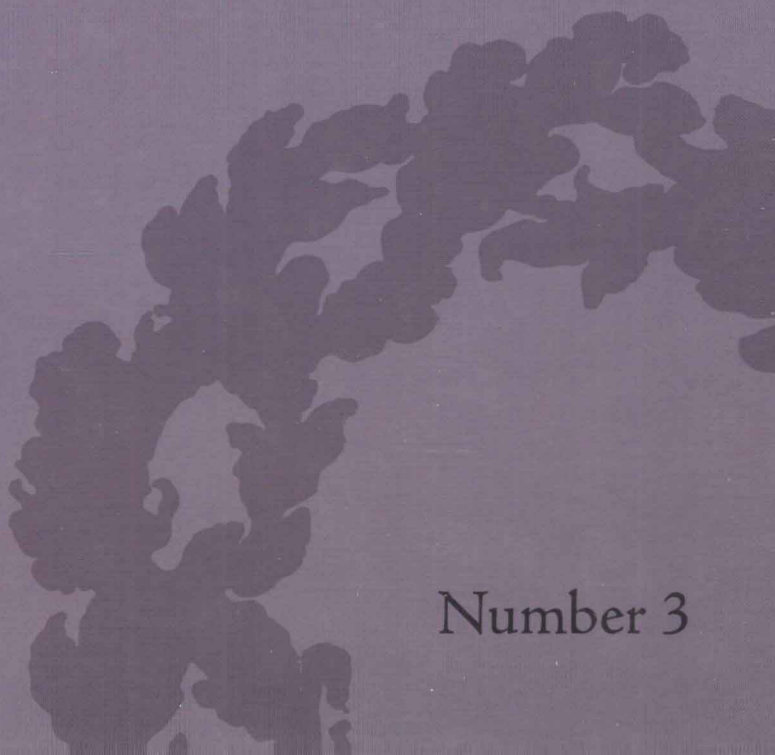


Edith Wharton's
The Custom of
the Country

*Edited by
Laura Rattray*

Number 3



EDITH WHARTON'S THE CUSTOM OF THE
COUNTRY: A REASSESSMENT

EDITED BY
Laura Rattray



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EDITORIAL NOTE

All page references to *The Custom of the Country* are to Scribner's original 1913 edition and appear in parenthesis within the text.

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INTRODUCTION

Laura Rattray

The Custom of the Country, first published on 18 October 1913, has been described as Edith Wharton's 'most powerful' novel, 'her greatest book', her 'most ambitious masterpiece' and a 'tour de force'.¹ Charting the career of the American-branded Undine Spragg of Apex, Wharton presents her readers with the modern material girl, a young woman surrounded by dazzling lights and mirrors, her sights set firmly on the centre of the social gaze. While *The House of Mirth*'s precarious insider Lily Bart fatally spirals down the social scale, 'thrown out into the rubbish heap' and all its attendant horrors,² Undine Spragg, the outsider, indefatigably works her way up and forces a way in. At the novel's remarkably open-ended close, Undine has realized her dazzling success (while never recognizing its casualties) only to discover 'under all the dazzle a tiny black cloud remain[s]' (p. 594). Undine Spragg Moffatt Marvell de Chelles Moffatt's career of acquiring and discarding husbands debars her from the role of Ambassador's wife – the one part, she tells herself, for which she was really made.

While Wharton herself would come to regard *The Custom of the Country* as one of her finest works, its genesis proved the most protracted and disrupted of any novel in her long and prolific career. As the author toiled on the manuscript in fits and starts between 1907 and 1913, progress was regularly interrupted, and the novel intermittently set aside in favour of other writings. During the period in which *The Custom of the Country* took shape, Wharton – displaying her familiar dexterity across a gamut of literary genres – published two collections of short stories (*The Hermit and the Wild Woman and Other Stories*, *Tales of Men and Ghosts*), a travel book (*A Motor-Flight through France*) and a volume of poetry (*Artemis to Actaeon and Other Verse*) in addition to her novels *Ethan Frome* and *The Reef*. Yet, throughout, *The Custom of the Country* remained a work for which its creator had ambitious plans. In May 1908, Wharton wrote to her friend Sara (Sally) Norton of having 'taken up again [her] sadly neglected great American Novel'.³ By May 1911, she was 'working steadily at "The Custom,"' though 'still only revising': 'I can't tell any longer whether I'm really improving it, or only undergoing an attack of scrupulosis' she wrote to former lover turned

sometime-friend Morton Fullerton.⁴ The same month Wharton informed the art historian Bernard Berenson she was at work on 'a real magnum opus ... a vast novel ... piling up the words as if publishers paid by the syllable'.⁵ In August 1911 she continued 'digging away' at 'the Big Novel' with 'dogged obstinacy'.⁶ When *Scribner's Magazine* began its serialization of *The Custom of the Country* in January 1913 (the serial ran from January to November), the novel remained incomplete. By August 1913, the 'hard grind' at her last chapters had 'used [her] up', leaving Wharton 'simply dead tired, from having always, these last months, a little too much to do'.⁷

