

## ABSTRACT

EDWARDS, LAURA MARIE. *The Maternal Question: Motherhood in Edith Wharton*. (Under the direction of Lucinda Mackethan.)

Despite Edith Wharton's difficult relationship with her mother and her lack of any children of her own, the figure of the mother is pervasive in her fiction. For Wharton, the figure of the mother—specifically the socially-minded mother—posed a unique set of questions: What is the mother's role in raising her daughter? What power does a woman derive from motherhood? What happens when a mother renounces her maternal claim? In developing this thesis, I will attempt to explore these three unique challenges within Wharton's text, considering more fully the way that Wharton portrays maternity as a means of asserting power over the child, the husband and other women, as well as the way that power is lost through renunciation of the maternal identity.

In the first chapter, I will examine the role of the daughter in Wharton's writing, specifically the ways in which the daughter serves as her mother's "last asset"—a final means of increasing social and financial power. I will begin my discussion by examining Wharton's short work, "Last Asset"(1904), in which she explicitly portrays a mother using her daughter to regain her position in society. Then, I will consider Wharton's portrayal of Lily Bart, the tragically fashionable New York socialite of Wharton's first successful novel, *The House of Mirth* (1905). As I will demonstrate, Lily is ultimately sacrificed to her deceased mother's expectations—a tragic, failed "last asset."

In the second and third chapters, I will shift my analysis to consider four of Wharton's later works: *Age of Innocence* (1920), "Roman Fever"(1936), *The Old Maid* (1922), and *The Mother's Recompense* (1925). In all four of these works, I will dissect the female-female rivalry

that Wharton constructs, arguing that maternity serves as the central site of competition between Wharton's heroines. The second chapter will focus primarily on *Age of Innocence* and "Roman Fever," evaluating Wharton's configuration of what I will term the maternal declaration—that moment in the story in which the seemingly passive, submissive woman asserts her dominance over other competing characters by asserting her status as mother. In particular, I will define the chief components of female rivalry and aggression as Wharton portrays these in "Roman Fever." As I will demonstrate, this competition between women allows Wharton to present a more complicated depiction of women than many critics recognize—a depiction which denies paternal agency in favor of an equally disturbing, controlling power of the maternal voice.

In the third chapter, I will consider what happens to a woman when she renounces her maternal claim, focusing primarily on *The Mother's Recompense* and *The Old Maid*. I will identify how Wharton's *unmothered* mothers ultimately suffer a loss of power and status as a result of their decision to renounce their position as mothers.

Finally, in closing my discussion of Edith Wharton and motherhood, I will evaluate *The Custom of the Country* (1913). As a means of concluding my thesis, I will evaluate the ways in which Undine, the most monstrous of Wharton's mothers, serves as a warning of the dangers of female aggression—a terrible example of the mother's potential for destruction. Yet Undine is only one of the many mothers that Wharton portrayed in a career that lasted effectively for over thirty-five years; for Wharton, both power and maternity proved to be topics worth repeated investigation, and the result is a canon rich with varied portrayals of motherhood that depict both the powers and the potential dangers of that position.

**THE MATERNAL QUESTION: MOTHERHOOD IN EDITH WHARTON**

by  
**LAURA EDWARDS**

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## **DEDICATION**

First, I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee for both their patience and their support. Thank you, Dr. Mackethan, Dr. Stein, and Dr. Hooker for taking the time to work on this with me.

Second, I want to thank my future husband, Evan, for insisting that I finish this thesis and for taking the time to read through it for me.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Born September 15, 1981, Laura was raised in North Carolina and attended Duke University as an undergraduate. Her interest in Edith Wharton began during a summer abroad in Madrid, when she discovered an unexpected copy of Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* in a small, Spanish bookstore. Upon completing her thesis, she will seek out a PhD from the University of Maryland at College Park.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1: Lily Bart as Last Asset: The Price of Maternal Expectation.....	6
CHAPTER 2: “I had Barbara”: Wharton’s Portrayal of the Maternal Declaration.....	23
CHAPTER 3: “how can I give up my baby?”: Scandal and Maternal Renunciation.....	38
CONCLUSION .....	61
WORKS CITED.....	66

## INTRODUCTION

Although Edith Wharton was never a mother herself, in her fiction, she frequently explores the issue of motherhood and the bond between mother and daughter. Early in her career, she focuses on the daughter's subservience to the controlling figure of the mother; her later works deal more directly with the mother herself. More often than not, Edith Wharton portrays these characters not as the self-sacrificing mother of traditional American fiction, but as competitive, possessive and self-centered women who use their maternity as a form of power. Moreover, the few women in Wharton's fiction who renounce their maternal claim are threatened with becoming mere shadows—impotent in deciding the future for their daughters and incapable of establishing their own psychologically fulfilling lives.

Though Wharton never knew what it was to be a mother, she had a distinct understanding of her role as daughter to the elegant, sometimes eccentric, Lucretia Rhineland Jones. With her husband, George Frederic, Lucretia formed a part of the social elite in old New York and as such, she adhered rigorously to a strict code of etiquette. Her very baptismal records reflect Lucretia's unusually proper sense of behavior; in the space allotted for the parents' names, there is written simply "George F. & —." Wharton's biographer R.W.B Lewis notes that Lucretia's name is similarly absent from the baptismal records of her two older sons, adding that "such maternal reticence over so long a period is without parallel in the Grace Church records"(5). In an attempt to account for the bizarre absence of the mother's name, Lewis first suggests that Lucretia might have been motivated by a code of etiquette, but finally concludes that the true reason "no doubt lies buried in some unfathomable eccentricity on the part of the always somewhat baffling Mrs. Jones"(6). Indeed, Wharton's mother proves to be a confusing figure in Wharton's life. In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, Edith recalls a number of her

memories of her mother in which the austere Lucretia is either stifling and controlling or cold and unloving. While Edith writes of her father with an adoring fondness, her mother appears always as a critical, cold, and rigid woman.

Thus, Edith was at odds to reconcile the cultural definition of motherhood with the cold reality of her own mother. Many of Wharton's critics have confronted this aspect of Wharton's upbringing, but Gloria Elrich provides what is, perhaps, the most compelling reading. She derives her interpretation of Wharton's childhood from the fact that Edith Wharton was actually raised by two women—Lucretia Jones and her nanny, Doyley. In this argument, Elrich observes that Wharton consistently portrays “her mother as cold, reproving, and remote,” suggesting that “Motherly comfort came only from Doyley”( 22). Elrich claims that because of this “mother-nanny splitting,” Wharton came to love and idealize the nurturing nanny “at the expense of the mother”(12). In Elrich's reading,

“The split that relegated to Lucretia Jones only the negative aspects of mothering—domination, intrusiveness, power to injure—created a pattern that would dominate Edith Wharton's psychic life and extend even beyond her mother's death. Once Lucretia Jones was cast into the role of the bad mother and became thus inscribed in her daughter's imagination, rectification of the mother-daughter relationship seemed almost impossible” (Elrich 18)

Elrich then argues that due to Wharton's divided perception of her mother and her surrogate/nanny, she only perceived her mother as a cruel and controlling force in her life. Though Elrich recognizes that, to “some degree, Lucretia Jones probably was self-centered and preoccupied,” she notes that “Wharton's own memoirs contain evidence that her mother cared about her. The record is contradictory”(25).

Elrich uses this theory to account for Wharton's idealized memory of her father. Accordingly, Edith's unrealistically negative view of her mother caused her to see Lucretia as a "negation" of her father (32). While she recognized in her mother only cruelty and an exacting attention to social etiquette, she came to identify with her father, seeing in him a "fellow victim of Lucretia's materialism and social ambitions" (32). Drawing on Wharton's autobiographical accounts of her father, Elrich suggests that Edith "projected her own sense of victimization by a female [onto her father], so that Lucretia seemed to shrivel the soul of this sensitive man. Wharton's fiction frequently echoes this pattern of shy male sensibility sacrificed to female crassness" (33).

Certainly for Edith, the mother—specifically the socially-minded mother—posed a unique set of questions that Wharton addresses again and again in her fiction: What is the mother's role in raising her daughter? What power does a woman derive from motherhood? What happens when a mother renounces her maternal claim? In developing this thesis, I will attempt to explore these three unique challenges within Wharton's text, considering more fully the way that Wharton portrays maternity in her stories as a means of asserting power over the child, the husband and other women, as well as the way that power is lost through renunciation of the maternal identity.

Despite her difficult relationship with her mother and her lack of any children of her own, mothers are pervasive in Wharton's fiction. Yet, Wharton does not simply explore questions of maternity and motherhood by portraying mothers; she also approaches motherhood by depicting the daughter's relationship to the mother. In the first chapter, I will examine the role of the daughter in Wharton's writing, specifically the ways in which the daughter serves as her mother's "last asset"—a final means of increasing social and financial power. I will begin my

discussion by examining Wharton's short work, "The Last Asset"(1904), in which she explicitly portrays a mother using her daughter to regain her position in society. Then, I will consider Wharton's portrayal of Lily Bart, the tragically fashionable New York socialite of Wharton's first successful novel, *The House of Mirth* (1905). Although Lily's mother dies prior to the novel's events, I will argue that even in death, she remains a significant and powerful force in the life of her daughter, Lily. Throughout the novel, Lily remains a slave to her mother's expectations that she marry a man of sufficient means, and yet, she lacks the powerful maternal figure necessary to ensure such a union. As I will demonstrate, Lily is ultimately sacrificed to her mother's expectations—a tragic, failed "last asset."

In the second and third chapters, I will shift my analysis to consider four of Wharton's later works: *Age of Innocence* (1920), "Roman Fever"(1936), *The Old Maid* (1922), and *The Mother's Recompense* (1925) . In all four of these works, I will dissect the female-female rivalry that Wharton constructs, arguing that maternity serves as the central site of competition among Wharton's heroines. The second chapter will focus primarily on *Age of Innocence* and "Roman Fever," evaluating Wharton's configuration of what I will term the maternal declaration—that moment in the story in which the seemingly passive, submissive woman asserts her dominance over other, competing characters by asserting her status as mother. In particular, I will define the chief components of female rivalry and aggression as Wharton portrays these in "Roman Fever." As I will demonstrate, this competition between women, which appears in all four of the stories at hand, allows Wharton to present a more complicated depiction of women than many critics recognize—a depiction which denies paternal control in favor of the equally disturbing, controlling power of the maternal voice.

While the second chapter will consider the moment of maternal declaration and the subsequent power that a woman gains over those around her through the claim of the mother, the third chapter will consider the reverse—what happens to a woman when she renounces her maternal claim? Focusing primarily on *The Mother's Recompense* and *The Old Maid*, I will identify how Wharton's *unmothered* mothers ultimately suffer a loss of power and status as a result of their decision to renounce their position as mothers.

Finally, in closing my discussion of Edith Wharton and motherhood, I will evaluate *The Custom of the Country* (1913). Undine, a cold, unapologetic social-climber, is depicted both as daughter and mother, and in her quest to rise to the top echelon of society, she epitomizes the competitive, calculating woman who not only uses her child to establish her position in society, but also consumes her very own mother and father in her struggle for dominance. Concluding my thesis, I will evaluate the ways in which the most monstrous of Wharton's mothers serves as a warning of the dangers of female aggression—a terrible example of the mother's potential for destruction. Yet Undine is only one of the many mothers that Wharton portrayed in a career that effectively spanned over thirty-five years; for Wharton, both power and maternity proved to be topics worth repeated investigation, and the result is a canon rich with varied portrayals of motherhood that depict both its powers and problems.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Lily Bart as Last Asset: The Price of Maternal Expectation**

Near the end of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), Lily Bart is brought to the house of Nettie Struthers, where she holds Nettie's infant daughter in her weary arms. It is there, on the hearth of Nettie's kitchen, that Lily catches "her first glimpse of the continuity of life"(349) in the familial bonds that shape Nettie's meager home. Warmed by a vision of love which knows no social boundaries—Nettie's husband loves her even though he "knows" of her past—Lily then returns to her own cold room, where she dies by an accidental overdose. The significance of Lily's final moments in Nettie Struther's kitchen remains enigmatic to both readers and critics alike. Even among feminist critics, there exists no consensus; Elaine Showalter considers the scene a triumph of the working woman, arguing that Nettie's presence at the end of the novel denotes Lily's growing awareness of a broader "community of women workers" (144) —a community in which she has found herself immersed. For Showalter, the establishment of such a female world thus mandates the subsequent death of the merely ornamental "lady," Lily. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, on the other hand, compares the scene to a similar moment in Sir Arthur Pinero's *Letty*, concluding that unlike Pinero's scene, Nettie's warm household affirms a "class-neutral conviction that everyone should denounce the false values of society and that all have an overriding need for emotional honesty"(83) [emphasis added]. However, Wolff argues that such "emotional honesty" remains closed to Lily, whose death merely fulfills a need to "enact the closure of some recognizable theatrical scenario"(83). Shirley Foster provides yet another reading of the scene, suggesting that Nettie and her baby present "a stereotyped image of womanly satisfaction which, denied Lily, intensifies the sadness of her last hours" (162). Foster thus posits Lily's death as a release "from her prison, not as a revolutionary spirit but as a potential wife and mother"(162).

