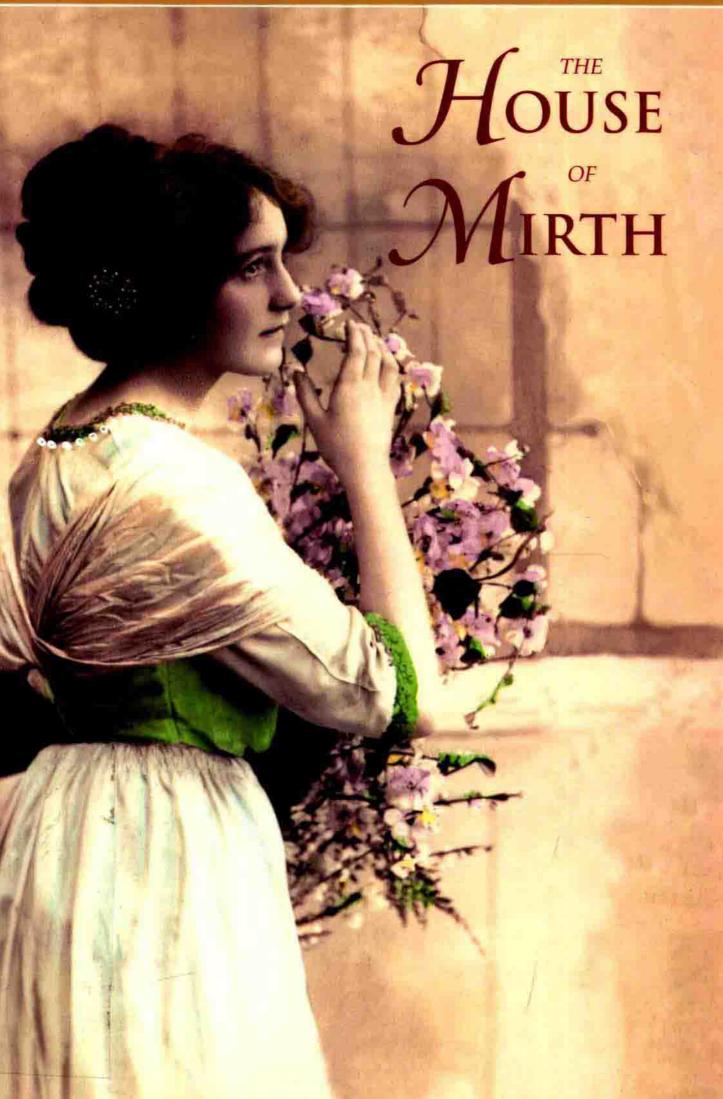
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EDITH WHARTON

With an Introduction by R.W.B. Lewis

THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

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THE HOUSE OF MIRTH A Bantam Book

PUBLISHING HISTORY

Bantam Classic edition published March 1984 Bantam reissue / January 2008

Published by
Bantam Dell
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York, New York

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ISBN 978-0-553-21320-1

Printed in the United States of America Published simultaneously in Canada

www.bantamdell.com

EDITH WHARTON was born into the upper stratum of New York society in 1862. That world would provide her with an abundance of material as a novelist, but it did not encourage her growth as an artist. Educated by tutors and governesses, she was raised for only one career: marriage. But her marriage, in 1885, to Edward Wharton was an emotional disappointment, if not a disaster. She would suffer the first of a series of nervous breakdowns in 1894. In spite of the strain of her marriage, or perhaps because of it, she began to write fiction, and published her first story in 1889.

Her first published book was a guide to interior decorating, but this was followed by several novels and story collections. They were written while the Whartons lived at Newport and New York, traveled in Europe, and built their grand home, The Mount, in Lenox, Massachusetts. In Europe she met Henry James, who became her good friend, traveling companion, and the sternest but most careful critic of her fiction. The House of Mirth (1905) was both a resounding critical success and a bestseller, as was Ethan Frome (1911). In 1913 the Whartons were divorced, and Edith took up permanent residence in France. Her subject, however, remained America, especially the moneyed New York of her youth. Her great satiric novel, The Custom of the Country, was published in 1913, and The Age of Innocence won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1921.

In her later years, she enjoyed the admiration of a new generation of writers, including Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald. In all, she wrote some thirty books, including an autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934). She died in France in 1937.

THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

INTRODUCTION

Writing from England in August 1902, he told Edith ENRY JAMES has been claimed as initiating it. Wharton that he had asked his publishers to send her "a rather long-winded (but I hope not hopelessly heavy) novel of mine ... a thing called The Wings of the Dove," and went on to voice almost extravagant praise for Mrs. Wharton's recently published novel, The Valley of Decision. James found it splendidly done and "brilliant and interesting from a literary point of view." Still, he had evident reservations about this historical chronicle and its eighteenth-century Italian setting. After circling about for a page or two, he began to stammer out his message. "Let it suffer the wrong of being crudely hinted as my desire, earnestly, tenderly, intelligently to admonish you...admonish you, I say, in favour of the American subject." After another cascade of language (introduced, as not uncommonly with James, by the phrase "in a word"), he came to the exact point: "Do New York! The 1st-hand account is precious."

James and Edith Wharton had not actually met at this date, though on two occasions, in Paris and then in Venice, they had attended the same dinner party. But they had been keeping an eye on each other—on Edith Wharton's part, an eye at once reverential and wary. After James had offered her a characteristically modulated judgment on a story she had been rash enough to send him—it had "infinite wit and point," he said, but it was "a little hard," and

ill-suited to its form—the younger writer assuaged herself by declaring to a friend that James's *The Sacred Fount* (1901) was "ignoble," and that she could *weep* over the ruins of such a talent. Edith's sister-in-law, Minnie Jones, then intervened by presenting Henry James, an old friend of hers, with Mrs. Wharton's two volumes of short stories and her first full-length work, *The Valley of Decision*. James was impressed: the writings showed a "diabolical little cleverness"; but he trusted that their author would forswear the foreign and the historical, and allow herself to "be tethered in native pastures." There followed the letter pleading with Mrs. Wharton that she do New York.

It was the wisest literary advice she ever received, and the timeliest. For some months, in fact, she had been at work on a novel set in New York society, to be called *Disintegration*, a term referring to a profound social deterioration resulting from the divorce of wealth from responsibility. The narrative was showing considerable promise, with lively characters and spirited dialogue; but James's exhortation, it appears, brought Mrs. Wharton to focus more sharply on her subject matter, and she abandoned *Disintegration* in favor of another novel she had been tinkering with in her notebook for a couple of years. At this stage, it bore the title *A Moment's Ornament*; only in revision would it be called *The House of Mirth*.*

New York was, of course, where the former Edith Newbold Jones had spent the better part of forty years—with periods out for Europe and Newport—from the time she had been born into its upper-middle-class echelons in 1862, as the daughter of George Frederic and Lucretia Rhinelander Jones. Within what has been described as a

^{*} The phrase comes from that treasury of literary titles, Ecclesiastes, 7:4: "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth."

closely knit community of cousins, the Joneses brushed shoulders with Schermerhorns, Rhinelanders, Newbolds, Astors, and other wealthy and socially distinguished relatives and in-laws. This was the society with which the adolescent and debutante Edith Jones became familiar, at the great balls held at Delmonico's during the season, at concerts and the opera, at ceremonial lunches and dinners. But it is not-the point is worth stressing-the society mirrored in The House of Mirth. Edith Wharton's own vanished New York was portrayed in The Age of Innocence, written in 1920 and looking back to the 1870s; and its disappearance is that handsome novel's central and ambiguously nostalgic motif. For The House of Mirth, Mrs. Wharton concentrated instead on a social world larger, showier, morally much looser, and even richer than the Joneses' set: "the new breed," as the longer-established folk called them; "the ultra-fashionable dancing people," in a phrase of the 1880s.

Edith Jones had come to know an early phase of this scene when she was being courted by young Harry Stevens, whose mother, Mrs. Paran Stevens, was one of the most energetic and conspicuous hostesses of the era. She sought with some success to move between the Fifth Avenue dancing people and the loftier social enclave of Schermerhorns and Rhinelanders; but Edith's kin persistently snubbed her, and it was on Mrs. Stevens's demand that the engagement between Miss Jones and Mr. Stevens was called off, a victim of New York social warfare. The novelist-to-be, meanwhile, had carefully taken the measure of that fashionable world, and by the early 1900s the writer of fiction could observe with ironic amusement that the old and the new were blurring together. In The House of Mirth, Freddy Van Osburgh, heir apparent to the oldest, Dutch-descended portion of the old guard, does not scruple to drop in of an

evening at the crudely opulent hotel apartment of the arriviste Norma Hatch.