In fact, neither professional nor personal conditions had been propitious – with 1913 also marking the culmination of a dramatic, at times traumatic, period in the author's life. During the years she worked on *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton was attempting to cope with what she diplomatically described as her husband's 'nervous excitability'⁸ and the humiliations his behaviour inflicted, not least the use of his wife's money to support a mistress.⁹ This was the period in which Wharton embarked on a tumultuous affair with Morton Fullerton, only for it to end badly, and in which she separated permanently from America, selling the Mount, her home in Lenox, Massachusetts. There had been a rift with both Wharton's brother Harry and, painfully, with Henry James. Crucially, 1913 brought completion of *The Custom of the Country* but also Wharton's divorce decree, marking a very public end to her twenty-eight-year marriage. As reporters circled, she assured herself in a letter to Fullerton that 'the public' at least could not access the register of the French courts, where the decree had been lodged, and that those reporters would 'soon tire of their vain researches'. A comment in the same letter ironically underscored the dichotomy of Wharton as a woman fiercely protective of her privacy and a media-savvy writer always concerned to see the maximum publicity and exposure for her work: 'It's a tiresome moment to traverse – but no more ... I *must* get back to work! – Undine is already making the press ring – I hope she'll keep it up'.¹⁰ Though her letter dismissed the event as merely 'tiresome', a private notebook entry betrayed the year's heavy emotional toll. In a visceral recounting of a nightmare experienced in October, a 'horror struck' Wharton sees a 'Demon' throw before her from 'a great black trunk' a succession of shapeless 'Black Horrors', conjuring up the personal vicissitudes of the year ('I knew what they were: the hideous, the incredible things that had happened to me in this dreadful year, or were to happen to me before its close').¹¹

Yet real life for Wharton would prove in many respects a series of 'adventures with books' – a phrase she employed twice as titles of fragmentary, abandoned reminiscences¹² – and, throughout, writing remained at its heart. Though she once described reading most reviews of her work as comparable to 'watching somebody in boxing-gloves trying to dissect a flower',¹³ the author took an

avid interest in her critical reception and sales – and among her papers at Yale's Beinecke Library are files of reviews of *The Custom of the Country* supplied by Scribner's and her British publishers Macmillan. The *New York Herald* promised 'a graphic picture of modern life both here and abroad', while a full page advertisement in the *Atlantic Monthly* opted for three punchlines: 'Recounts the Career of a Beautiful, Ambitious American Girl / Forms a Graphic Revelation of American Society To-Day / Already the Most Discussed Novel in America'. Sections of the British press, meanwhile, smugly distanced themselves from American social conduct, with the *Leeds Mercury* pronouncing the novel 'of American application ... deal[ing] with the "habit" of divorce which prevails across the Atlantic'.¹⁴ The *Saturday Review* concluded

Mrs. Wharton has assembled as many detestable people as it is possible to pack between the covers of a six-hundred page novel. It is a sordid society into which we are introduced – a set of vulgar Americans, blatant and pushing, whose only standard of values is the dollar.¹⁵

Wharton herself was no stranger to the value of the dollar, Scribner's paying a royalty advance of \$7,500 for *The Custom of the Country* and \$6,000 for serial rights, with half of the novel's 30,000 copies of the first American edition having sold in advance of official publication.¹⁶

Reviewers were both fascinated and repelled by the incessantly self-gratifying exploits of Undine Spragg. She was perceived as 'an ideal monster', 'sexless', 'absolutely unmoral [*sic*]', 'absolutely selfish, logical and repulsive', 'the most repellent heroine we have encountered in many a long time' and 'a mere monster of vulgarity'.¹⁷ In his essay 'Justice to Edith Wharton', Edmund Wilson would seal the deal, famously labelling Undine 'the prototype in fiction of the "gold-digger," of the international cocktail bitch'.¹⁸ More recent readings highlight Charles Bowen's observation to consider the character not as a monster *per se*, but as 'a monstrously perfect result of the system: the completest proof of its triumph' (p. 208). Readings with a greater social consciousness include those by Elizabeth Ammons, who perceives Undine as a 'naïf' revealing Wharton's 'criticism of leisure-class marriage'; Susan Goodman, who concludes 'Undine is tragically limited by a society that does not value intelligence or eloquence in women until after they are safely married'; and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, who regards her as a product of the reader's own misogyny.¹⁹