While many feminist critics consider Lily with regard to Nettie Struthers and her role as both worker and mother, few consider the more substantial literary parallel that Wharton creates between Lily and Nettie's infant daughter. Indeed, in the final moments of the novel, Wharton invokes Lily's role as daughter, not as potential mother or potential worker, providing a kind of closure to Lily's unresolved relationship with the long-deceased Mrs. Bart. Thus Wharton's *House of Mirth*, in addition to demonstrating societal restrictions placed on women, poses a question that occurs in another of Wharton's works, "The Last Asset": What is the mother's role in establishing a suitable marriage for her daughter? And perhaps, more importantly, what are the ramifications of the fact that this seems to be the mother's primary obligation, vis a vis her daughter—to see that the female child is secured the safety of a good marriage? The novel, which Wharton published only a year after publishing "The Last Asset," both implicitly and explicitly invokes the language and themes of the shorter work. Despite Mrs. Bart's physical absence from the events of the novel, the plot of *House of Mirth*, much like that of "The Last Asset" (1904), critiques the mother's all-important role in choosing her daughter's husband. This matter of the mother's role in the daughter's marriage drama was probably of no small importance to the young and intellectually-inclined Edith Wharton, who like both Lily Bart and Hermione of the "Last Asset," remained subject to her mother's desire that she secure herself a suitable marriage.

In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton recounts her difficult relationship with her mother, Lucretia Jones. Wharton, in depicting her childhood, describes a woman who suppressed not only young Edith's literary interests, but also those of her father. Describing George Frederic Jones as a man who might have come to love and appreciate poetry, Wharton speculates that her mother's harsh criticism "must have shriveled up any such buds of fancy" (39). Her observation reflects more on the person of the speaker, Wharton herself, than on

her father. Young Edith Jones, touched by a deep, expressive imagination, no doubt recoiled from her mother's harsh "matter-of-factness"( 39). Rather than encouraging her daughter's literary pursuits, Lucretia's ruthlessly practical criticism impeded her daughter's efforts. When Edith brought her first work of fiction to her mother—a work detailing the results of the "unexpected social call" and an untidy drawing room(Lewis 30)—her mother dismissed it immediately, coolly informing her daughter that "drawing rooms are always tidy"(Wharton, as quoted by Lewis, 30). Susan Goodman<sup>1</sup> draws on Wharton's contentious, strained relationship with her mother as a means of understanding Wharton's creative work. In a brief set of notes entitled "Edith Wharton's Mothers and Daughters," Goodman suggests that Wharton attempts to "negotiate an equitable truce" with her mother through the medium of her writing. Yet, while Goodman's work more broadly considers motherhood as it occurs throughout Wharton's fiction, her brief analysis of motherhood in Wharton's fiction only touches on an issue of critical significance—the trope of the repressed daughter. In both *The House of Mirth* and "The Last Asset," it is Wharton's configuration of the daughter as subject and embodying to her mother's expectations that informs the narrative movement. Depicting two young women who serve as their mother's "last assets" within the demands of society, Wharton thus explores the daughter's relationship to her own mother, both as an object of maternal longings and as a means of the mother's social rehabilitation.

In "The Last Asset," Wharton depicts the aging Mrs. Newell, whose tenuous grasp on society depends entirely on her ability to secure the proper marriage for Hermione, her innocent, obedient, young daughter. In order to enact the marriage though, the brash and bold Mrs. Newell must first convince her reclusive husband to attend the ceremony—a service which she requests

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<sup>1</sup> See both her shorter article entitled "The Female Conscience in Wharton's Shorter Fiction," and her longer, psychological exploration of Wharton's biography and literary work, *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton*.

of the well-intentioned Garnett, through whom Wharton directs the third-person-limited narration.

Significantly, Mrs. Newell's daughter, Hermione, lacks the social sophistication and elegance that allow for her mother's maneuverings within the social hierarchy. She is but a shadow, a puppet in her mother's game of social bargaining. She is too simple, too good even for the discreet manipulations that allow for her mother's continued presence within polite society. By herself, the young woman scarcely possesses enough vibrancy, enough individualism to "fill a paragraph of her own"(164). When she confronts Garnett, she merely "smiles obediently"—a gesture that is, no doubt, the refined product of her mother's training. Hermione follows her mother's bidding; even at her wedding, Garnett watches her surrender unquestioningly to Mrs. Newell's designs. Rather than basking in the attention of her wedding day, she is instead passive and quiet, "resigned to serve as the brilliant lay-figure on which Mrs. Newell hung the trophies of conquest"(193). The reference to "trophies of conquest" carries an implicit reference to sexual conquest, yet it is the mother, and not the groom, who hangs these "trophies of conquest" on the figure of her veiled, virginal daughter. Indeed, as governing agent of her daughter's sexuality, it is she who not only authorizes Hermione's relationship with the young man, but who selects and secures the match for her daughter. Contrary to the more typical understanding of familial roles and the tradition of arranged marriages, the father plays no part in selecting his daughter's suitor. For that matter, the young girl is barely able to speak with her father without her mother's aid. When presented to Mr. Newell just moments before the wedding, Hermione remains motionless. Finally, Mrs. Newell thrusts the young woman forward with "a sharp push" to initiate the daughter's reluctant embrace of her father (196). Hermione's relations with men occur only as an extension of her mother's overarching ambitions, and even her matrimonial vows act to "seal and symbolize her [mother's] social rehabilitation"(194).

For Mrs. Newell, Hermione is not only a sexual body to be governed, but also an investment. Garnett notes that the woman “spoke as if her daughter were a piece of furniture acquired without due reflection, and for which no suitable place could be found”(165). Even before Mrs. Newell succeeds in securing her daughter a proper match, she extracts what value she can from the girl, assigning daily chores, the task of visiting less interesting acquaintances, and an “intermediate office between that of lady's maid and secretary”(165). Mrs. Newell expects larger “returns on her investment”(165) than mere chores, though—as Wharton ironically notes, “What was the use of producing and educating a handsome daughter if she did not, in some more positive way, contribute to her parent's advancement?” (165). It is a question fundamental to Wharton’s early work and one that she examines—if indirectly—throughout her first successful novel, *The House of Mirth*.

While Mrs. Bart appears only as a memory in *House of Mirth*, her influence on Lily, like that of Mrs. Newell on Hermione, proves stronger than that of any other character in the novel. As Maureen Howard notes in “The Bachelor and the Baby,”

Wharton understood that the family histories of Lily and Selden, both orphans, would sit heavily in the first chapter as rationale. She is careful to give us their heritage at some delay, for a time concealing Lily’s bitter, ambitious mother, who saw her daughter as the “last asset of their fortunes.” (143-144)

Despite her absence from the novel’s chief events, Mrs. Bart succeeds in impressing her values indelibly on her daughter, impelling Lily’s desires for marriage, which subsequently results in her desolation. Mrs. Bart’s longings and expectations—that Lily escape “dinginess”—haunt Lily until her own death. Like her mother, Lily envisions a life of dinginess—without the refinement she has come to expect—as intolerable, and her unwillingness to sink to such poverty shackles her to the socially restrictive world of the New York elite.

Mrs. Bart, whose refined tastes vastly outstrip her husband's limited means, teaches her daughter to appreciate only the material comforts. An unthankful, demanding wife to the bitter end, Mrs. Bart's worst reproach to her husband was to ask him if he expected her to "live like a pig"(35). When her husband answered in the negative, she then used that answer "as a justification for... telephoning to the jeweller that he might, after all, send home the turquoise bracelet which Mrs. Bart had looked at that morning" (35). Mrs. Bart's request for a "turquoise bracelet" recalls an earlier passage; Selden, observing Lily's attire, notes that "She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her future"(10). Thus, Wharton links the bracelet that Mrs. Bart buys so as not to "live like a pig" metaphorically to the manacles which imprison Lily.

When her husband admits his financial ruin, Mrs. Bart can find no reason to continue living. Overwhelmed by that dinginess which she hates, she dies of a "deep disgust"—but not before passing that disgust to her only daughter (41). In fact, Mrs. Bart's all-consuming preference for the best and most beautiful possessions finds its consummation in the person of Lily. Following the ruin and subsequent loss of her father, Lily recalls her mother's eager attempts to introduce her into society. In these narrative "flashbacks," Wharton depicts a mother whose only drive is to secure a socially and financially successful marriage for her beautiful daughter. As Lydia Wagner-Martin notes, "Lily's mother is shown to be uninterested in Lily, except as a commodity to buoy the family through its financial misfortunes"(Wagner-Martin 45). As Mrs. Bart loses her grip on the social status she had once enjoyed,

Only one thought consoled her, and that was the contemplation of Lily's beauty. She studied it with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance. It was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt. She watched it jealously, as though it were her own

property and Lily its mere custodian; and she tried to instill into the latter a sense of the responsibility that such a charge involved. (39)

Mrs. Bart—perhaps rightly—considers her daughter’s good looks to be “the last asset”—the final piece of valuable property to which she has any rightful claim and the “nucleus” around which Mrs. Bart dreams of rebuilding her own social status. Wharton’s phrasing explicitly recalls the title of the “The Last Asset,” which she had written and published the year before *The House of Mirth*. Yet, while it is Hermione who serves as her mother’s final claim to social status in “The Last Asset,” in *The House of Mirth*, it is Lily’s beauty, and not Lily herself, that Mrs. Bart so highly values. In her “study” of Lily’s beauty, she comes to envision the girl’s appearance as a “weapon” of social aggression with which she might invoke her own “vengeance”(39)—against what force, we do not know. In the end, it would seem the only victim of Mrs. Bart’s aggression is her daughter, who remains unable to escape the role her mother has chosen for her as beautiful object.

Exploited by her own mother, Lily cannot conceive of a life in which she is more than simply a beautiful face. Her intense need to be a visual focal point—to remain the object of study that she had once been for her mother—drives her to display herself as Reynold’s “Mrs. Lloyd” in the frequently analyzed scene of the *tableaux vivants*. For many critics, Lily’s performance at the Welly Brys party is central to the novel’s portrayal of the young woman.<sup>2</sup> Yet, while the scene heightens Lily’s status as object, it simultaneously allows for a moment of deeper insight into the character. Lily, who is eager to showcase “her unassisted beauty,” experiences an exhibitionistic thrill in exposing herself to the crowd—“the exhilaration of displaying her own beauty”(148). For Lily, this thrill stands in for those signifiers which remain

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<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Griffin Wolfe’s “Lily Bart: The Beautiful Death,” Ruth Yeazell’s “The Conspicuous Wasting of Lily Bart,” and Elizabeth Ammon’s “Edith Wharton and Race,” provide three notable, and varying accounts of the scene. Both Wolfe and Yeazell offer feminist analyses of the scene; Ammons provides a more racially charged reading.

absent in the novel, chiefly love, sexual pleasure and maternal acceptance. Following her performance, Lily finds herself alone with Lawrence Selden for a moment, and the very language with which she perceives her approaching love interest indicates that, for Lily, the experience of being admired, looked at, and studied is tantamount to the sensation of love. Although the scene is heavy with the “magic” of high romance, and Lawrence eagerly confesses his love for Lily, there is nothing of Lily’s reciprocated feelings for Lawrence (151). Instead, Lily’s feelings for Selden occur merely as a moment of intense and exclusive exhibitionism, a desire to be visually consumed by her would-be lover: “for the moment it seemed to her that it was for him only she cared to be beautiful”(151). Such a desire—to be aesthetically pleasing for only one man—is the closest that Lily comes to experiencing love. Certainly, it is the only form of love that she learned from her mother, who valued her for little else than her appearance. As Cynthia Griffin Wolfe notes,

The family’s concerted effort in the production and sustaining of Lily’s aesthetic nature has endowed her with a limitless responsiveness to beauty—in herself and elsewhere; but her rarefied sensitivity has left her absolutely dependent upon finding an environment that will support such refinement.(22)

If Lily thrives on the exhibitionistic thrill of her own self-display, it is because she has been taught to do so by a mother who appreciated her for little else.

For Mrs. Bart, a good marriage is the only opportunity Lily has “to escape the dinginess” of their impending poverty, and even as Mrs. Bart loses her tenuous clutch on acceptable society, she clings unbendingly to that hope (41). She trains Lily to this end, “pointing out to her daughter what might be achieved through such a gift, and dwelling on the awful warning of those who, in spite of it, had failed to get what they wanted”(39). Moreover, Mrs. Bart rails “acrimoniously against love-matches,” closing her daughter’s heart to the possibility of a

romantically driven marriage. Ironically, while Mrs. Bart believes that “only stupidity could explain the lamentable denouement of some of her examples,” she excuses her own poor choice in husbands by passing it off as a matter beyond her own control. She tells her daughter that “she had been ‘talked into it’—by whom, she never made clear”(39). Wharton emphasizes Mrs. Bart’s unwillingness to name the arbiter of her marriage, and the implication of her intentional ambiguity would suggest that it was Mrs. Bart’s mother who convinced her to pursue the marriage, thus continuing a cycle of maternal suppression.

Long after Mrs. Bart’s death, Lily remains captive to her mother’s expectation that she should find and secure a suitable husband. She does “not need Mrs. Bart’s comments...to foster her naturally lively taste for splendour”(34), because she has internalized Mrs. Bart’s views of life. Her failure to achieve her mother’s desires—to marry a wealthy, socially revered suitor and thus satisfy her mother’s dream for her—haunts Lily in her moments of quiet reflection. When she discovers “two little lines near her mouth,” the addled Miss Bart probes the causes of her “failure”:

Was it her fault or that of destiny?

She remembered how her mother, after they had lost their money, used to say to her with a kind of fierce vindictiveness: “But you’ll get it all back—you’ll get it all back, with your face.” ...The remembrance roused a whole train of association, and she lay in the darkness reconstructing the past out of which her present had grown. (33)

The passage begins with a question (“*why had Lily failed?*”), but the construction of the two paragraphs, as well as the language, suggests that there is a more important underlying question at hand: *Who* has Lily Bart failed? While on the surface, the passage claims that it is Lily’s “ambitions” which have “shrunk gradually” with the passing of time, the paragraph that follows indicates that these were not Lily’s ambitions at all. Rather, it is Lily’s mother, and not Lily, who

sought out a husband for her young daughter with “fierce vindictiveness”(33). Moreover, the construction of the passage connects Lily’s increasing sense of failure in finding a husband with her memories of her mother and her mother’s expectations—a juxtaposition which provides a powerful insight into the motivation of Wharton’s heroine. Lily cannot bring herself to marry a man of high social standing, and yet, she cannot allow herself marry a man that she loves. This lingering impression of her mother drives her from one failed conquest to the next, eager to satisfy her mother’s requirements that she marry for money, and terrified at the possibility of entering such a marriage.