This indistinctly outlined but primarily light-minded and aimlessly wasteful society, then, was the "New York" that Edith Wharton took it upon herself to "do." It was a bold commitment. New York had provided various scenic settings for Henry James and William Dean Howells, and (though Edith Wharton did not yet know their work) for Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser. But in no instance had New York been a novel's chief character, and in the New York of the early 1900s that Edith Wharton knew best-"a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers," as she put it in her autobiography of 1934—she had chosen a protagonist essentially incapable of serious and significant action. This problem she recognized clearly enough, and the answer she came to, as she recalled, was "that a frivolous society can acquire significance through what its frivolity destroys." The answer, in short, was Lily Bart.

She had yet to determine the defining nature of the destructive element: or rather, she had yet to see how it might be effectively rendered by the arts of narrative. What began to press on her imagination as the permeating—the doable—quality of the mirth-loving society was its theatricality.

Edith Wharton was not alone in detecting a large amount of the theatrical in the turn-of-the-century urban atmosphere. All the writers just named (and one could add others) drew upon stage performances as fact and metaphor of city life, as sources of enjoyment, and as purveyors and reflectors of illusion. The stage was thought to have a shaping influence, for the most part a bad one, on youthful character and conduct in much the way television is

thought to have in our day. But no one saw more deeply into the implications of the phenomenon than Edith Wharton. This was due in part to the fact that, as it happened, she was developing and exercising a strong histrionic awareness during the time when *The House of Mirth* was coming into being. We can shortly look at a remarkable issue of it in a long passage midway through the novel; but a word can be helpful here on Edith Wharton's personal and literal, if frustrated, relation to the New York stage.

It may be that another tryout for The House of Mirth, along with the abortive Disintegration, was a stage comedy of manners called "The Tightrope," which Mrs. Wharton wrote in 1900. It apparently contained a musicale and a ballroom scene (to judge from passing references), but the manuscript has not survived. She next toyed with the idea of a historical melodrama, a story of sexual passion and murder, and marginally involving James Boswell and Dr. Johnson, two of Edith Wharton's favorite literary figures. That work was abandoned, but a year later Edith completed two acts of a serious contemporary play, "The Man of Genius," and sketched a full outline of the remainder of the action. The play manipulated the entwining themes of adultery and the creative personality. There was talk of producing it, but it never reached the stage; not improbably because it was too intelligent and probing for its own good.

There followed two stage adaptations of foreign texts. For the English actress Marie Tempest, Edith Wharton did an excellent four-act dramatization of Abbé Prévost's eighteenth-century novel *Manon Lescaut*, only to be informed quite casually by Miss Tempest, over supper in her London home, that the actress had decided not to do any more costume plays. In May 1902 Mrs. Wharton let herself be persuaded by the gifted and volatile prima donna Mrs.

Pat Campbell to translate a tragic drama by Hermann Sudermann, Es Lebe das Leben. The political and erotic analogies in the play appealed to her, and she spent a summer on the translation. This work did make it to Broadway, but only for a short run.

While we are at it, we can glance at the later stage and film adventures that befell The House of Mirth itself. Over the summer of 1906 Edith Wharton collaborated with Clyde Fitch—at the time the country's most popular playwright, the author of Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines and the like-on a stage version of the novel, she writing the dialogue and Fitch taking care of the structure and movement. It opened in September at the Detroit Opera House to a good deal of applause, but the first night at the Savoy Theater in New York a month later was a distinct failure. The Times pronounced it "a doleful play," and Edith was inclined to doubt that any play "with a 'sad ending'...could ever get a hearing from an American audience." Howells, who accompanied her to the opening, was in agreement: "What the American public always wants," he confided to her as they left the theater, "is a tragedy with a happy ending."

However, a revised treatment of the Fitch-Wharton script produced seventy years later by the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven suggested another reason for the play's lack of success. This adaptation was well staged and competently acted; the sets were charming, the costumes vivid. But what was unmistakably revealed was a nearly total absence of dramatic tension in the show. In this, the play was oddly faithful to the original novel. For what the novel disclosed by the author's brilliant design (and the play, as it were, by the accident of imitation) was a social theater that had substituted intrigue, posturing, and betrayal for decisive action.

