

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

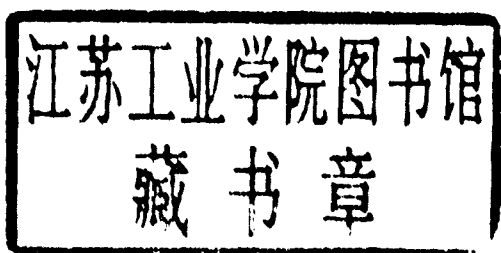


EDITH WHARTON

Edited by Millicent Bell

THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
EDITH WHARTON

EDITED BY
MILLCENT BELL



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1995

First published 1995

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Cambridge companion to Edith Wharton / edited by Millicent Bell.

p. cm. – (Cambridge companions to literature)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-45358-5. – ISBN 0-521-48513-4 (pbk.)

1. Wharton, Edith, 1862–1937 – Criticism and interpretation.

I. Bell, Millicent. II. Series.

PS3545.H16Z636 1995

813 .53—dc20

94-34704
CIP

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-521-45358-5 hardback

ISBN 0-521-48513-4 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

CONTRIBUTORS

ELIZABETH AMMONS is Professor of English and American Studies at Tufts University. She is the author of *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (1991) and *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (1980), and the editor of *Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe* (1980), *Short Fiction by Black Women, 1900-1920* (1991), and *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century Multicultural U.S. Literature*, with Annette White-Parks (1994).

MILLCENT BELL is Professor of English, Emerita, Boston University. She is the author of *Hawthorne's View of the Artist* (1962), *Edith Wharton and Henry James* (1965), *Marquand: An American Life* (1979), and *Meaning in Henry James* (1992).

NANCY BENTLEY is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of *Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James, and Wharton* (1994), and has published articles on issues of race in American fiction as well as essays on James and Hawthorne.

GLORIA C. ERLICH is an independent scholar who has written essays on Hawthorne, Thomas Mann, and biographical theory, as well as on Wharton, and is the author of *Family Themes and Hawthorne's Fiction: The Tenacious Web* (1984) and *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton* (1992).

MAUREEN HOWARD is a professor in The School of the Arts, Columbia University. Her latest novel, *Natural History*, was published by W. W. Norton (1992) and is now a Harper Perennial. An autobiography, *Facts of Life*, won the National Book Critic's Circle award and is published by Viking/Penguin.

PAMELA KNIGHTS lectures on English and American Literature at the University of Durham, England. She has published essays on Faulkner and other American writers and provided the introduction for the Everyman's Library edition of *The House of Mirth*.

CONTRIBUTORS

ELAINE SHOWALTER is Professor of English at Princeton University. Among her books are *Women's Liberation and Literature* (1971), *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), *The New Feminist Criticism* (1985), *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and Culture* (1985), *Speaking of Gender* (1989), *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Creativity in the Fin de Siècle* (1990), *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (1991).

RHONDA SKILLERN, a writing instructor for the Success Program at the University of Texas, has published two study guides for American Literature correspondence courses. She is completing her dissertation, entitled "From the Land of Unlikeness: Ritual and Resistance in Edith Wharton's Novels." A version of the essay presented in this volume was presented at the International Conference on Edith Wharton, held in Paris in 1991.

JAMES W. TUTTLETON is Professor of English at New York University. He is the author of *The Novel of Manners in America* (1972), compiler of "Edith Wharton: A Review of Research," in *Fifteen Women Writers in America* (1983), and coeditor with Kristin O. Lauer and Margaret P. Murray of *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews* (1992).

WILLIAM L. VANCE is Professor of English at Boston University. He is the author of articles and review essays on Hawthorne, Whitman, Dreiser, and Faulkner, and on American painting, and author of *America's Rome* (1989).

VERNON LEE, born Violet Paget (1856–1935), was the author of over forty volumes of poetry, fiction, plays, works of cultural and aesthetic criticism, and numerous uncollected magazine and newspaper essays. Her *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880) attracted wide attention; Browning wrote in *Asolando* (1889): "‘No, the book / Which noticed how the wall growths wave,’ said she, ‘Was not by Ruskin.’ I said, ‘Vernon Lee.’" Her personal brilliance was acknowledged by a wide circle of intellectual acquaintances, including Henry James, Maurice Baring, Bernard Shaw, Roger Fry, and Edith Wharton, who met her in Italy in 1894.