While Lily suffers from the insistent memory of her mother’s expectations, it is her mother’s absence that truly cripples her in attaining the socially mandated end—an advantageous marriage. As a creature without a mother to guide her in choosing a mate, Lily is forced to care for herself, and it is in fulfilling this dual role—as both marriageable young girl and her own matchmaker—that Lily proves inadequate. Her aunt offers her little guidance in the matter, and though Lily ‘takes’ her position on the marriage market with “the confidence of assured possessorship,” her expectations diminish greatly with each failed year. As the aging maiden attempts to explain her supposed failure, she suspects that her inability to secure a husband arises out of one of two problems: that “Mrs. Peniston had been too passive,” or that “she herself had not been passive enough”(44). As Wagner-Martin notes,

Lily’s lament that she did, in fact, need a mother like Mrs. Van Osburgh, a woman who was able to place “four dull and dumpy daughters... in enviable niches of existence,” points to an obvious truth. As circuitous as the ritual of courtship and marriage in Lily’s society was, an inexperienced girl-on her own-had little chance of arranging all parts of that ritual for success. (46)

While Mrs. Bart or Mrs. Van Osburgh may act as chief negotiators in wedding their daughters to the most desirable bachelors, the unmarried girl must play the role of the passive, un-aspiring young woman, not too forward in her desires for a match and not too formed in her own ideas of self. Consequently, Lily is unable to feign the “‘pliancy’ necessary to gain herself a proper husband”(44). Her failure to juggle simultaneously the passivity appropriate in a polite maiden and the aggressiveness necessary in a mother amounts to personal failure for Miss Bart. When Mr. Gryce enters New York society, his “arrival had fluttered the maternal breasts of New York”(26). With “no mother to palpitate for her,” Lily must secure her own marriage—and while she is an expert at drawing up the contract, she cannot bring herself to close the deal. After learning of Mr. Gryce’s weakness for Americana and actively working to grab the young man’s attentions, Lily throws away her chances at marriage on a last minute impulse to skip Sunday services.

When Lily learns that the “youngest, dumpy, dullest of the four dull and dumpy daughters” of Mrs. Van Osburgh has won Mr. Gryce’s hand(100), she does not long for her lost opportunity with Mr. Gryce, nor in fact does she long for a marriage of her own; rather, Lily yearns for the tender, abiding hand of a conniving mother, such as Mrs. Van Osburgh:

Ah, lucky girls who grow up in the shelter of a mother's love--a mother who knows how to contrive opportunities without conceding favours, how to take advantage of propinquity without allowing appetite to be dulled by habit! The cleverest girl may miscalculate where her own interests are concerned, may yield too much at one moment and withdraw too far at the next: it takes a mother's unerring vigilance and foresight to land her daughters safely in the arms of wealth and suitability.

Lily’s passing light-heartedness sank beneath a renewed sense of failure. Life was too stupid, too blundering! (100)

Wharton frames the passage much as she frames an earlier one in which she introduces Mrs. Bart: Lily's thoughts of motherhood and the maternal role in courtship are immediately tied to her increasing sense of failure. While she remains unable—and perhaps, unwilling—to secure a husband, her sense of failure stems not from her status as an unmarried woman, but from her inability to satisfy her mother's wishes that she marry. Moreover, though Lily suspects that her failure to find a husband lies in her lack of passivity, Wharton—as narrator—makes this connection more clearly the result of the absent mother.

Just as Lily's inability to find and secure a husband becomes increasingly linked to the absence of a mother-figure in her life, her unwillingness to accept an alternative fate—such as the one chosen by Gerty Ferrish—similarly stems from her mother's unmistakable influence on her tastes and expectations. Even as Lily longs to break free of the society that insists that she find marriage, even as she begins to contemplate “an independent life for herself,” she remains inhibited by her fears of the life that she would ultimately face (44). Early in the novel, after meeting with Lawrence Selden and discussing the independence of Gerty Ferrish, Lily briefly considers pursuing such independence on her own. Wharton describes this urge as one of many “fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself” (44). Yet the urge is only momentary, and Lily quickly suppresses her desires, reminding herself of the “manner of life” that such independence would necessitate:

She had barely enough money to pay her dress-makers' bills and her gambling debts; and none of the desultory interests which she dignified with the name of tastes was pronounced enough to enable her to live contentedly in obscurity. Ah, no--she was too intelligent not to be honest with herself. She knew that she hated dinginess as much as her mother had hated it, and to her last breath she meant to fight against it, dragging

herself up again and again above its flood till she gained the bright pinnacles of success which presented such a slippery surface to her clutch. (44)

Of course, the two expenses that most readily come to Lily's mind are her dresses and her gambling, and it is these luxuries which she holds more valuable than her independence. Yet, in a moment in which Lily is supposedly "honest with herself," she couches her honesty in terms of her mother's preferences. Her very language reflects her mother's desperate plea that she not let the taint of dinginess "creep up" on her and "drag" her down (41). Moreover, Lily's claim that she "hated dinginess as much as her mother had hated it" explicitly evokes her sense of connection with her mother, while foreshadowing her own demise (41).

When Lily comes face-to-face with the sexual expectations of Gus Trenor, who informs Lily both of his desires and her indebtedness, Lily immediately experiences a longing for maternal affection. Eager to find some semblance of maternal affection, she runs to Gerty Ferrish, and begs her for comfort as though she were a child: "Hold me, Gerty, hold me, or I shall think of things"(183). Gerty, confused by the strangeness of such a request from woman as unaffectionate as Lily, responds kindly to her cousin's pleas, sliding an arm around her and "pillowing her head in its hollow as a mother makes a nest for a tossing child"(183-4). Several critics have recognized Gerty's position as a "mother figure" in this passage, suggesting that the episode prefigures or foreshadows Lily's death, in which she imagines Nettie's infant daughter in her arms.<sup>3</sup> Gloria Elrich takes this argument a step further in *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton*, positing that Gerty is only one of many such maternal figures in a novel which depicts Lily's passage "through a steadily declining series of maternal surrogates until she reaches the bottom of the social ladder"(63). For Elrich, Lily searches for such maternal affection first in the person of her "sanctimonious, wealthy aunt," and then in the assurance of her socialite friends.

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<sup>3</sup> See Lydia Wagner-Martin, "The Mother-Daughter Paradigm" and Maureen Howard's "*The House of Mirth: The Bachelor and the Baby.*"

Arguing that Lily moves from one “false mother” to the next, Elrich suggests that Lily is always at first welcomed by the women from whom she would seek protection, then banished from their affections—usually following her supposedly scandalous relations with their husbands(63). Accordingly, Lily’s final meeting with Nettie Struthers reverses this decline from one false mother to the next, providing Lily instead with a final, momentary glimpse of the real maternal love, warmth, and affection that she seeks throughout the novel (Elrich 64). However, this reversal occurs only after Lily has thrown off the controlling voice of her own lost mother. In choosing how to allocate her grandmother’s inheritance, Lily finally overcomes “her old incurable dread of discomfort and poverty; [...] that mounting tide of dinginess against which her mother had so passionately warned her”(322) and rejects the life her mother chose for her. Rather than keeping the money for herself, so as to escape her mother’s dreaded material dinginess, Lily sacrifices physical comforts to choose the moral high road, repaying the money that she unwittingly borrowed from Gus Trenor. For Lily, the act is a triumphant one, and it signals her renunciation of Mrs. Bart’s beliefs. Ironically, by rejecting her own mother, Lily is finally able to experience the peace of maternal affection that she discovers in Nettie Struther’s kitchen.

Unlike Lily, Nettie “never thought [she]’d get married,” and yet, she finds a husband who accepts and loves her in spite of her ruined reputation. A poor, working-class woman, Nettie is incapable of grasping the depths of Lily’s fall from society. To her, Lily stands as the picture of luxury, elegance, and beauty—a figure to be contemplated, rather than a flesh and blood woman. Nettie’s admiration does not fade upon seeing the diminished luminary, stripped of her claims to society. Rather, she regards her both as idol and as woman, inviting Lily into her home and offering her companionship.

Lily fails to find comfort in Netty's offer of friendship, but she does find a comfort in holding the young woman's infant. This child, who Nettie openly admits she conceived out of wedlock, becomes a means of redemption for Lily—redemption from her own failed attempts to find love. The child is named "Marry Anto'nette...after the French queen in that play at the Garden," who, Nettie explains, reminded her of Lily"(344). Although Netty attempts to honor Lily, the woman that she has come to admire, the intermediary namesake she chooses—Marie Antoinette—ironically alludes to an historical figure who, like Lily at the novel's opening, lacked any awareness of the hardships of poverty. Nettie's young girl is thus connected to Lily, and Netty expresses her interest in deepening that connection. Watching gleefully as her idol holds the infant, Nettie exclaims, "Wouldn't it be too lovely for anything if she could grow up to be just like you? Of course I know she never COULD--but mothers are always dreaming the craziest things for their children"(345). For Lily, Nettie's utterance of maternal longing aligns Nettie in many ways with Lily's mother. When Lily entreats that "she must not do that," her polite request amounts to a plea on the child's behalf. Aware only of her own failure to accomplish the tasks prescribed by her mother, Miss Bart kindly wishes for a different ending for Mrs. Struther's infant girl. However, it is important to note that Nettie's desire that her daughter grow to become like Lily stems only from her deep regard for the fallen socialite. While Lily views her life as a failure, Nettie sees her as an independent woman, a woman of great generosity, and most of all, a woman of deep humility. For Nettie, Lily's mere presence in her house amounts to the visitation of a celebrity. Thus, by the cozy fire in Nettie Struther's kitchen, Lily not only glimpses a warmer, happier view of family life, but more importantly, for an instant she sees a more positive, more redeeming view of herself through the eyes of Nettie Struther.

Even if Nettie's lifestyle appeals to Lily's need for a simpler, ordered existence, in which a woman might find redemption in the loving, unified family of her husband and child, it is the infant, not Nettie, who ultimately entrances Lily. When Mrs. Struthers begs Lily to visit often, Lily does not recognize the gesture verbally but rises "with a smile and held out her arms; and the mother, understanding the gesture, laid her child in them"(345). It is the child, and not Nettie, who ultimately touches Lily. Gaining the trust of the defenseless infant "thrilled her with a sense of warmth and returning life"(345). As the child rests in her arms, it grows heavier, "sinking deeper, and penetrating her with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered into her and became a part of herself"(345). Wagner-Martin notes that the scene signals "Lily's retreat to a childlike stage, admitting her need to be cared for"(44). Gloria Elrich similarly posits that through this "identification with the infant," Lily rediscovers the love, affection and sense of security which she so desperately needs. Elrich links death and motherhood, suggesting that Lily is finally "ready to return to death, the great mother"(66). Bonnie Lynn Gerard suggests that Lily's physical sensation of the child's body penetrating her own signals an "imaginative empathy and communion" that Lily has never before experienced, and this sense of communion "replaces altogether her former distaste for working-class people and scenes." The result is a "surprised sense of human fellowship" that "took the mortal chill from her heart"(511). Yet, Wharton suggests that more occurs between Lily and the young infant than mere "imagined empathy"; in this moment, Wharton not only aligns Lily with the infant in her arms—both through the paralleled naming and through their mothers' shared wishes—but moreover, she suggests that the infant literally *penetrates* and *enters into her*, becoming a "a part of herself"(345). That symbiosis awakens Lily, only momentarily, from the chloral induced trance that directs her actions at the novel's end. For a moment, Lily not only catches a "glimpse" of

happiness, she actually becomes both the small child in her arms *and* that child's pregnant mother.

In Nettie Struther's kitchen, Lily ultimately discovers a maternal affection which she experiences both as mother and as child. The child becomes a part of her, and for a moment she knows what it is to be a mother—to be completely responsible for the life of another human being. Thus, when she hallucinates the presence of that child in her arms only moments before her death, the infant is not simply Nettie's daughter, but a signifier for Lily's own uncorrupted infancy. Imagining the child in her arms and herself as mother to that child, she attempts to rewrite her story as woman; while Lily's mother dies with a plea that her daughter "escape dinginess," Lily dies, "holding her breath lest a sound should disturb the sleeping child"(352). She is at once would-be mother and undamaged child. Embracing the tender infant in her arms, Lily passes from this world, comforted by the hope of a future in which the daughter is free from the mother's all-encumbering expectation.

## CHAPTER 2

### **“I had Barbara”: Wharton’s Portrayal of the Maternal Declaration**

As Wharton matured, her interest shifted from the plight of the woman as marriageable daughter to the woman’s role as a married woman and mother. In *The Age of Innocence* (1920) and her much later short story, “Roman Fever”(1934), this shift in her interest—from struggling daughter to struggling mother—becomes increasingly apparent. Although Wharton wrote the two works during markedly different points in her life, the stories share a compelling similarity; unlike “The Last Asset” and *The House of Mirth*, which focus on the daughter’s subjection to the will of the mother, both *The Age of Innocence* and “Roman Fever” envision that transitional moment in which a woman proclaims her maternal right. For Wharton, this declaration serves as a woman’s means of exercising power over the father of her child and/or the woman who competed for his sexual attention. Interestingly, Wharton consistently structures this ‘moment of declaration’ as a dramatic climax—the deciding moment, in which a woman claims her right to the man for whom they are both competing.