A more satisfactory version of *The House of Mirth* was a television film screened for public broadcasting in 1981. It had its peculiarities: the actor chosen to play Selden, whom the novel presents as a slightly worn-out gentleman in his late thirties, looked like nothing so much as a well-heeled second-year graduate student at Brown; and the story line must have been close to incomprehensible to anyone who had not recently read the novel. But Geraldine Chaplin was touchingly lovely and vulnerable as Lily Bart; and the colorful social pageantry had a finely paced ritual quality.

More than that, the film made manifest the fact that although *The House of Mirth* is not dramatic, it is exceedingly cinematic. As a single instance, one may cite the dinner scene at the Trenors' country home at Bellomont, where Lily sits at the long orchid-strewn table with Judy and Gus Trenor, Selden, the drowsy-witted millionaire Percy Gryce, Bertha Dorset and her husband George, Jack Stepney, Carry Fisher. As Lily's gaze passes slowly from one face to another, each, by a hallucinatory trick of the camera, changes into a grotesque, into a huge-snouted animal or a gargoyle: the true beings that lie behind and are masked by their social role-playing.

It is a superb visualization and if anything an improvement on the original novelistic moment, which occurs in chapter five of book one. What is being illustrated is Lawrence Selden's effect on Lily of "readjusting her vision"; it is when Lily begins to scan her dinner companions "through his [Selden's] retina" that she perceives "Gus Trenor, with his heavy carnivorous head sunk between his shoulders, as he preyed on a jellied plover" and, among others, "Jack Stepney, with his confident smile and anxious eyes, halfway between the sheriff and an heiress."

It is most often Selden who sees social conduct as theatrical and the socialites as actors and actresses, and his capacity for so envisioning them is rooted in his detachment. Even with regard to Lily Bart, his attitude-or so he tells himself on their Sunday afternoon excursion into the Bellomont woods-is one of "admiring spectatorship." The stance allows him to discern, as does no other character in the novel, the characterizing and destructive selfdeception of the social performers. It reverses the usual situation. "With most shows," he tells Lily, "the audience may be under the illusion, but the actors know that real life is on the other side of the footlights." The guests at Bellomont, on the contrary, go through their playacting convinced that they are engaged in the be-all-and-end-all reality, the only one that counts; and they will do anything to protect it.

The theatrical figure comes to its fulfillment at the start of book two, when Selden, just arrived at Monte Carlo, stands on the Casino steps and surveys "the white square set in an exotic coquetry of architecture"; and "the groups loitering in the foreground against mauve mountains which suggested a sublime stage-setting forgotten in a hurried shifting of scenes." As his zest for spectatorship renews itself, the image proliferates into a visual impression that warrants full quotation:

It was mid-April, and one felt that the revelry had reached its climax and that the desultory groups in the square and gardens would soon dissolve and reform in other scenes. Meanwhile the last moments of the performance seemed to gain an added brightness from the hovering threat of the curtain. The quality

INTRODUCTION

of the air, the exuberance of the flowers, the blue intensity of sea and sky, produced the effect of a closing tableau, when all the lights are turned on at once. This impression was presently heightened by the way in which a consciously conspicuous group of people advanced to the middle front, and stood before Selden with the air of the chief performers gathered together by the exigencies of the final effect. Their appearance confirmed the impression that the show had been staged regardless of expense, and emphasized its resemblance to one of those "costume-plays" in which the protagonists walk through the passions without displacing a drapery. The ladies stood in unrelated attitudes calculated to isolate their effects, and the men hung about them as irrelevantly as stage heroes whose tailors are named in the programme. It was Selden himself who unwittingly fused the group by arresting the attention of one of its members.

It is one of the extraordinary passages in American fiction, uncoiling, as it does, in several significant directions at once. It contributes tellingly to social history in its depiction of the expensive and insipid histrionics of the New Yorkers; and at the same time, in the same satirical phrasing, it is a devastating comment on the actual condition of the theater in America. The men and ladies (among them, it turns out, Carry Fisher, Jack Stepney and his bride—the former Gwen Van Osburgh—and the Wellington Brys) are not only taking part in a stage play, they are taking part in a very bad one. It is of a kind with that always popular Broadway show of the era, the costume play, where no authentic human emotion was allowed to disturb the decor; and where, far from working closely in an ensemble performance, the

actresses strike picturesque poses that have no relation to each other, and the actors hang about them in faultlessly dressed irrelevance. Broadway and society, within the clustering imagery, are linked, not in the classical manner for the betterment of cultural health, but in shared disjointed futility.