CHRONOLOGY OF WHARTON'S LIFE AND PUBLICATIONS

- 1862 Born New York City, third child of George C. Jones and Lucretia Rhinelander Jones.
- 1866-72 Fall in family income, owing to economic depression, prompts move to Europe. The Joneses spend most of 1867 in Rome, travel in Spain and settle in Paris in 1868, move to Germany in 1870 and to Florence at the end of 1870.
- 1872 Family returns to the United States, living in New York City and spending summers in Newport, Rhode Island.
- 1876-81 Juvenile writings: a manuscript novella, *Fast and Loose*; a volume of poetry, *Verses* (1878), published privately by her mother; a poem, signed "Eadgyth," printed in the *New York World* (1879); and one or more poems published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (1880) at the recommendation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
- 1880-2 With parents in southern France, where George Frederic Jones dies in 1882. She inherits \$20,000 trust fund. Engaged to Newport socialite Henry Stevens but engagement broken.
- 1883 Meets Walter Van Rensselaer Berry and Edward Robbins Wharton in Bar Harbor, Maine.
- 1885-8 Marries Wharton, and couple move into cottage on her mother's Newport estate and spend February through June in Europe each year. In 1888, they cruise the Aegean for four months. Develops friendship with cultivated member of her social circle, Egerton Winthrop. Inherits \$120,000 from a Jones cousin.
- 1889 Whartons rent house on Madison Avenue, New York City. Four poems accepted for publication by *Scribner's Magazine*, *Harper's Monthly*, *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1891-2 Buys house on Fourth Avenue (later Park Avenue) in New York City. First published short story, "Mrs. Manstey's View," in *Scribner's*.
- 1893-4 Buys Newport house, "Land's End." Visited by French novelist Paul Bourget. Publishes three more stories in *Scribner's*. Travels in Italy and meets English writer Vernon Lee.
- 1895-7 Experiences prolonged periods of depression and writes only sporadically. Begins work on *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), collaborating with architect Ogden Codman and counseled by Walter Berry, and book is published by Scribner's which will continue to publish her without interruption until 1912.
- 1898 Undergoes Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's rest cure for female neuroses as an outpatient at the Philadelphia Orthopedic Hospital.
- 1899 Whartons stay for four months in Washington, D.C., where Berry, Washington lawyer, is her supportive friend and literary adviser. *The Greater Inclination* (1899), collection of stories. Summering in Europe, the Whartons tour northern Italy with the Bourgets.
- 1900 *The Touchstone* (1900), a novella. Travels again in Europe with the Bourgets and begins work on *The Valley of Decision*.
- 1901 Buys property in Lenox, Massachusetts, and begins planning house modeled after Christopher Wren's Belton House in Lincolnshire. *Crucial Instances* (1901), second story collection. Mother dies, leaving trust fund which will bring her \$90,000.
- 1902 *The Valley of Decision* (1902). Henry James praises but urges her to "do New York." Moves into The Mount.
- 1903 *Sanctuary* (1903). Divides year between Italy (where she inspects Italian villas for a series for the *Century* and sees Vernon Lee), The Mount, and England (where she visits Henry James).
- 1904-5 Buys first motor car: tours in south of France and visits Bourgets at Hyères; in England, tours Sussex with James.
- Entertains at The Mount a succession of guests, including James. *The Descent of Man* (1904), third story collection. *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904). *Italian Backgrounds* (1905). *The House of Mirth* (1905). Literary income for 1905 over \$20,000.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1906 In Paris, makes new friends in elite social circles; in England, becomes part of circle at Queen's Acre, home of James's friend Howard Sturgis, where she meets Percy Lubbock and Gaillard Lapsley. Play version of *The House of Mirth* opens in New York. Literary income for year nearly \$32,000.
- 1907-8 Rents apartment in rue de Varenne, where her Paris social life accelerates, and, with her husband, takes James and Lapsley on motor tours through France. Meets another friend of James's, William Morton Fullerton, and in March 1908 their love affair begins while Teddy goes to Hot Springs, Arkansas, to relieve his depression and gout. Sees much of James at his own house at Rye and at Queen's Acre and tours with him in England. Makes two new younger English friends, Robert Norton and John Hugh Smith. *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907). *A Motor Flight through France* (1908). *The Hermit and the Wild Woman* (1908), fourth story collection. Earnings for 1908: \$15,000.
- 1909-10 Edward Wharton's medical and emotional problems increase; in November 1909 she discovers that he has embezzled \$50,000 of her trust funds. In January 1910 he enters Swiss sanatorium, while she remains in new Paris apartment, 53, rue de Varenne. Following September she returns with Wharton to New York, after which he leaves for world cruise. Affair with Fullerton has come to an end. *Artemis to Actaeon* (1909), a book of poems. *Tales of Men and Ghosts* (1910), fifth collection of short stories.
- 1911-12 In 1911, promotes, unsuccessfully, the nomination of Henry James for Nobel Prize, and, the following year, arranges that \$8,000 of her own royalties be transferred to his account. Separation talks with Edward begin. The Mount (where she entertained James in July) is put up for sale in September 1911 and sold the next June. Tours Italy that October, visiting Bernard Berenson, and, in the spring, returns to Tuscany with Berry. *Ethan Frome* (1911). *The Reef* (1912), published by Appleton.
- 1913 Sues Edward for divorce on grounds of adultery; divorce granted April 16. Travels with Berry in Sicily, with Berenson in Germany, and makes new friend, Geoffrey Scott. Attends premier of *Sacre de Printemps* in Paris. *The Custom of the Country* (1913).