At the close of Edith Wharton’s *Age of Innocence* (1920), May Welland Archer informs her husband, Newland, that the woman he has come to love—the enchanting Ellen Olenska—is returning to Europe. May notes that she and Ellen “talked things over”—a comment which, in the context of her relationship with Ellen, amounts to a veiled threat. Undisturbed by his wife’s comment, Newland decides that “Nothing...was to prevent his following” Ellen to Europe. It is not until after Newland Archer watches Ellen exit his door for Europe that he realizes the significance of May’s discussion with Ellen. In a chilling exchange with his young bride, Newland discovers that his wife is with child:

“Have you told anyone else?”

“Only Mamma and your mother.... That is—and Ellen. You know I told you we’d had a long talk one afternoon—and how dear she was to me.”

...

“Did you mind my telling her first, Newland?”

“Mind? What should I mind?” He made a last effort to collect himself. “But that was a fortnight ago, wasn’t it? I thought you said you weren’t sure till today.”(346)

Her colour burned deeper, but she held his gaze. “No I wasn’t sure then—but I told her I was. And you see I was right!” she exclaimed, her blue eyes wet with victory.

Indeed, it is a moment of “victory” for May, who, aware of her husband’s socially indecent relationship with her cousin, asserts her authority over and above the growing love between Ellen and Newland. As his wife, she no longer holds any claim on her husband. It is only by positioning herself as the mother of his child that she is able to end her husband’s affair. More importantly, she chooses to assert that claim, not by telling Newland of her pregnancy, but by telling his lover and her cousin, Ellen Olenska. As she admits to her husband at the end, she not only confronts Ellen about her pregnancy, but she lies to her with regards to the matter’s certainty. It is this confrontation between May and Ellen, cousins and rivals for the same man, which ultimately proves to be the deciding exchange of the novel. Although Wharton does not disclose that conversation within the text, there is no question regarding its substance; May, afraid that she will lose her husband to another woman, reveals that she is to become a mother, and Ellen accepts this as a sign of her own defeat and removes herself to Europe. Thus, as a mother, May reclaims her rights to her husband, and it is a claim that neither Ellen nor Newland attempts to controvert. It is this “claim” which May counts on in her confrontation with each. Yet, May is not a woman reveling in the deceitful nature of her triumph over her husband; at the

last moment, when she admits to misleading Ellen, her eyes grow “wet” with victory—a small detail which suggests that even as Newland perceives her as villainous, she is crying with the emptiness of the “victory” she has won—a resentful, unaffectionate husband and father for her children.

The absence of a scene of confrontation between May and Ellen is fitting in a novel which is depicted entirely through the eyes of the man for whom they are competing. Yet, while Wharton’s earlier fiction does not explore this moment of rivalry between two women, her later short story, “Roman Fever”(1936), focuses entirely on the moment of competition. The story, which she wrote some fourteen years after completing and publishing *Age of Innocence*, is, according to Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “perhaps Wharton’s most popular short story”(xiv). “Roman Fever” is told through the perspective of the woman who, at the outset of the story, has seemingly triumphed over her rival, and the story is a careful study of competition between women. In “Roman Fever,” Wharton tells the history of two widows, Alida Slade and Grace Ansley, who find themselves reunited in Rome, where the women once competed for the love of the desirable Delphin Slade. Surrounded by the scenes of their earlier rivalry, each woman reveals a secret of her youth, which reopens their former competition and reorders the terms of its closure.

In *Edith Wharton’s Brave New Politics*, Dale Bauer frames “Roman Fever” as a story of female sexual violence and patriarchal domination. Within this reading of the story, Bauer asserts a feminist reading of the work’s uniquely situated moment of maternal declaration, in which Grace Ansley admits that her rival’s husband is the father of her adult daughter:

...Grace Ansley’s gesture can only mean that her character rejects domestic harmony and opts, instead, for the scene of destruction, the scene of confrontation with the other (Alida

Slade) who represents the repressions of a patriarchal culture that has infected them (like the fever itself). By throwing the whole notion of paternity in doubt, and therefore throwing her daughter's name up for grabs, she displaces herself as sign of American culture and becomes the signifier of the disruption of the proper name, of paternity, of patriarchal order in general. (Bauer 158)

In reading the story as simply a demonstration of the powers of patriarchy and what she refers to as the “fictions about women's place,” Bauer oversimplifies what is, without a doubt, one of Wharton's most compelling portrayals of female competition. Moreover, by introducing patriarchal constructs into her reading, she mistakenly imprints a voice—the voice of men—upon a story that is decidedly concerned much more with women and the principal ways in which they assert power, both over men and over one another. The primacy of this rivalry narrative between women is evidenced both in Wharton's decision to display that rivalry between three pairs of women and to display it in three successive generations. Understanding and approaching Wharton's short story as a depiction of a rivalry between women—a rivalry decided by maternal claim—is integral to a complete reading of the work. Contrary to Bauer's patriarchal reading, this story establishes a world of female competition in “Roman Fever,” in which women attempt to assert their social and sexual dominance over one another. And, as is the case in *The Age of Innocence*, motherhood and maternal declaration is a deciding factor in asserting such dominance. Grace does not just throw “the whole notion of paternity in doubt”; more significantly, she asserts her *maternity* as an ironic means of establishing her dominance over Alida Slade.

“Roman Fever” is a tale of rivalry between two women who fight not only for their reproductive right to the same man, but more importantly, for their regenerative rights to a

shared, yet subjective history. For both Alida and Grace, motherhood is a means by which each woman cements her claim to an objective understanding of their shared past. While the central story primarily focuses on the lifelong competition between Grace Ansley and Alida Slade, the women appropriate and revise two other, separate tales of female rivalry and maternal desire within the primary narrative of competition. The first rivalry sub-narrative occurs as an old maternal anecdote; in this tale, two women—Grace’s great-aunt Harriet and Harriet’s younger sister—supposedly compete for the love of the same man. According to Grace’s recollection of the story, great-aunt Harriet sent her sister “out to the Forum after sunset to gather a nightblooming flower for her album” in the hopes that she would be able to monopolize the attention of their shared suitor (13). In this, the oldest of the three rivalry plotlines circulating through the text, the younger sister catches malaria while visiting the forum—the same disease that kills the heroine of James’s well-known story, “Daisy Miller”(1879). Yet, the rivalry between great-aunt Harriet and her sister does not simply document the competition between the two women; it also serves as a maternal anecdote, which Grace’s “Mother used to frighten”(14) her daughter, so as to prevent her from misbehaving. Thus, at the same time this first sub-narrative chronicles the rivalry of Grace’s two ancestors, it functions as a tool of maternal desire, with which the mother attempts to curb and control the behaviors of the daughter.

The second female rivalry narrative is mere fantasy. While thinking of her daughter, Jenny, and Grace’s daughter, Babs, Alida reinvents her own rivalry with Grace in the relationship of the two younger women: “if Babs Ansley isn't out to catch that young aviator—the one who's a Marchese—then I don't know anything. And Jenny has no chance beside her. I know that too. I wonder if that's why Grace Ansley likes the two girls to go everywhere together! My poor Jenny as a foil—!”(Wharton 11). Unlike the first rivalry narrative of Grace’s two

competing ancestors, which is merely used as a tool of maternal desire, the second rivalry narrative is a product of that maternal desire. Moreover, as Dale Bauer notes, this conjectured maternal narrative not only presupposes a competition between the two daughters, but it is also the basis of yet another competition between Grace and Ansley, who “compete once again in marrying their daughters off” (157). As Wharton weaves both of these secondary rivalry narratives through the primary conflict between Grace and Alida, it becomes clear that no story is static, free from re-authorship, but rather, that each fiction is highly suspect, and entirely subject to the desires of the author/character. Moreover, throughout Wharton’s tale, it is women—specifically mothers—and not men, who create these fictions in Wharton’s most effective, most engaging tale of female competition.

Grace’s story of her great-aunt Harriet serves as a base narrative, which is only slightly altered and re-altered with each generation. As Bauer notes, this same story has several different narrative uses depending on the situation: in the first instance, the story is intended to discipline daughters. In the second instance, the story is used as a vehicle for Grace’s aggression against her rival, Alida. In the third instance, the story is reappropriated by Alida in order to thwart—if not kill—her rival (Bauer 154). Indeed, Alida reappropriates the story of great-aunt Harriet and revises it for her own purposes. In her adaptation of the story, Alida alters the bait; while great-aunt Harriet sends her younger sister out for flowers, Alida unintentionally sends Grace out to meet the man whom they both love. Alida obliquely refers to this difference between the innocent pursuit of flowers, which in earlier times had supposedly lured one young girl to her death, and the desire for both sexual knowledge and satisfaction that attracted Grace to the same Roman ruins. As Alida tells Grace,

"our mothers had a much more difficult job than our grandmothers. When Roman fever stalked the streets it must have been comparatively easy to gather in the girls at the danger hour; but when you and I were young, with such beauty calling us, and the spice of disobedience thrown in, and no worse risk than catching cold during the cool hour after sunset, the mothers used to be put to it to keep us in—didn't they!" (Wharton 11)

While Alida recognizes the sexual intrigue—the “beauty” and “the spice of disobedience”—that called women of her own generation to the coliseum at night, her second statement reveals her inability to recognize that other consequence of “the danger hour”—sexual knowledge and illegitimate pregnancy. In her understanding of history, Grace, her competitor for Delphin’s affections, lost the battle for the man they both wanted the night she went out to meet him in the coliseum. In her mind, there had been no risk greater than “catching cold,” and consequently, she naively believes that Grace fell ill due to her Coliseum visit, left Rome to recover, then was quickly married to a man far less exciting and less desirable than Delphin. It is this fiction, the primary one of the text, which the reader is also led to believe until the story’s conclusion. Ultimately, the reader learns that Grace carries her own alternate fiction, in which she was pursued by an adoring Delphin, whom she met and had sexual relations with at the Forum.

The existence of these three rivalry stories—of the long-deceased great-aunt Harriet and her sister, of the widows, and of their two daughters—suggests a cyclical aspect of the competition. Alida notes this repetitious cycle: “what different things Rome stands for to each generation of travelers. To our grandmothers, Roman fever; to our mothers, sentimental dangers—how we used to be guarded!—to our daughters, no more dangers than the middle of Main Street. They don't know it—but how much they're missing!”(Wharton 10). Ironically,

Alida only recognizes “sentimental dangers” as a threat to herself or to Grace, and she is not alone in this generational fiction of maternal innocence. Grace makes a similar assumption; when she informs Alida that her great-aunt’s generation collected flowers, she carefully brushes aside the possibility that her aunt’s generation also enjoyed sexual activities.

Each woman in Wharton’s “Roman Fever” creates a (false) fiction; even the two young daughters assert a naive understanding of their mothers. As Jenny and Babs run off to a meeting with the eligible Roman aviator, Babs instructs Jenny to “leave the young things to their knitting”(3). When Jenny scolds her for the flippant remark, Babs modifies the statement only barely, claiming that she meant they were knitting “figuratively...After all, we haven't left our poor parents much else to do”(3). At hearing the two young woman speak of her so casually, Alida laughs and remarks to her quieter companion, “That's what our daughters think of us”(4). Although Grace subsequently proves that her daughter was right by pulling out her knitting, Alida’s point remains—Babs and Jenny view their mothers as harmless, rather useless old widows. Throughout the story, Wharton emphasizes this “figurative” understanding of other generations, which supplants a recognition of the realities of sexuality. Just as Babs believes her mother to be “figuratively” knitting, Grace and Alida hold similar fictions—about both their daughters and their mothers—which prevent them from confronting the reality of sexual reproduction inherent in the mother’s always-already penetrated body. Yet, “figuratively,” both picking flowers and knitting prove to be more sexual images than either Babs or Grace recognize. Great-aunt Harriet, we are told, sent her younger sister to the Forum to pick “a nightblooming flower”—a description which recalls that other “flower” which blooms at night in the Forum: a girl’s un-‘plucked’ virginity. As Alida informs us, the Forum is a great haven for young, promiscuous lovers, looking to escape the eyes of their parents. Ironically, while Grace’s

great-aunt is sent to the Forum to gather the “night-blooming flower,” it ends up that Grace is sent there—if unintentionally—to *lose* hers. Alida recognizes this possibility for illicit behavior; upon rehearing Grace’s sanitized version of the story, she reminds Grace that great-aunt Harriet actually sent her sister to the forum “because they were in love with the same man”(14). In response, Grace admits that this “was the family tradition”—an ambiguous statement, which suggests two possible interpretations: either the story of great-aunt Harriet and her sister is a part of the oral tradition of the family, or there is a generational tradition of women competing for the love of one man. Although the second reading is less obvious, it is actually more valid, as we are to understand that not only Grace and Alida have followed this “tradition,” but also, Barbara and Jenny. As their mothers’ rivalry reaches its climax, these two half-sisters are beginning their own competition as they move through the streets of Rome. Even knitting becomes a sexually charged image within the context of the work. As Alice Petry Hall notes, knitting is a “traditionally passive, repetitive, and undemanding task”(163), and yet, Wharton depicts Grace knitting with “crimson’ silk,” which Petry Hall suggests is “an insistently passionate color”(165). Petry Hall also points out that the skein has been “‘run through’ by needles, a startlingly assertive image”(165). Certainly, the act of knitting itself consists of two phallic needles, penetrating and re-penetrating chains of yarn. These knitting needles constantly strike and bump against one another, enacting a motion that parallels the fervent exchange between Alida and Grace. Thus, this seemingly passive act, which is part of the literal and “figurative” identity of mothers, is transformed in Wharton’s work to reflect the violence, the scheming and the aggression of the two mothers as they struggle for dominance.

