerable ambition are very much restricted by society. She takes the one avenue open to her, and becomes an expert on the terrain it covers".