CHRONOLOGY

- 1914-16 Tours in Algeria and Tunisia with Percy Lubbock, returning to Paris three days before outbreak of World War I. Establishes workshop for seamstresses. Directs, with Elisina Tyler, American Hostels for Refugees. Visits Argonne, Verdun, and Vosges fronts. Establishes homes and training schools for Flemish refugee children. Continues war work and is made Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. *Fighting France, from Dunkirk to Belfort* (1915), her frontline reports. *Xingu and Other Stories* (1916), sixth story collection. Death of Henry James, February 28, 1916.
- 1917-19 September 1917, tours Morocco with Walter Berry. In 1918, buys Pavillon Colombe at St. Brice-sous-Fôret. *Summer* (1917) and *The Marne* (1918) published by Appleton, henceforth publishers of all her fiction except *A Son at the Front*, published by Scribner's in 1923. *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919). *Pictorial Review* pays \$18,000 for serial rights to next novel.
- 1920-4 This turns out to be *The Age of Innocence* (1920), which wins Pulitzer Prize and yields royalties of \$70,000 by 1922. *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922) sells 100,000 copies in first six months, is made into a film, and earns \$60,000. *In Morocco* (1920). *A Son at the Front* (1923). *Old New York* (1924), four novellas. Receives National Institute of Arts and Letters Gold Medal.
- 1925-6 *The Mother's Recompense* (1925). *The Writing of Fiction* (1925). Ten-week Mediterranean cruise on chartered yacht. *Here and Beyond* (1926), seventh story collection. *Twelve Poems* (1926). Elected to National Institute of Arts and Letters.
- 1927-9 *Pictorial Review* pays \$40,000 for serial rights to *The Children* (1928). *Twilight Sleep* (1927) earns \$95,000 from book and film receipts. *The Age of Innocence* earns \$25,500 as successful play. *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929). Berry, after two strokes, dies October 2, 1927. Edward Wharton dies in New York, February 7, 1928. In 1929, she suffers severe case of pneumonia.
- 1930-4 Elected to American Academy of Arts and Letters. *Certain People* (1930), eighth story collection. *The Gods Arrive* (1932) sold to *Delineator* for \$50,000. *Human Nature* (1933), eighth story collection. In 1933 begins *The Bucca-*

CHRONOLOGY

neers (never finished). *A Backward Glance* (1934), her autobiography. Catherine Gross, companion since 1884, dies October 1933.

1935-7

Beloved sister-in-law, Mary Cadwalader Jones, dies, 1935. Play versions of *The Old Maid* and *Ethan Frome* successes in New York in 1935 and 1936 and net her \$130,000. *The World Over* (1936), ninth story collection. Sends final story, "All Souls," to her agent. Suffers stroke June 1, 1937, and dies at St. Brice August 11. Buried, by her instructions, beside Walter Berry in Versailles cemetery.