Although each story of female rivalry centers on the attainment of a desirable man, there is no voice of male authority within the text. On the contrary, in Wharton’s portrayal of raw

female competition, the maternal voice serves as the voice of authority. The only male speaker is a gracious head-waiter, and he is quickly and unceremoniously dismissed from the text by the confident Alida. Her confrontation with the waiter is one of the initial exchanges in the story. Although Grace is reticent to deal with the “wondering” waiter, Alida does not hesitate to “cure him of wondering”(5). With this single male voice effectively at the outset of the story, the only other possible site of male authority or authorship is the letter that Grace receives supposedly from Delphin. Yet, as Alida admits to Grace, the letter was not written by Delphin. Rather, Alida appropriates his voice for her own purposes, so that his voice never appears at all in the story. Although Bauer argues that Alida commits a “a kind of violence against herself and Grace—in order to trick her rival”(154), her reading conflates sexual “violence” with sexual “agency.” Despite the fact that Alida was later shocked to learn that Grace had in fact answered the letter and met with Delphin, she certainly recognized the potential for sexual desire when she wrote the letter. By authoring Delphin’s invitation, she simultaneously recognizes both Grace’s attraction to Delphin and Delphin’s potential sexual desire for Grace. When Grace sends her response to Delphin, although she thinks she is merely confirming their meeting, she is in fact initiating their affair. As she informs Alida rather matter-of-factly, “I answered the letter. I told him I’d be there. So he came”(Wharton 20). Hers are not the words of a submissive woman; rather, Grace’s construction is bold and determined. She “told him” that she would be at the forum and he merely “came,” obeying the imperative of Grace’s response. Thus, both Grace and Alida act as sexual aggressors, initiating the rendezvous, while Delphin merely acquiesces to the terms of Grace’s requested encounter. Commenting on this aspect of their love triangle, Bauer notes that “For Delphin, it seems, one woman is as good as another”(159); what Bauer fails to recognize, however, is the sexual aggression demonstrated by the two women. If Delphin is not particular,

then it is the two women of the story who exercise sexual selection and agency, asserting their wills over the obedience of the supposedly empowered bachelor. The violence of the story, then, is ultimately directed not towards Alida or Grace, but rather, over Delphin, whose body is used as the site of declared sexual conquest for the two women.

Although the central object of competition within “Roman Fever” is the shared male lover, and Rome is the primary arena in which this competition is played out, for Alida Slade, no arena is free from the pressures of competition. Even as Delphin’s wife, Alida is driven by the need to compete with the women around her. She derives a kind of social satisfaction from her position as Delphin’s wife; in remembering her role as the wife of Delphin Slade, she recalls rich dinners, trips abroad, but most importantly,

“the amusement of hearing in her wake: “What, that handsome woman with the good clothes and the eyes is Mrs. Slade—*the* Slade’s wife? Really? Generally the wives of celebrities are such frumps”(Wharton 7-8).

As one of the most prominent memories of her married life, this memory is significant. Alida does not think back on the way that Delphin treated her, nor does she consider her past in terms of her own accomplishments. Rather, it is in comparison to the women around her that Alida derives her sense of self importance. Alida’s “amusement” is twofold: she is pleased to hear that she is more attractive and better dressed than other, more frumpy wives of celebrities, but more importantly, she revels in knowing that other (less important) women recognize her status as a celebrity wife. Ultimately, her sense of selfhood emerges entirely from an ongoing, constant competition to have the best clothes, the prettiest face, and most importantly, the social stature of having the most desirable husband.

The terms of Alida Slade's current competition with Grace exceed even their initial rivalry for Delphin; in spite of her earlier victory, Alida envies every aspect of Grace's life. As they sit reminiscing, Alida reflects that "she felt her unemployment more than poor Grace ever would"(Wharton 7). Alida must compete with Grace even for a share of sadness and social displacement. She envies Grace her daughter, and more than that, this envy fuels her hatred of Grace—who, like her name, is the constant embodiment of graceful, tactful, prudent action. Throughout the story, Alida is moved by this envy, turned into hatred. Even as Alida dredges up the story of Grace's great-aunt, a story which no doubt holds a deep significance for both women, Alida does it with the thought that she "must make one more effort not to hate her"(Wharton 13). Thus, she recalls the story as a means of escaping her own self-consuming hatred for Grace. This is not to say that Alida reveals her mistake as a confession; she is not a penitent woman. Rather, Alida confronts Grace with the hopes of demonstrating, once and for all, that she is superior to Grace. In an attempt to "cure herself of envying " Grace (Wharton 13), Alida actually reveals that she had tricked her years before. For Alida, envy and competition are, without exception, the primary modes of life. Her understanding of Grace reflects this tragically limited vision; in her youth, when she learns that Grace has hastily been married off to Horace Ansley, she concludes that her rival "did it out of *pique*—to be able to say you'd got ahead of Delphin and me. Girls have such silly reasons for doing the most serious things"(Wharton 18). Yet, by assuming that Grace is driven by the same competitive envy, Alida fails to consider that other possibility for Grace's overhasty marriage—an attempt to avoid scandal. As she notes, "girls are ferocious sometimes, you know. Girls in love especially"(Wharton 19). Ironically, in both this passage and the previous one, Alida fails to notice that her comments apply more directly to her own behavior than to that of her rival.

The final encounter between Alida and Grace marks the ending of their rivalry, while reversing the initial outcome. As Mrs. Ansley rises to leave, she wraps “her fur scarf about her,” and pretends to attempt a reconciliation with Mrs. Slade: “‘I’m sorry for you,’ she said, as she clasped the fur about her throat”(20). Grace’s movement to protect her throat recalls Alida’s venomous quip that Grace was “so prudent on account of [her] throat” that it was difficult to understand her earlier visit to the forum late at night. If her decision to visit the forum with Delphin was an act of imprudence, however, Grace’s confrontation with Alida is not. By motioning to cover her throat—both from the cold and from Alida’s verbal assault—she demonstrates a prudent self-preservation in her response far beyond that of the angry Alida. While Alida moves out of an uncontrollable jealousy, Grace carefully, deliberately sets Alida up for what is her own final blow. In a statement that superficially appears to be an apology for her actions, Grace instead tells Alida that she pities her. This supposedly sympathetic gesture is nothing short of a trap, and it is one that Alida is incapable of resisting. Irritated to hear that Grace—a woman she considers to be beneath herself—should ever feel “sorry for” her, Alida inquires into the cause of her rival’s pity. When Grace responds that she is sorry she met with Delphin that night, Alida falls for Grace’s attack:

“I had him for twenty-five years. And you had nothing but that one letter that he didn't write.”

Mrs. Ansley was again silent. At length she took a step toward the door of the terrace, and turned back, facing her companion. "I had Barbara," she said, and began to move ahead of Mrs. Slade to the stairway. (Wharton 20)

Just as Alida attempts to proclaim her own superiority over her rival, she sets herself up for the final blow of the short story—Grace’s revelation that Delphin fathered her daughter.

Although Dale Bauer claims that Grace's statement represents her triumph over the "life-denying investment in conventional norms" that imprisons Alida Slade, the statement in fact reinforces the politics of maternal possession and competition which repeat throughout the story. Indeed, if Grace rejects the patriarchal codes that restrict Alida, this rejection merely echoes and therefore reinforces her attacker's syntactical construction of possession. When Alida attempts to reassert her dominance by re-claiming ownership of Delphin ("I *had* him"), Grace responds by mimicking the construction of Alida's claim, but substituting Barbara, the current object of Alida's desire, for the deceased (and therefore, no-longer available) Delphin. In these terms, their rivalry is at the most simple level, a battle for possessions—two women, competing to have the smartest accessory or the best new dress. Just as Alida lays claim to Delphin, whom she "had" as her husband, Grace claims full possession of Barbara, whom Delphin fathered. In this moment, she briefly asserts herself as victor in a twenty-five year battle for dominance by claiming that thing which Alida—deprived of her socially desirable husband—wants most, "a brilliant daughter"(12).

For many, the ending of "Roman Fever" comes as a surprise. Like Alida, we too come to believe that Grace is too well-mannered and too prudent to have been sexually intimate with Delphin and, like Alida, we cannot imagine that such a seemingly 'good' woman could have overcome the scandal of conceiving an illegitimate daughter. These are the assumptions that Wharton counts on—that we, like Alida, have been too blinded by our own fictions about maternal sexuality to recognize the possibility that a prudent widow and mother could have such a scandalous past. Yet, even as we are confronted by Grace's maternal declaration, we remain blind to the implications that the declaration has on the one competition that still remains to be decided—the competition between the two daughters. Alida longs for a brilliant daughter; in her

mind, Jenny is far too perfectly behaved and far too prudent to necessitate much “mothering,” and more than anything, Alida wishes her daughter might “fall in love—with the wrong man, even; that she might have to be watched, out-maneuvered, rescued”(8). For Alida, even motherhood is a potential site of competition, and she mourns the fact that she might not have an opportunity to “out-maneuver” the seemingly angelic, ever-prudent Jenny Slade. As readers, we accept this view of Alida’s daughter and consequently, we accept her reasons for envying Grace the more dynamic Barbara. Yet, as Grace tells Alida much earlier in the story, “The most prudent girls aren't always prudent”(15). The very fact of Grace’s maternal declaration, her admission that she once enjoyed a late night tryst, suggests that in time, should the daughters reenact the competition between the mothers, Alida may have just the opportunity to ‘watch, out-maneuver, and rescue’ that she desires. Thus, the story ends with the suggestion that even as Alida is “out-maneuvered” by the more prudent Grace Ansley, she is already establishing the terms of her next rivalry with her marriageable daughter.

## CHAPTER 3

### **“how can I give up my baby?”: Scandal and Maternal Renunciation**

While maternal declaration entitles a financially secure woman to a certain amount of power over those around her, renouncing that maternal claim similarly divests a woman of power, not only over those around her, but also over her own child. In “Roman Fever” and *The Age of Innocence*, both May and Grace reveal themselves as the reproductive partners of their respective lovers, and therefore, assert themselves over their rivals; in “The Old Maid” and *The Mother’s Recompense*, the two mothers renounce their claims to their daughters and consequently, they are unable to establish an identity as either mother or sexual being.

Much like “Roman Fever,” Wharton’s longer novella, “The Old Maid,” depicts two middle-aged women united by their shared love for one man. However, while “Roman Fever” builds up to a final revelation, in which Grace declares that Delphin is the father of her daughter, the conflict of “The Old Maid” *begins* with such a moment. Delia Ralston, who has married into the tight, socially-upright enclave of the Ralston family, learns only days before her cousin Charlotte’s nuptials that Charlotte Lovell—the woman who many had dismissed as the virginal old maid—has an illegitimate daughter. But perhaps more importantly, Charlotte reveals that her daughter is the child of Clement Spender, Delia’s former suitor and the man who even years later, remains a vivid part of Delia’s thoughts. As Delia confronts the fact of her cousin’s maternity, she must also confront her own rejection of sexual fulfillment, and Wharton’s novella focuses almost exclusively on Delia’s growing awareness of this lost sexual life, as well as Delia’s attempt to reconcile herself to that life by living vicariously through her cousin’s daughter, Tina.

Even before Charlotte's daughter enters Delia's life, Delia remains undeniably in love with her former suitor. In the privacy of her bedroom, Delia keeps a clock—a wedding gift—which was brought to her by Clem Spender. This European wall clock, which Delia likes to look at every morning, displays a “bold shepherd stealing his kiss”(90) from a young maid. Numerous critics have commented on the image, which Wharton carefully weaves throughout the story. For Judith Funston, this ormolou clock represents the impassioned, youthful Delia, who has slowly conformed to the demands of the Ralston family. As such, Funston suggests, the “clock is Delia's sole link to the pastoral world of her youthful daydreams, where desires are frankly expressed and satisfied”(Funston 147-8). Gloria Elrich, meanwhile, interprets the clock as an invasive object, a remnant of “Clem's unruliness,” which has “invaded the sanctity of her marriage chamber, rendering what passes there perfunctory and joyless”(136). She notes the clock's continuing, persistent presence throughout the story, suggesting that the “chimes” of the clock act symbolically, “ticking off the years that see Delia a wife, a mother, and finally a widow with Charlotte as her chief companion”(136). Thus, while Funston reads the clock as a means of escape for Delia, Elrich considers it an intrusive object—one that robs Delia of the “joy” of marriage and motherhood.

Either interpretation, however, overlooks the chief symbolic purpose of the clock, which simultaneously functions to mark the passage of time and to display forever an act of pleasure postponed. For Delia, Clem is captured not only in the unruliness of the shepherd's kiss, but in the frozen image of the gesture. Clem is the eternally suspended shepherd, hovering forever in Delia's mind. But it is because he is forever suspended—unable to seek more—that he is desirable. As Delia prepares for her cousin's nuptials at the novella's beginning, she looks around her room and decides that Charlotte's suite would “not be as pretty as hers” because

Charlotte “would certainly not have such a pretty clock in her bedroom”(18). Funston dismisses Delia’s smug thought, arguing that “Delia feels compelled to differentiate herself from Charlotte, who seems to embody all that is safe, ‘nice,’ and predictable in old New York” simply because Delia needs “some kind of consolation for having surrendered her dreams”(151). Of course, even at the outset of the story, Charlotte does not embody all that is “safe, ‘nice,’ and predictable in old New York”; rather, she is presented as a problem—a young woman predisposed to working with the children of the lower classes and dangerously attached to the small orphans she takes care of. It is not Charlotte who embodies that which is safe in New York, but her impending marriage to Joe Ralston, and subsequently, her initiation into the same Ralston clan which confines Delia. Delia’s immediate need to assert some form of superiority over her cousin suggests then that Delia—even at the outset of the story—considers Charlotte as her social rival.