The passage, beyond that, has a resonance for the architecture of the novel. When the "consciously conspicuous group" advances to the "middle front," they have the air, for Selden, of featured players lining up in a closing tableau for the final curtain. And in fact, the three fast-moving chapters the scene serves to introduce provide the last occasion in the story when the conspicuous group is seen together en masse.

What Edith Wharton gives thereafter, over roughly the final third of *The House of Mirth*, is a series of displaced social settings, successively coarser parodies of the frivolous society. It is an almost unrivalled instance of social history (in its larger ranges) as narrative art and in a manner Henry James quite failed to appreciate when he told Minnie Jones that, although he admired *The House of Mirth*, he felt it to be "two books and too confused."

The good-natured Carry Fisher arranges for Lily to have a long stay with the Gormers, who have rented the Van Alstyne house on Long Island—they are the type to rent the homes of the socially superior; Lily, after a bit, identifies the place as "only a flamboyant copy of her own world, a caricature"—the twist on the recurring metaphor is startling—"approximating the real thing as the 'society play' approaches the manners of the drawing-room." Lily is prepared to think, however, that for all its noisiness the Gormers' set might have a greater talent for enjoyment than that of Bertha Dorset—until Mattie Gormer becomes

a slavish follower of Bertha Dorset herself, aping her mean and shallow snobbishness.

Lily Bart then moves into the Emporium Hotel, as social secretary to Mrs. Norma Hatch, and enters an overheated, overupholstered world, the human members of which are uncannily devoid of real existence. This is where the Freddy Van Osburghs are likely to come for a spot of social slumming, and Lily, watching them unbuttoned, so to say, has the sense "of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung." Before long Lily is ejected from the Emporium, the victim of her hostess's inept adulterous intrigue, exactly as she had been from the Dorsets' yacht at Monte Carlo—the novel's plot imitates and parodies itself even as the social centers do.

The last locale is the hat-making shop of Mme. Regina, a final gross mimicking of the higher society. The girls shape and trim hats for such as Mrs. Trenor and Mrs. Dorset, chattering briskly about their clientele; while Lily, listening and appalled, sees "the fragmentary and distorted image of the world she had lived in reflected in the mirror of the working-girls' minds."

It is Lawrence Selden, to repeat, who has the most articulate consciousness of society as theater, but he has it, one might venture, at the cost of his life. In his adopted role of spectator he is not much better than Lily's aunt, Mrs. Peniston, who "had always been a looker-on at life," and whose mind, we are told in one of the novel's choicest images, "resembled one of those little mirrors which her Dutch ancestors were accustomed to affix to their upper windows," so that, while remaining herself invisible, she could see what was going on outside in the street.

It is the fate of lookers-on that they can always be deceived by appearances and gossip; they have too little touch with human experience to discriminate wisely. Mrs. Peniston is easily gulled into believing her niece to be a promiscuous and profligate girl and cuts Lily out of her will; and Selden, spying Lily emerging from the Trenors' house late at night, assumes on the spot the sexual worst and cuts her out of his life. Selden passes through his own stages of decline. He is in certain ways amusing and sympathetic at Bellomont, though his republic of the spirit, as enunciated to Lily, sounds a rather chilly, inactive, and solitary place. He has stray moments of longing for Lily, but he grows increasingly myopic and priggish as book two goes forward and is at his worst in conversations about Lily with Gerty Farish (for example, in chapter eight). Readers' reactions will differ, but for me the last two sentences of the book-about "this moment of love" and "the word which made all things clear"-are to be received as Selden's ultimate misapprehension. I doubt if we are expected to believe a word of it.

Lily Bart is as beautifully conceived, in her way, as the society in which and against which she loses herself. Up to a point, she is perfectly equipped to play a lead part in the social gaming. No woman in her set is more adept at arranging herself in graceful and inviting postures, as she does on the train to Rhinebeck; and it is revealed during the preparations for the tableaux vivants that she possesses a fine dramatic instinct and "a vivid plastic sense," which she exercises happily in fixing the draperies and experimenting with statuelike attitudes. But in marked contrast to the other fashionable ladies (in Selden's description of them), Lily always knows the real from the histrionic, and she always hangs on to at least a portion of her real self. This is a main reason why, however exasperated one may become with