CONTENTS

<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	<i>page vii</i>
<i>A Chronology of Wharton's Life and Publications</i>	ix
Introduction: A Critical History	
MILLICENT BELL	I
1 <i>The Social Subject in <i>The Age of Innocence</i></i>	20
PAMELA KNIGHTS	
2 <i>Edith Wharton and the Science of Manners</i>	47
NANCY BENTLEY	
3 <i>Edith Wharton and Race</i>	68
ELIZABETH AMMONS	
4 <i>The Custom of the Country: Spragg and the Art of the Deal</i>	87
ELAINE SHOWALTER	
5 <i>The Female Conscience in Wharton's Shorter Fiction</i>	98
GLORIA C. ERLICH	
6 <i>Law, Language, and Ritual in <i>Summer</i></i>	117
RHONDA SKILLERN	
7 <i>The House of Mirth: The Bachelor and the Baby</i>	137
MAUREEN HOWARD	
8 <i>The Fruit of the Tree: Justine and the Perils of Abstract Idealism</i>	157
JAMES W. TUTTLETON	
9 <i>The Valley of Decision: Edith Wharton's Italian Mask</i>	169
WILLIAM L. VANCE	

CONTENTS

10	Edith Wharton's <i>Valley of Decision</i> : A Rediscovered Contemporary Critique by VERNON LEE	199
	<i>Bibliography</i>	203
	<i>Index</i>	205

MILLICENT BELL

Introduction: A Critical History

Edith Wharton, who was never obscure or forgotten, has been rediscovered a number of times. In 1938, the year after she died, Edmund Wilson published a famous essay, "Justice to Edith Wharton," because he felt that the notices at her death had underestimated her achievement. Between *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920) she had attained, he thought, an intensity – the consequence of secret personal anguish – which made her "important during a period . . . when there were few American writers worth reading."¹ He deplored the lowering of her reputation by the effect of her later, inferior works, written when some of this anguish had passed. Unquestionably, Wharton's powers had waxed and waned, as Wilson said. But the life curve of her reputation, whether measured by critical blame or esteem or by popular success or failure had not been governed by the issue of literary achievement alone; it was her subject matter and presumed personal attitudes that chiefly provoked response.²

Before the triumph on all fronts of *The Age of Innocence*, she pleased some readers, but by others she was considered too refined or too intellectual or too snobbish or not cheerful enough or too much like Henry James. At the same time, the avant-garde champions of the new naturalism found her inadequately realistic, setting her well below Dreiser or Norris. In the 1920s, the period of her greatest commercial success, her books still seemed to indicate, the serious critics thought, that she had turned her back on the truths of common life, and if she wrote about the rich it was in a way inferior to F. Scott Fitzgerald's. Writing about the rich was less appealing in the depression 1930s, when she seemed to have found, as Henry Seidel Canby said, only the "soiled egret feathers and false decorations"³ of a degenerate upper class to write about.

The House of Mirth, the first complete triumph of her art, had been met with some enthusiasm, despite its subject, and speaking against prevailing prejudice one reviewer wrote that it was "far and away the best novel of society written by an American . . . deeply moralized because it is deeply

humanized," and because it made no concession to "the optimistic mood which is supposed to dominate American readers" (111-12). But another expressed a common opinion in remarking that the magazine readers who were pleased by the serial installments of the novel had found there only the equivalent of the society gossip column (207). That the writer had chosen to show the sordid rather than the glamorous side of upper-class life did not please; another reviewer said, "If this is American society, the American House of Mirth, it is utterly unsuitable for conversion into literature" (116). And Wharton's attitude toward her characters, even toward her heroine, Lily Bart, was at the same time felt to be too frigid, too distant, showing, as the English writer Alice Meynell said, an "extremity of reserve" which hid her feelings too well (125).