When Charlotte finally confesses that Clem was the father of her daughter, she is quick to defend herself, telling Delia that Clem had “always thought you'd wait for him...and then, when he found you hadn't...and that you were marrying Jim...He heard it just as he was sailing...He didn't know it till Mrs. Mingott asked him to bring the clock back for your wedding”(101). Once again, this image of the clock surfaces in relation to Clem. However, within this iteration, we learn that the clock takes on a different meaning for Clem; while it signifies postponed pleasure for Delia, for Clem, it marks the break in their love affair. As the reader learns through Charlotte’s outburst, Clem did not reject Delia, or refuse her the same affections that he offered Charlotte, but rather, Delia rejected Clem and married Jim in his absence. Thus, as the shepherd, he has been discarded and thrown away in place of the more stable, more reliable Ralston clan. Interestingly then, this clock, which effectively concludes Delia’s love affair with Clem, becomes emblematic of a pleasure eternally suspended. In Delia’s heart, Clem forever seeks out

that kiss, which she once turned from, and it is only through the young Tina's acceptance of her own lover that Delia finally allows herself a glimpse of "bliss accepted" (168).

Much like Wharton herself, Delia initially resists consummating her marriage. The story suggests that Delia, who chose to marry the safe and reliable Joe Ralston, rather than the wild Clem, is—at least initially—afraid of sex. In contemplating Charlotte's approaching nuptials, Delia imagines how Charlotte's wedding night—and the nights following that night—will be. She recalls the sexual initiation which followed her own wedding night:

"afterward" there was the startled puzzled surrender to the incomprehensible exigencies of the young man to whom one had at most yielded a rosy cheek in return for an engagement ring; there was the large double-bed; the terror of seeing him shaving calmly the next morning, in his shirt-sleeves, through the dressing-room door; the evasions, insinuations, resigned smiles and Bible texts of one's Mamma; the reminder of the phrase "to obey" in the glittering blur of the Marriage Service; a week or a month of flushed distress, confusion, embarrassed pleasure; then the growth of habit, the insidious lulling of the matter-of-course, the dreamless double slumbers in the big white bed, the early morning discussions and consultations through that dressing-room door which had once seemed open into a fiery pit scorching the brow of innocence.(88)

The memory provides a window into Delia's own wedding night and sexual education, denoting her fears of sexual intercourse. The loss of her virginity is a "puzzled surrender," and the ensuing "terror" is met only by her mother's "resigned smiles" and scripture—a fact which suggests the mother's complicity in enforcing her daughter's surrender, as well as her coldness towards the young, newly married girl, desperately seeking her mother's comfort. Even after that initial surrender, the "embarrassed pleasure" gives way to only "the insidious lulling of the matter-of-

course.” Sex, for Delia, is a marital obligation only—that constant matter of surrendering her body to her husband’s demands.

Solidly confined within her sexually unsatisfying marriage, Delia is initially left with only her own children to reconcile her to the disappointments of married life. As Wharton coolly notes, Delia has only “the babies; the babies who were supposed to “make up for everything,” and didn’t—though they were such darlings, and one had no definite notion as to what it was that one had missed, and that they were to make up for”(88-9). Indeed, while Delia is fond of her own children, they offer her none of the fulfillment she finds in her adopted maternal relationship with Tina. Wharton emphasizes this difference—between how Delia thinks of her two offspring, and how she regards the daughter of Clem Spender. When Delia is leaving her house to go see Teena, she passes her children sitting and playing with the nurse. Although she notes how “happy and jolly they looked,” she does not take the time to stop and hold them. Rather, she “waved at the group and hurried on,” (105) eager to see the child of her former lover. Delia’s own children hold no symbolic meaning for Delia, and the contrast between the way that Delia feels for her children and the way she regards Clement’s child is once again emphasized upon Delia’s return from the orphanage; when the nurse tells Delia that her children are “waiting to say their grace,” Delia lightly tells her to “let them say it to you. I’ll come later”(109). The mere thought of Clem Spender’s child awakens a maternal feeling in Delia that far surpasses her longings for her own children.

After recalling the terrifying experience of her own wedding night, Delia concludes that “Charlotte’s fate would be just like hers” (89). The thought comforts her, convincing her that her experience of sexuality is entirely normal, i.e, the experience of all women upon entering the marriage contract. When Charlotte reveals the nature of her relationship with Clem, Delia is

initially disturbed. Suddenly, she must confront the fact that some women willingly enter into sexual relations. She shudders at hearing of Charlotte's illicit sexual relations and, initially, she cannot envision Charlotte—or any woman—willingly giving into a man's sexual appetite outside the context of marriage. Even after guessing that her cousin “loved someone,” Delia remains convinced that Charlotte was the “victim”(98) of her lover's sexual aggression. She asks Charlotte “who took advantage” of her (100), denoting her own inability to imagine female sexual agency.

From the first moment Delia learns that Tina is Clem Spender's daughter, she links the child inextricably with her father, and consequently, with the fantasy of her own rejected happiness. She thinks of the infant as “Clem Spender's child”(103)—a connection which is further strengthened when Delia sees young Tina:

The little creature on her knee was made of different stuff—it had not needed the plaid alpaca and coral buttons to single her out. Her brown curls grew in points on her high forehead, exactly as Clement Spender's did. Delia laid a burning cheek against the forehead. (107)

The mere fact of Delia's “burning cheek” recalls both the image of the young shepherdess, offering her lover a cheek to kiss, and Delia's recollection of her own courtship with Jim Ralston, in which she offered him only a cheek to kiss before their marriage. For Delia, Tina does not exist in her own right within this initial encounter in the book. Instead, she is symbolic of something that Delia had previously been incapable of imagining—“bliss accepted”(110). Of course, here I use the phrase differently than it appears at the novella's end. Tina as a child does not accept bliss; rather, she is symbolic of the sexual bliss, which Charlotte “accepted” with Clem and which Delia rejected. It is this, Delia's “first sight” of Tina, which awakens her to the

possibilities of sexual love, and which “somehow decentralized Delia Ralston's whole life”(149). Her newly gained awareness effectively terminates her existence as a Ralston: “her own life was over: she felt as detached as a cloistered nun” (150). Of course, Delia’s sense of ‘detachment’ suggests not only her estrangement from the Ralston clan, but more importantly, her newly gained sense of sexual inexperience. Delia realizes that her despite her marriage, she remains—like the “cloistered nun”—a sexually inexperienced and unfulfilled woman.

As many critics have noted, Tina is undoubtedly much more to Delia than simply a daughter—she is a means of allowing Delia to live out the dreams she once renounced. When Delia rises up against the Ralston clan to adopt Tina, she feels that it is “not for Clement Spender, hardly for Charlotte or even for Tina; but for her own sake, hers, Delia Ralston's, for the sake of her one missed vision, her forfeited reality”(150). Of course, the passage is somewhat misleading; Delia is convinced that it is “not for Clement Spender” that she breaks down the rules of the Ralston clan, but her very description of a “missed vision” and “forfeited reality” suggests that it is for Clem—and for the life with Clem that Delia rejected—that Delia finally acts to help Tina. As Funston notes, “Clem Spender is only a minimal part of Delia’s attraction to Tina; more importantly, Delia sees in Tina her ‘own girlish self’ and a ‘vision of requited love’ forever denied her” (155). For Funston, Tina “personifies emotional and sexual completion, and the realization of Delia’s fantasies”( 154). Gloria Elrich goes on to suggest that “The woman who had been properly married to a good, solid man and borne two thriving children feels so starved for passion that she is driven to experience it vicariously through the girl whom she has appropriated emotionally” (138).

Indeed, Tina allows Delia a rare transfusion—of life, of vitality, and most importantly, of illicit sexual knowledge. Watching the young girl, Delia is given a view of herself not as she

was, but as she wished that she had been. Tina's very speech recalls what "in far-off self-communications, [Delia] had imagined herself saying to Clement Spender"(136). Moreover, it is only through Tina that Delia is able to understand the secret machinations of an illicit affair. By observing the girl's stormy engagement to Lannings, Delia discovers "the answer to a question which had long been the subject of her secret conjectures. How did lovers like Charlotte and Clement Spender contrive to meet?"(153). Unconcerned with Tina's behavior, Delia immediately imagines Charlotte and Clem in her grandmother's darkened house, "in each other's arms"(154). For the first time, Delia is able to envision a consensual, extramarital sexual encounter between Clem and Charlotte, and it is this newly gained vision which then allows her to imagine the same sexual fulfillment for herself.

If Delia's perception of Tina as a daughter-figure is complicated by an intense identification with the girl, then her decision to adopt the young woman proves significantly more problematic. Delia believes that by adopting Tina—and subsequently rendering Charlotte powerless—she is acting on the girl's behalf, but her motives are, from the start, undoubtedly selfish. When Delia learns that Lanning, like Clem, claims he cannot afford to marry Tina, Delia's identification with the girl engulfs her:

The past was too overwhelmingly resuscitated in Charlotte's words. Clement Spender stood before her, irresolute, impecunious, persuasive. Ah, if only she had let herself be persuaded!(143)

In hearing Tina's dilemma, Delia is transported to a time in her own life when a young Clem stood before her, explaining his reasons for resisting marriage, yet pressing for her sexual submission. Rather than resisting the memory and separating herself emotionally from Tina, Delia instead chooses to revise her own tragic history by altering the ending of Tina's love story.

Thus, by adopting Tina, Delia does not simply secure the girl a happy marriage; rather, she appropriates Tina for her own psychological benefit, subsuming the girl's desires in her own selfish need for the illusion of self-fulfillment:

The older woman, whose whole life had been shaped and coloured by the faint reflection of a rejected happiness, hung dazzled in the light of bliss accepted. Sometimes, as she watched Tina's changing face, she felt as though her own blood were beating in it, as though she could read every thought and emotion feeding those tumultuous currents....Delia saw displayed before her, with an artless frankness, all the visions, cravings and imaginings of her own stifled youth.(168)

As Delia prepares for Tina's wedding, which is symbolically set in the same house where Delia said her own vows, she recalls "again her reflection in the sallow pier-glass as she had left that same room on Jim Ralston's triumphant arm, and the one terrified glance she had exchanged with her own image"(171). Looking at the pier-glass before Tina's wedding, Delia reflects on "what a different image the pier-glass would reflect" for Tina (171). Notably, Delia does not imagine the way that Tina will look in her dress at the wedding; rather, Delia envisions the way in which Tina will see herself—as the reflection of the self, glanced only momentarily in a mirror. Thus, the image of Tina's reflection supplants the "terrified glance" of the adopted mother, erasing Delia's terror of the sexual future, and in its place, inscribing the fantasy of calm, eager sexual initiation. Wharton, never an author to leave things vague, goes on to suggest that Tina "had reconciled [Delia] to the memory of what she had missed. All these last days she had been living the girl's life, she had been Tina, and Tina had been her own girlish self, the far-off Delia Lovell"(177). Yet, in equating Tina with Delia's "own girlish self," Wharton ironically suggests that like the "fair-off Delia Lovell," Tina herself is afraid of entering into sexual union. Of

course, Delia never entertains this possibility, and ultimately, Tina's fears and desires as an individual are sacrificed so that the adopted mother can play out her own delusions of sexual fulfillment. These false motives, which motivate Delia to claim a maternal right to the daughter which is not her own, ultimately allow her to,

yield to that vision of requited love from which her imagination had always turned away.

She had made her choice in youth, and she had accepted it in maturity; and here in this bridal joy, so mysteriously her own, was the compensation for all she had missed and yet never renounced" (177).

Yet, there is nothing "mysterious" about the fact that Delia experiences Tina's "bridal joy" as though it were her own; indeed, Delia's perception of Tina as an individual is subsumed by her own desires such that she cannot perceive any joy *but* her own. For Delia, the girl ceases to exist in her own right, either as a daughter or as a person, and instead becomes only a reflection in that bridal mirror that Delia is so eager to revise.

Unlike Delia, who uses Tina only for her own selfish means, Charlotte—the biological mother—acts unselfishly on her daughter's behalf, forgoing first her rights as a wife, and then her rights as a mother so that her daughter might know a better life. While Delia sees Tina's marriage as a means of reconciling herself to the sexual and emotional "memory she had missed," Charlotte initially seeks a more prudent ending for her daughter's romantic adventure. Unlike her cousin, Charlotte carefully watches over her daughter, silently policing the girl's growing relationship with Lannings Hasting. Gloria Elrich, in comparing Delia with Charlotte, argues that

on the freedom-repression axis that structures the novella, the cousins have switched poles. Charlotte, who once dared the proprieties to seize her moment of love, has

rigidified and become oppressively vigilant about Tina's chastity. The formerly conventional Delia has learned how to bend social rules with impunity. She dares to adopt a child widely known to be illegitimate and later becomes indulgent toward Tina's fairly lax dating behavior (Elrich 137).

Of course, such a reading fails to take into account each woman's motives in dealing with the child. When Charlotte confronts her cousin with her fears that Lanning and Tina are sexually intimate, and that Lanning has no intentions of marrying the girl, Delia is hesitant to react. Yet, her hesitancy does not stem from an "indulgent" attitude towards Tina. Instead, Delia fails to react to the girl's behavior, partially out of her own ignorance, and partially out of a selfish desire that Tina should stay single, that Delia might enjoy her companionship in her later years. It is Charlotte here who fights on the behalf of the young girl, violently refusing to let Tina know a life like hers: "Tina an old maid? Never! ... My child shall have her life...her own life...whatever it costs me"(145). While Delia adopts Tina so that she might vicariously live out her own dreams through the girl, Charlotte wants Tina to have her "own" life, and consequently, she fights to protect her daughter from the very scandal that invalidated her maternal claim to the girl, and denied her the ability to marry. From the moment Charlotte first confronts Delia with the secret of her "scanted motherhood," Charlotte knows that she is sacrificing that which she values most—her sole claim ("She is mine!") to her beloved daughter—so that her daughter will have a better life. Yet, perhaps it is Charlotte's clear, honest vision of the girl which demonstrates most completely her love for her daughter. When Charlotte first suggests that her daughter might involve herself in a sexual relationship with Lannings, Delia asks her how she can dare to judge the girl so harshly. Charlotte's response is fierce: "Oh, I dare anything for Tina, even judging her as she is"(145). Unlike Delia, who acts only on behalf of her own "forfeited

reality,” Charlotte fights on behalf of her daughter so that Tina will have “her own life,” rather than one subject to the financial power of a self-serving cousin.