'If only everyone would do as she wished she would never be unreasonable' (p. 266), observes the narrator of the soulless Undine, the name inspiring both mythical water-nymph and hair-waver marketed by the Spraggs. Restless, relentless, four-times married, yet entirely lacking in desire or affection (she spectacularly fails the maternal litmus test by forgetting the birthday of her young son), Undine exists only for an audience. Wharton's fiction parades a cast of ver-

satire actresses, skilfully changing roles as the occasion demands. Undine lives for the limelight: 'she might have been some fabled creature whose home was in a beam of light' (p. 21). At the early Dagonet dinner,

she found that to seem very much in love, and a little confused and subdued by the newness and intensity of the sentiment, was, to the Dagonet mind, the becoming attitude for a young lady in her situation. *The part was not hard to play* (p. 91, my italics)

Wharton's hopes of a playwriting career may have been thwarted, but her fascination with the stage and with playwriting continued to reap rich rewards. Theatrical settings and motifs are pervasive in her fiction, the perfect venue for her female protagonists to display themselves and be displayed. As Undine's performance in the opera box will illustrate, elaborate social scenarios are frequently enacted in the auditorium rather than on stage.²⁰

In her article for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1907, Anna A. Rogers wondered 'Why American Marriages Fail'.²¹ It was a question Wharton was addressing in her own life, and Rogers's answers, examined by Susan Goodman in the opening essay of this collection (women's failure to realize that marriage is her work in the world; her growing individualism; her lost art of giving), would have offered any successful, professional, financially independent female writer little relief. As each of her husbands will discover to his cost, Undine Spragg simply has nothing to give. The status of divorced women had long intrigued Wharton in her writing: in her abandoned early novel, *Disintegration*, divorcee Alice Clephane is ostracized, only to remarry and buy her way back in as Alice Wing; in the 1904 short story 'The Other Two', twice-divorced Alice Haskett Varick simply moves on to husband number three. Wharton's unfinished play, *The Arch*, features a twenty-eight-year-old woman, Rose, who has scandalized society by divorcing her first husband and taking a second – the successful architect George Adrian. In the early scenes, Rose is presented as a woman adopting an individual, honourable moral code; by the end she is charged with causing all the miseries through her loose, corrupting standards, specifically her 'preaching the gospel of divorce' – a judgement Rose appears to accept: she is 'inwardly aghast at what she has done'.²² Undine Spragg, on the other hand, having no self can have no self-doubt, 'Wharton's deeply ironic novel prov[ing] that divorce is the logical mechanism for market expansion, providing women with the means to forge nuptial careers based not on a single liaison but on successive – and ever more successful – unions'.²³

Though part of the narrative is set in France, as Undine moves her marital campaign to Paris, Wharton regarded *The Custom of the Country* as an 'intensely American' tale.²⁴ No writer would prove more effective at capturing American society in transition, with Ralph Marvell memorably viewing his mother and grandfather as 'Aborigines', 'vanishing denizens of the American continent

doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race' (pp. 73–4). As Emily J. Orlando astutely observes in her essay 'Crude Ascending the Staircase: Undine Spragg and the Armory Show', when Ralph in turn is left behind, the narrator fittingly places Undine aboard the iconic 'Twentieth Century' train (below, p. 83). Wharton locates most of the action of *The Custom of the Country* in an early twentieth-century world, her notes for the novel including a precise timing of important events, labelled the 'Undine Chronology'. (The author evidently laboured over the timings, making a series of painstaking corrections: 'Married in ~~March~~ <February> 1900/ Paul born ~~Feb.~~ <January> 1901/ Birth-day scene ~~Feb~~ <January> 1903. / Goes abroad for ~~June~~ <May> 1903/ Goes off with Van D. in July 1903/ ~~January~~/ Goes to Dakota <to> gets divorce').²⁵ Indeed several contributors to this collection underline *The Custom of the Country*'s remarkably prescient concerns: 'the media's ability to shape human beings' perceptions of themselves and their societies', 'the rise of "image"', 'economic and business shifts to a society of spectacle', corporate corruption, the 'portent of a future as shaped by Undine and her sort – the society of spectacle, auguring late capitalism' (below, pp. 18, 103, 113). Read against our recent economic and banking freefall, the novel appears alarmingly prophetic. Carol J. Singley defines it as 'a contemporary jeremiad that rails against reckless materialism', while Robin Peel rephrases 'Orwell's account of his own dystopian novel' to label *The Custom of the Country* 'both a prophecy and a warning'.²⁶