Yet when *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907) came along, it was unfavorably compared with its predecessor – which had meanwhile become a popular success despite its detractors. The critical jury found the presentation of a "mercy killing" repulsive and one commentator pictured Wharton writing it in a state of mind "as detached as a scientific student viewing bacilli under a microscope" (154). Soon after, her *Ethan Frome* (1911) – which would eventually become the favorite both of critics and of the general reader – seemed even more repellently grim to many. Though the short novel's technical mastery impressed some of these first readers, they called her vision "relentless" (186), and she was reproached with an inability to see life "with the deep sympathy, smiling tenderness, and affectionate tolerance of the greatest novelists" (181). She had not succeeded in depicting "normal people and situations" (183), and the ending was "something at which we cover the eyes" (186). When she returned to the scene of upper-class life in *The Reef* (1912), the jury of journalistic censors continued the indictment of cruelty. One reviewer defined Wharton's method in this novel and its two predecessors as "taking a human being and subjecting him or her to a cumulative process of torture . . . a primitive method of entertainment" like that offered by the writhings of Christian martyrs in the Roman colosseum (193).

The Custom of the Country (1913) struck a nerve in the American consciousness. The subject of the rich American matron, with her tough tenacity in the service of absolute frivolity and selfishness, her ambition to "climb" socially, her divorces and remarriages, was too well known to newspaper readers to be denied. But reviewers still shrank from Wharton's strong portrait. Undine Spragg was a "monster" – the word was used repeatedly (202, 203, 208) – so monstrous that she seemed inhuman. Gentle Lily Bart, victim rather than victor in the savage social game, was recalled wistfully as a type one would rather read about.

Such a book as *The Custom of the Country* could not expect to please those who enjoyed contemporary best sellers like Eleanor H. Porter's *Polyanna*, Henry Sydnor Harrison's *V. V.'s Eyes*, and Gene Stratton Porter's *Laddie*, examples of a genre critics were dubbing "molasses fiction."⁴ Wharton was well aware of this and saved a clipping of an advertisement of *Laddie* which called it a "true blue story." She underlined in red the admonishing information that *Laddie* had sold 3 million copies, being a book that "goes to the heart of a vast reading public because it is true to life, a picture of genuine American people, people who love their homes, who figure neither in newspaper nor divorce court; who are the source of the vitality of the nation."⁵ Her next production was intended to deal with the "common" person, certainly, but it was hardly in the vein of *Polyanna* – a name which would become a word for foolish cheer. In *Summer* (1917), written in the midst of the war, she had chosen to write again, as in *Ethan Frome*, of obscure and straitened American lives. Though the *Boston Evening Transcript* felt that the New England scene had been maligned (252), outside of Boston others found her to have created a masterpiece. In truth, like *Ethan Frome*, it had almost no real precedent in its boldness in treating sexual passion and in its sense of regionality, except for *The Scarlet Letter*. But the writer was thought by a lingering minority to be colder than her New England snow. "It is one of those stories of the inexorable that seem perfectly to lend themselves to Mrs. Wharton's icy restraint. . . . What one dislikes in *Summer* is the undoubted purpose of the author to dish the heroine for the sake of the sensation of dishing her," one of the leading literary reporters said (249–50).

Yet subjects aside, her literary competence did not always win her plaudits. From the first, even when her themes were deemed tolerable, she was still reproached for being an accomplished writer; the very elegance of her style was somehow felt to be a limitation that expressed a temperament too inhospitable to the emotions animating great art. She was said to have "that rare thing, distinction in literary style, . . . but it is like the fine gowns of her heroines, a fashion of the times for interpreting decadent symptoms in human nature" (110). She writes "too consciously well," said a rival novelist, Robert Herrick, in 1915, setting himself deliberately against the laudatory summary of her accomplishments to that date by Wharton's friend Percy Lubbock.⁶ Her American male critics would sometimes express the ingrained native distrust of "cleverness" as somehow undemocratic and something no real man cared for, something respected chiefly by women. Surveying the work she had done by 1914, John C. Underwood acknowledged her "brilliancy" but observed that brilliancy was "a patrician quality,

of the superficial, by the superficial, for the superficial. It is intrinsically alien to the genius of the Anglo-Saxon world, in particular to that of its male half; and the great mass of the world in general has some reason for looking at it with suspicion."⁷ One can see why Wharton came to feel that America was still a culture of cave dwellers.