While Charlotte would do anything for her daughter, her own overwhelming sense of shame prohibits her from ever revealing to the girl her “scanted motherhood.” Although Charlotte accuses Delia of “robbing” Tina from her with “all your forbearances and your generousities”(176), her comment only veils the true reason for her renunciation of her daughter. After Delia adopts Tina, Charlotte still cannot bring herself to reveal the truth of her sordid history—even for the sake of reclaiming her own daughter. Instead, she benevolently accepts the situation, and

one phrase of hers perhaps gave the clue to her acceptance: ‘Now at least she’ll never suspect the truth.’ It had come to be the poor creature’s ruling purpose that her child should never guess the tie between them. (168)

She states the terms of her renunciation, telling Delia, “I would rather [Tina] thought me an old maid than—”(132). Of course, her speech trails off; not even Charlotte can produce a name for herself and her history. When Tina returns home from her late night rendezvous with Lannings, only to find Charlotte waiting up for her, Delia “shiver[s] at the irony of the confrontation”(154), realizing that if Tina knew of her “aunt’s” history—the late night trysts that she once shared with Tina’s father—the relationship between the two women would be irrecoverably changed. Charlotte’s tenuous claim to her daughter thus hangs on a double-bind; if she does not tell Tina of her history, she cannot claim her natural, biological role as mother. However, were she to tell Tina of her scandalous past, it would similarly disrupt her power as a moral authority figure and thus, her ability to guard her daughter’s chastity—the qualification for being a “good” mother.

Finding an answer to the “question” of the “The Old Maid”—“*WHICH OF US IS MOTHER?*”—ultimately hangs upon the readers’ perception of Charlotte Lovell. A number of critics have asserted their own answer to the question. For Tintner, the “two mothers join in their love for Tina,” which she claims demonstrates that “Wharton has removed the mother role from its biological determinants” (126). Gloria Elrich, meanwhile, suggests that the issue is “decided in favor of the psychological mother” (139). In the novella, it is Charlotte who answers her own question; after standing at her daughter’s bridal room, Charlotte finally turns away, that Delia may visit with the girl. As she leaves, Charlotte makes her renunciation complete: “You’re her real mother. Go to her. It’s not your fault—or mine”(179). It is the only option available to the woman who cannot reveal her motherhood without also revealing her shameful, scandalous past. As Funston notes, it is this fact of Charlotte’s renunciation which complicates the novella’s end:

Wharton shifts the blame to the society’s demand that the “blind forces of life” be kept “groping and crying underfoot,” a shift consonant with the underlying idea of *Old New York*. Delia’s victory is in the end bittersweet, her vigil with Tina made “tragic” by Charlotte, alone in her bedroom “watching, struggling, listening”(190) (156).

Indeed, it is Charlotte’s quiet suffering which ultimately frames the events of the novella; just as the story begins with the dissolution of her engagement to Joe Ralston, it ends by denying her a final chance to claim the daughter for whom she has sacrificed everything. Yet, the answer to Charlotte’s question—“Which of us is mother?”—is not so simply decided as either Charlotte or the critics would suggest. While Delia selfishly uses Tina to reconcile herself to the failings of her own past, it is Charlotte who ultimately renounces her maternal claim for the sake of her daughter’s happiness, and in doing so, cements her position within the novel as loving, self-sacrificing, mother.

In *The Mother's Recompense*, the conflict pattern shifts—instead of two women competing for the daughter of their shared lover, a woman must watch as her own daughter marries the man that she loved. Kate Clephane, a woman who abandoned her family more than two decades before, is invited back to claim her hold on the daughter she left behind. That newly configured mother-daughter bond is disrupted, however, when Kate discovers that her daughter is to marry her own former lover, Major Chris Fenno. The conflict of the novel, then, centers on Kate's struggle, first to dissolve the union, then to reconcile herself to the inevitability of her daughter's marriage—a feat which she never successfully accomplishes. Ultimately, much like "The Old Maid", Kate's only remaining option is complete renunciation—both of her sexual past and her rights as a mother.

For most critics<sup>1</sup>, Kate's inability to accept this union between her daughter and her former lover presents a major challenge to the novel. Tintner, in reading Kate's inner struggle, argues that

The impossibility of her tolerating the situation gives the book a clear-cut dazzling intensity, although from the facts of the situation as presented this is clearly absurd. Why should a mother in 1925 living for the past two decades on the edge of the most sophisticated society in Europe regard her daughter's marrying her former lover as so horrifying? It can only be because Mrs. Clephane views the lover as a husband, and the coupling of her daughter and the man who represents the husband figure becomes an incestuous act. (Tintner 127)

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<sup>1</sup> "In *The Mother's Recompense* the incest theme is interwoven with Kate's satisfaction in being nurtured by her own child, so that generational strife over the same lover intercepts the satisfaction of an infantile need on the part of the mother" (Elrich 146)

Like most critics, Tintner contends that Kate's inability to tolerate her daughter's relationship stems from the "incestuous" nature of the union between Anne and Chris, and in fact, few critics offer a reading to challenge this view, accepting the common argument that Kate's horror is simply too exaggerated and too "absurd" to be anything more than her reaction to a "Sophoclean" tragedy (Tintner 127). Such readings of the text, however, dismiss not only the content of the novel itself, but also, the thematic underpinnings of several novels and stories in Wharton's late career. Much like "Roman Fever" and "The Old Maid," the psychological drama of *The Mother's Recompense* hinges on Wharton's supposition that "A woman never stops thinking of the man she loves" ("The Old Maid" 175). Indeed, Wharton's later novel works within this presumption of feminine psychology; even three years after the end of her affair with Chris, Kate Clephane is unable to let go of the man who, for her, is "the central fact of her experience" (43). The psychological pain that Tintner dismisses as "absurd," is—for Kate—real, overwhelming and paralyzing. Moreover, despite the fact that she has lived in "the most sophisticated society in Europe" for the past two decades, Kate remains unabashedly conservative. Even as she recalls her affair with Chris, she remembers that she "had never let Chris come in with her at that hour, no, not once"—despite the absence of any real chaperone or moral authority in the house. Kate's pride, her need to be considered a "good woman," and her inability to let go of the only man she ever loved both physically and emotionally, take over her in a way that—despite the arguments of various critics—provides the novel an unusually harrowing glance at psychological truth, which focuses primarily on the question of motherhood: Does Kate, in losing her daughter, simultaneously lose her opportunity to be mothered? Moreover, can a woman be a mother and a sexual being?

Kate begins the novel much like Delia; she thinks almost constantly of Chris, and there is clear evidence that she has never stopped loving him or longing for the day of his return. When Kate Clephane discovers that she has received a telegram, her first thoughts are not of the daughter that she abandoned some seventeen years prior. Rather, her mind immediately turns to the one man who has meant something in her life—Chris:

There was no reason why [...] there shouldn't be a message at last, the message for which she had waited for two years, three years; yes; exactly three years and one month—just a word from him to say: *'Take me back.'* (7)

For three years and one month, Kate has waited eagerly, hoping for the day when Chris would return to her. Like Delia, Kate is not looking for a daughter; rather, she longs for the return of her lover. When Kate realizes that it is Anne who has called for her and not Chris, she briefly forgets him. The thought of Anne overwhelms all other thoughts, “crowding out everything else, yes, effacing even Chris as though he were the thinnest of ghosts”(8). Kate claims that the memory of her daughter has effaced “even Chris,” but the effect is only temporary. When Aline announces that another telegram has arrived, Kate does not hope that it is news from her daughter, but instead sits “bolt upright,” excited once again that it could be “a word from him, a message at last”(8). Even after she remembers fighting for her daughter, dreaming of abducting her and taking her to Canada, Kate’s mind quickly returns to Chris, noting that all of her struggles for Anne “had become dim to her since she had known” the young man (15). Throughout the novel—even before Wharton reveals the relationship between the two—Chris and Anne appear in Kate’s mind always in juxtaposition with one another, suggesting that Kate perceives Chris as a substitution for her lost daughter. More importantly, Chris has proven a more satisfactory substitution, implying that Kate always chose her sexual

identity over her other biologically framed identity—motherhood. In the middle of discussing her daughter’s potential suitors with Fred Landers, Kate’s mind turns unexpectedly to Chris, and she is startled by the connection: “Why, in the very act of thinking of her daughter, had she suddenly strayed away into thinking of Chris? It was the first time it had happened to her to confront the two images, and she felt as if she had committed a sort of profanation”(73).

Although it is the first time that she chooses to “confront the two images,” it is most certainly not the first time that her mind draws the connection. The two relationships that determine Kate’s identity—her relationships with Chris and with Anne—stand in direct opposition to one another. With Chris, Kate is reborn as a thinking woman and a sexual creature; with Anne, Kate experiences motherhood and what it is both to nurture and be nurtured. The two thus remain forever juxtaposed in Kate’s mind, representing the two irreconcilable aspects of Kate’s feminine self.

Through Chris, Kate discovers a part of her sexuality that had been denied both in her marriage to John Clephane and in her affair with Hylton Davies. Chris allows Kate to be reborn as a sexual being:

For the first time, when she met him, her soul’s lungs seemed full of air. Life still dated for her from that day—in spite of the way he had hurt her, of his having inflicted on her the bitterest pain she had ever suffered, he had yet given her more than he could take away. At thirty-nine her real self had been born; without him she would never have had a self... (15)

The very language suggests a rebirth through Chris, and in that language, he becomes a second, spiritual mother for Kate. Like the child exiting the womb, Kate Clephane’s “soul’s lungs” fill with air only after meeting Chris, and in knowing him, she is finally “born” at thirty-nine. Thus,

figuratively, he becomes the mother of Anne's self. In this way, the stories prove parallel; just as Kate abandons the life that she brought forth into the world when she abandons Anne, so too does Chris abandon the selfhood which he brought forth in Kate.

Through Anne, Kate rediscovers both what it is to be a mother and, ironically, what it is to be mothered—to nurture and to be nurtured by another human being. She finds comfort and a degree of fulfillment in that role, but she also discovers that as a mother, she is expected to renounce herself as a sexual woman, and even as a social being, so that her existence may become secondary to that of her daughter. In her new life as social subordinate, Kate finds that she is sometimes lonely, and she briefly wonders if she had “been too suddenly changed from a self-centered woman, insatiable for personal excitements, into that new being, a mother, her centre of gravity in a life not hers?”(83). Though Kate never stops to answer her own question, the fact remains that even in her new found happiness with her daughter, Kate is not fulfilled as a woman. In order to be with Anne, Kate must deny herself those “personal excitements” in favor of the vicarious excitements of her daughter. Moreover, in reprising her role as mother, Kate finds that her claim to Anne is tenuous at best. As Allen Stein notes, “Kate has forfeited all influence over her and so cannot work subtly to change her mind”(224). Indeed, Kate lacks any rightful claim to her daughter, and she discovers this weakness when Anne confronts her in Europe. Defending her decision to send Chris away, Kate tells her daughter, “Any mother would have done as much. I had the right—.” Anne swiftly cuts her mother off: “The right?” Anne shrieked. “What right? You gave up all your rights over me when you left my father for another man!” (161). As Kate has realized, she is nothing more to her daughter than a “conscientious chaperon”(155)—her rights as mother are lost to her. Kate can claim no rights of possession over Anne, nor can she claim any rights to Chris or her sexual agency. In the end, she is forced to

renounce even her place in Anne's life because she is incapable of changing the reality of her sexual attraction to Chris.

For Kate, watching Anne plan a life with Chris, the man she still loves, is psychologically paralyzing. After working fruitlessly to break up the relationship between the two, though, Kate attempts to reconcile herself to her daughter's marriage and "cease her inward struggle against it"(217). In that moment, she recognizes that despite her moral repugnance to the idea of her daughter's marriage, there is nothing legally wrong about the union between her daughter and her former lover. She experiences a brief moment of clarity, in which she is able to accept the "vehemence of Anne's passion," as well as the fact that Chris returns that love as passionately. She even goes so far as to recognize that her own claim on Chris was never intended to be a lasting one—"a passing incident, a pleasant memory" at the most—and it was she who "had insisted on the... necessary transiency of the tie"(219). Her remembrance is followed by a more powerful realization that more than anything, she cannot allow Anne to be destroyed. It is here that Kate realizes that Anne's happiness depends entirely on her ability to reconcile herself to a single act: "Renunciation—renunciation. If she could attain to that, what real obstacle was there to her daughter's happiness?"(221). Like Charlotte, in "The Old Maid", Kate is forced either to renounce her scandalous past or renounce her claim to her daughter. The realization leads her to consider more deeply what she would sacrifice to keep Anne: "I would sell my soul for her—why not my memories?"(222). Although she asks the question rhetorically, she finds her answer only moments later. Convinced that she must hold on to Anne "at all costs"(222), Kate goes to her daughter to set the wedding date, but discovers the girl standing quietly with Chris, looking onto the "dazzling whiteness" of her wedding dress. As Kate stands ghostlike, "invisible and

inaudible”(222) before them, she is suddenly overwhelmed by the very memories she has tried to forsake:

a furious flame of life rushed through her; in every cell of her body she felt that same embrace, felt the very texture of her lover's cheek against her own, burned with the heat of his palm as it clasped Anne's chin to press her closer.