In the years since publication, *The Custom of the Country* has attracted an array of critical readings. Elizabeth Ammons interprets the work as 'one of America's great business novels', throwing 'a brilliant, satiric light on the institution of marriage, stripping it of all sentiment and sentimentality'.²⁷ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Shari Benstock and Aaron Worth, among others, view it as a novel about 'energy', Wolff asserting 'One thing and only one is genuinely fixed; and that is a preoccupation with energy. Psychic energy – power, assertion, drive, ambition. This, more even than Undine herself, is the subject of the fiction'.²⁸ R. W. B. Lewis reads the novel biographically, seeing the author 'revealed, quite startlingly, in the characterization of Undine Spragg' which suggests her 'anti-self', 'what Edith Wharton might have been like if, by some dreadful miracle, all her best and most lovable and redeeming features had been suddenly cut away'.²⁹ Debra Ann MacComb defines *The Custom of the Country* as one of Wharton's 'divorce novels', positioning the text against the backdrop of a 'divorce industry' seen to function as an extension of the 'marriage economy' by 'recycling women back onto the marriage market after exacting from them both their time and money'.³⁰ Cecelia Tichi characterizes the work as 'arguably Wharton's most thoroughgoing socially Darwinian narrative'; Ticien Marie Sassoubre suggests it 'should be read as a novel about changing property relations and the ways in which those property relations are constitutive of personal identity', while Can-

dace Waid contends it 'is about the destruction of the writer who is seduced by the siren song of a false muse'.³¹ As the *New York Times Review of Books* had promised in October 1913, '*The Custom of the Country* is a book which will arouse some dissension and much discussion'.³²

Dissension and discussion have also been aroused regarding the novel's form. Robin Peel reads *The Custom of the Country* as 'a disguised eighteenth-century novel of sensibility, designed to show what happens when those without empathy or the semblance of virtue inherit the earth'.³³ Hermione Lee, on the other hand, observes that '*Custom* looks expansive, like a nineteenth-century novel. Balzac, Thackeray, Trollope, even Dickens, come to mind'.³⁴ Recent scholarship has debated the degree of Wharton's engagement with the modernist aesthetic³⁵ – a debate Hildegard Hoeller applies to *The Custom of the Country* in the final essay of this collection, "'Lost in Translation": Financial Plots and the Modernist Reader in *The Custom of the Country*'. The years from 1907 to 1913 may have been among the most difficult in Wharton's personal and professional life, but they were also among the most innovative, prompting one to wonder whether the writer divorced not only her husband in this period, but also her customary narrative techniques. Of the two other novels produced in the gestation years of *The Custom of the Country*, much has been written on the ambitious and ambiguous framing structure of *Ethan Frome* (1911),³⁶ which ensures – in Margaret Murray's apt summation in her essay 'Landscape with the Fall of Undine' (below, p. 117) – that narrative veracity hangs by a thread. (In her memoir *A Backward Glance*, Wharton expressed exasperation at having been 'severely criticized by the reviewers for what was considered the clumsy structure of the tale'.)³⁷ Others have commented on experiments with perspective in *The Reef* (1912), notably the withholding of Sophy Viner's point of view, the narrative refusing throughout to present her directly to the reader.³⁸ While Peel views *The Custom of the Country* as a return to form, its 'rhetoric' suggesting 'the triumph of orthodoxy', others have focused on the novel's 'difficult and disorienting' qualities.³⁹ In 1915 Percy Lubbock searched vainly for 'a controlling and unifying center' in a book that was 'all too good for Undine'.⁴⁰ Wolff writes of the novel's 'insistent contradiction', its 'deliberate unsettling of every comfortable conviction', Wharton 'toss[ing] the narrative vantage about with a virtuoso's nonchalance', 'shifting the focus of our gaze'. 'Nothing is fixed', '[t]here are no clarifying summations', 'no fixed set of principles according to which we may systematically evaluate [the novel's] characters'.⁴¹ This is a novel in which important events are delayed or withheld from the reader – not least a first marriage and past life in Apex. In a world of change, uncertainty and false muses, omniscience and authority are often denied. In the final scenes of the text, the reader views Undine's youngest casualty, her son Paul, piecing together his family narrative from Mrs Heeny's