Her literary sophistication was often confused with a supposed resemblance of her art to that of the most sophisticated of American writers, Henry James. When her first collection of stories, *The Greater Inclination* (1899), was published, reviewers, as one of them admitted, formed "a critical chain gang"⁸ in agreeing that she was James's imitator. And the refrain that she copied his choice of motives and even his style continued in reviews of her next books, with the exception of her first long work, a chronicle novel about eighteenth-century Italy, *The Valley of Decision* (1902) – too obviously an experiment utterly unrelated to James's model. In the case of some of her stories of this period there was some superficial truth to these charges, a theme or situation paralleled in James. But her treatment was already quite different from his; she was less interested in the deeper reverberations of character than in situation, and her crisp style, already showing her bent for satire, predicted the direction, quite divergent from his, that she would soon take in *The House of Mirth*.

The assertion that she was James's literary heiress annoyed Wharton at the start of her career as well as later.⁹ James's more rarefied late writings did not appeal to Wharton at all, though, paradoxically, even while she was reading them the older novelist himself was becoming one of her most cherished friends. Returning a batch of the reviews of her third collection of stories, *The Descent of Man and Other Stories* (1904), she wailed to her Scribner's editor, W. C. Brownell, "The continued cry that I am an echo of Mr. James (whose books of the last ten years I can't read, much as I delight in the man) makes me feel rather hopeless."¹⁰ A particular embarrassment created by the charge of her dependence upon James was the fact, probably, that it did her no credit with an anti-Jamesian literary establishment – and she was used as a paddle with which to spank him. "No one except perhaps Mr. James can present a revolting scene with more delicacy,"¹¹ a reviewer of her novelette, *The Touchstone* (1900), wryly declared. Another deplored the fact that she had "enveloped all she touched in a thick Jacobean atmosphere, in which nothing human, not even an emotion, could stir."¹²

The House of Mirth may have reflected the effect upon her of James's advice that she embrace the subject she knew best and tether herself in native ground.¹³ But it had no Jamesian qualities. This was true despite a certain correspondence between Selden, its principal male character, and

some of James's heroes. It was more of a naturalist novel than any of James's, its heroine down-spiraling through the layers of a realistically observed social world, a structure remote from his tightly centralized designs, his preoccupation with mental events. For a while, in her next writings, the comparison despite differences could still be made. Unlike *The House of Mirth*, the international *Madame de Treymes* (1907) was a step backward, and the reviewer for *Putnam's Monthly* had some right to complain, "After granting the unfairness of comparisons which Lily Bart's successor would inevitably be compelled to undergo, it was positively exasperating for *Mme de Treymes* to hark back to Henry James."¹⁴ The story had analogies with the Master's *Madame de Mauves* and *The American*. But even these resemblances were less significant than the differences; her interest in Franco-American cultural comparisons was more objective than his, more a question of the precise observation of real manners.

In the case of *The Fruit of the Tree*, with its complex incorporation of social issues, one might possibly say that some elements of the plot were Jamesian, but there was now no question at all that Wharton could write without owing anything substantial to the older writer's example and was serving interests totally unlike his. James, himself, reacted to the casualness of the book's design – so different from his own – and told a friend, "It is of a strangely infirm composition and construction."¹⁵ Her masterpiece in consistent point of view and tight structure, *Ethan Frome*, he would call a "gem,"¹⁶ but, still, nothing could have been more unlike his studies of complicated human subjects. *The Reef*, on the other hand, like *Madame de Treymes*, did take up again more subtle characters and a Jamesian international theme, and James told its author that he had adored "the unspeakably *fouillée* nature of the situation between the two principals" and its "Racinian" unity.¹⁷ The terms of James's praise suggest that *The Reef* may have been Wharton's most serious effort to adapt his method to her own purposes.

But, if so, it was pretty much her last attempt in this direction. When *The Custom of the Country* appeared, it was clear that she had taken up again the line begun with *The House of Mirth*, reversing the earlier novel's spiral, episodic downward design and substituting the picaresque ascent of a heroine who would never have interested James, taking liberties of authorial intrusion into the narrative that must have gone against his grain, illuminating her scene with her own "almost scientifically satiric . . . light," as James himself saw.¹⁸ He made this book the occasion of his only published comment on Wharton, a complimentary review in the *London Times Literary Supplement*, although he told her privately that she had slighted the kind of