For Kate, it is a moment of absolute and utter horror. Despite her previous clarity, Kate is suddenly awash with the memory of her relationship with Chris and “every thought and feeling was clogged with thick entangling memories”(222). As much as she might try, Kate cannot “sell”(222) her memories for her daughter, nor can she separate the Chris she once loved from the man who her daughter intends to marry. For the first time, Kate confronts that emotion that underlies the entire work:

“Jealous? Was she jealous of her daughter? Was she physically jealous? Was that the real secret of her repugnance, her instinctive revulsion? Was that why she had felt from the first as if some incestuous horror hung between them?”(222).

She did not know—it was impossible to analyze her anguish. She knew only that she must fly from it, fly as far as she could from the setting of these last indelible impressions.

Kate’s very inability to answer her own question demonstrates the depths to which she is addled by her jealousy. Despite her conviction that she no longer loves the man, she is, in fact, still unable to psychologically release him to another. Thus, her own daughter becomes her competitor. Rather than confront the fact, though, Kate runs wildly to the door, planning a self-annihilation that is cut short only by Enid Drover’s unexpected arrival and her “silly chatter about the house next door”(219-222).

When suicide does not prove a viable alternative for Kate, she must face the only option left—complete renunciation. Much like Charlotte Lovell, Kate is convinced that she can regain influence over her daughter if she reveals the truth of her sexual past. Initially, Kate goes so far as to threaten Chris with this possibility, promising that should he see her daughter again, she will tell Anne the truth of their affair. Her threats prove as empty as Charlotte's, though. Much like the old maid in Wharton's novella, Kate Clephane cannot bring herself to share the truth of her past with her daughter. When Chris threatens to reveal their affair, Kate erupts into pleas for his silence: "Oh, don't tell her, don't tell her! Chris, don't tell her!"(177). Unlike Charlotte though, Kate is not capable of carrying the burden of renunciation. The truth of her past is a great burden for her, and yet, "there was not an ear into which she dared pour her agony"(216). When Kate finds herself at a Catholic church, she cannot help but imagine the comfort of the sacrament of reconciliation. Her interest in the forum—in a place where she might "entrust her anonymous secret to one of those anonymous ears" (216)—suggests that for Kate, there is a tremendous sense of guilt of incest working concurrently with her jealousy. In thinking upon those confessing their sins, she thinks "how trivial, how childish they would seem, compared to what she carried in her breast"(215). Seduced by "the authority which the habit of the confessional must give," Kate imagines how relieving it must be to confess one's sins to another. For Kate, it is not that the priests communicate with God; instead, it is that they communicate with those who come to confession without allowing "moral repugnance nor false delicacy [to] interfere with the sacred task of alleviation and purification"(216). Kate longs for repentance, and "Her eyes filled at the thought of laying her burden in such hands"(216). When she finally reveals her past to Fred, she finally receives absolution, and in watching his pain, Kate finds a strange kind of relief: "Curiously enough, she was less unhappy than for a long time past. His pain and his pity were

perhaps what she had most needed from him: the centre of her wretchedness seemed the point at which they were meant to meet”(259).

At one point, Kate notes “with self-derision that all her suicidal impulses seemed to end in the same way; by landing her in the arms of some man she didn’t care for”(228). It is only at the end of the novel that she is finally able to break this cycle and return to Europe alone. Yet, if at the end of “The Old Maid,” the central question is “who is Tina’s mother,” then at the end of *The Mother’s Recompense*, the very title of the novel begs a similarly distinct question: *what is Kate Clephane’s recompense?* In a novel that ends much as it begins—with the protagonist floating through European society—the “recompense” suggested by the title is not only obscure, but bitterly ironic. Consequently, critics have offered a number of readings of the ending of the novel. For instance, Tintner suggests that Kate’s “recompense is the restitution of her own personality that confirms an existence beyond her relation to a husband or a child”(129). Of course, like many critics, Tintner’s reading is based only on one definition of “recompense” as a compensation or repayment. However, there is a second meaning of the word, which alters Tintner’s interpretation: “recompense,” meaning to make compensation for or repay something. Indeed, in escaping to Europe, Kate is not compensated; rather, she is performing a strange act of penance, by which she atones for the mistakes of her past. The very language of the final two is rife with religious undertones; Fred, in forgiving Kate for the sins of her past,

had overcome his strongest feelings, his most deep-rooted repugnance; he had held out his hand to her, in the extremity of her need, across the whole width of his traditions and his convictions; and she had blessed him for it, and stood fast on her own side. (271-2)

Thus, Fred forgives her failings and she, upon blessing him, attempts to repay the sins of her past by breaking the cycle of escape which first led to her pain; rather than fleeing with Fred in the

same way that she once fled with Hylton Davies, Kate leaves as a free woman. She does not repeat the sins of her youth; in abandoning Anne and Chris, she reconciles herself to her daughter's relationship and in choosing to abandon Fred, she is assured that she will never be able to hurt him or her family again.

Through Kate and Charlotte, Wharton suggests that motherhood for the respectable, upper-class woman is not simply a biological claim, but rather, it is a social claim dependent on a woman's moral integrity—and not her sexual experience. For Charlotte, the irony of this paradigm is emphasized through the mother's loss; as a woman who has fallen to sexual scandal—a scandal which resulted in her impregnation and motherhood—Charlotte is subsequently denied her rights as a mother. Yet, while both Kate and Charlotte are forced to renounce their maternal identity, this renunciation is ultimately the only option available to any mother—even the respectable Delia Ralston. At the end of both stories, as at the beginning, the daughter chooses to pursue her own identity as a sexual woman and wife in favor of her identity as a daughter, and this choice effectively separates the girl from the mother. Thus, in the same moment that Wharton demonstrates the problematic social aspects of motherhood, and the pain of a mother's renunciation, she simultaneously emphasizes the impermanence of any woman's role as daughter, as lover or as mother.

## CONCLUSION

Although Edith Wharton portrays motherhood as a means of empowering women, it would be incomplete to end any such discussion of mothers in her work without also recognizing the implicit threats to maternal power in Wharton's fiction. While motherhood may give a woman control over the future of her offspring and a reproductive claim to her partner, the validity of the "power" that she gains is ultimately challenged and criticized within each text. Although a daughter may be subject to her mother's expectations, Wharton's work suggests that it is also the mother who carries the burden of securing her daughter's happiness through a suitable marriage, which in Wharton's work, is, ironically, often the only means of granting women autonomy in a world operated and owned by men. When there is no such motherly presence to guide a young woman, the only remaining alternatives are scandal or tragedy. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart's mother's early death leaves the girl vulnerable in the dangerous world of the marriage market and subsequently exposes the girl to ruin. For Charlotte Lovell, in *The Old Maid*, the mother is charged with being too "burdened" by the expense of her family to "do much for her eldest girl"(91). Consequently, Charlotte's mother is rendered financially helpless and morally negligent—not only can she "not afford to give her more than one new tarlatan dress"(91), she is unavailable to guard her daughter's chastity. As a result, Charlotte is able to enjoy a tryst with Clem Spender alone in a house "where there was no one to spy upon their coming"(154). Without a mother to police her behavior, Charlotte discovers her sexuality, but ironically, it is a discovery that leads to her life as an old maid, in which she does not own her future and in which she holds no legal or emotional claim to her daughter. Thus, while the mother is often presented as a controlling force in a girl's life, the absence of such a mother renders a girl powerless in the marriage market in Wharton's fiction.

The only woman who succeeds in securing her daughter a positive, loving match for her child, Mrs. Newell in “The Last Asset,” is never recognized for her accomplishment; rather, to the very end of the story, the mother is vilified by a narrator who can see her as nothing less than a master puppeteer with no end in mind but her own. Her husband, the grumpy, reclusive Mr. Newell, would seemingly rather sacrifice his daughter’s happiness than appear at her wedding, and yet, his decision is described with a charity that belies his selfish, disagreeable demeanor towards wife and daughter. Of Wharton’s works, there are two other seemingly well-suited matches—Anne Clephane’s marriage to Chris Fenno and Tina Ralston’s marriage to Lanning Halsey—and yet, in both cases, the marriage serves not to reveal the mother’s power, but rather, to cement her powerlessness. Charlotte, who holds no rights to her illegitimate daughter, is denied the opportunity to speak with her daughter the night before her wedding; Kate Clephane, who wants nothing more than to end the marriage between her daughter and former lover, must confront the fact that in leaving her daughter two decades before, she has rendered herself powerless as an influence in the girl’s life. Thus, the few happy unions in the book are not attributed to the mother’s guidance; rather, they occur either as a sign of the mother’s overly-powerful control or as a sign of her utter powerlessness.

Even the initial power that a woman gains upon revealing her maternity proves to be a mixed blessing. Grace Ansley, in “Roman Fever,” briefly trumps her friend Alida Slade by announcing that she not only “had” Alida’s husband, but also, she gave birth to her daughter by that husband—a daughter that Alida openly wishes were her own. Alida openly admits her envy to her friend, and secretly recognizes her boredom with her own daughter, wishing more than anything, “that Jenny would fall in love—with the wrong man, even; that she might have to be watched, out-maneuvered, rescued”(8). Yet, when Grace reveals that she “had” Delphin as a

sexual partner, she unwittingly undermines the expected trajectory for both her dynamic daughter, Barbara, and Alida's seemingly angelic Jenny. As Grace tells Alida, "The most prudent girls aren't always prudent"(15)—a statement which suggests that in time, should the mothers' competition be replicated by the daughters, Alida may have just the opportunity she desires to "out-manuever" her angelic daughter, Jenny. Similarly, the final moments of *The Age of Innocence* challenge any reading of May's maternal declaration that portrays her as achieving an unmitigated victory. When May tells her husband that she has confronted Ellen with news of her pregnancy and misled her with regards to the matter's certainty, she is not—as her husband suspects—a woman reveling in a deceitful triumph over her husband; rather, at the last moment, when she admits to misleading Ellen, her eyes grow "wet" with victory—a small detail suggesting that even as Newland perceives her as villainous, she is crying with the emptiness of the "victory" she has won—a resentful, unaffectionate husband and father for her children. Thus, while the maternal declaration might serve as a dramatic twist in Wharton's fiction—a moment in which one woman's proclamation of motherhood dramatically restructures the perceived dynamics of power—the benefit of that shift in power is questionable at best.

In the end, perhaps Wharton's most unambiguous portrayal of feminine power is her depiction of Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* (1913). Although Wharton would go on to create different, more complex portrayals of motherhood, *The Custom of the Country* is Wharton's most troubling portrayal of motherhood, and thus it provides an excellent end point in a discussion of maternal power. Undine, who is portrayed fully as daughter, wife and mother, exists as a kind of warning—an imagining of the potential power of maternity and the subsequent horror of such a possibility. Spoiled and tyrannical, Undine manipulates her parents, often playing one off against the other for her own purposes. When her mother displeases her,

Undine leaves her house only because “she wished to discipline her mother”(23). Unlike many of the other daughters in Wharton’s works, Undine dominates her parents; she controls them absolutely, and it is their chief business in life to satisfy her every, fleeting whim. Even as her parents grow increasingly strapped for money, Undine continues—without any sense of guilt—to draw “an undiminished allowance” from them. Within her uniformly self-centered vision of the world, she firmly believes that “it was the hereditary habit of the parent animal to despoil himself for his progeny”(291).

Yet, if this is her view of her own parents, she by no means develops that habit in herself when she becomes the “parent animal.” Instead, her insensitivity is exaggerated to the point of cruelty. From the moment she first learns of her pregnancy, Undine resents her child, bemoaning the restrictions that pregnancy will place on her social life: “Look at me—see how I look—how I’m going to look! You won’t hate yourself more and more every morning when you get up and see yourself in the glass!”(96). Once her son is born, she cannot be bothered with such details as his birthday. The child for her is, purely and without question, only an object in a game—another piece with which she might manipulate those around her. Undoubtedly, she expresses some few, passing feelings of maternal love, but on the whole, she is unwaveringly ruthless in her relationship with her son, Paul. After divorcing his biological father, Ralph Marvell, Undine releases the boy to him and does not think of the child again until he serves her new purpose of securing a match with Count Raymond de Chelles. Upon regaining custody—a feat which leads to Ralph Marvell’s pathetic suicide—she immediately recognizes Paul only as an “acquisition,” another possession useful for garnering social favor (247). Yet, despite Paul’s usefulness to her, she openly regards children as “a dreadful nuisance.”

In one of the final chapters of the novel, Wharton shows this mother through the eyes of the neglected son, reinforcing our judgment of Undine as a failed mother and emphasizing her inhumanity. As we witness the world through the perspective of young Paul, we see a boy who is both confused and lonely, and who yearns to find some semblance of meaning in his mother's fourth and newest marriage. When she finally returns home, though, his tight, seeking embrace is coolly met and quickly swept aside. In Undine's life, there is no room for a child. Perhaps Wharton captures Undine best through the words of the senior Mr. Marvell who, in referring to the problems of American marriage, describes Undine as "a monstrously perfect result of the system"(108). And indeed, within the terms of Wharton's satire of the American *nouveau riche*, she is monstrous. As a daughter, she is unchecked by the mother and father that should regulate her development; as a mother, she is unburdened by such impulses as maternal sympathy and thus, she is able to rip her child from the breast of the father(s) that he loves, carrying him persistently and uncaringly from one social plane to the next. Unlike Lily Bart and Hermione Newell, she is never submissive to the whim of her mother and, unlike Charlotte Lovell and Kate Clephane, her maternal claim is never threatened by her scandals. As one of Wharton's early portrayals of motherhood, Undine stands as one of Wharton's most troubling portrayals of motherhood, and yet, she is by no means the last such portrayal. Indeed, Wharton would go on to depict the mother-figure numerous times in her career, constantly revisiting her own problematic relationship with maternity through the one medium that allowed her the power of generation—the act of writing. Through writing, Wharton effectively established her own "maternal" power in her depictions of women and society, inscribing her own, female authorial voice upon a cannon predominantly comprised of men.

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