



## PROPERTY AND IDENTITY IN *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY*

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Ticien Marie Sassoubre

Critical responses to *The Custom of the Country* have been deeply influenced by events in Edith Wharton's life during the period over which the novel was written (1907–13). Connections between the novel and Wharton's financial success (resulting from her shrewdness in negotiation with publishers as well as her literary talent and productivity), her affair with Morton Fullerton, and the difficult decision to divorce her husband of nearly thirty years are readily apparent. As a result, *The Custom of the Country* is consistently read as a novel about divorce, or a critique of the patriarchal oppression of women.<sup>1</sup> In these readings, Undine Spragg, the novel's main figure, is conceived as a frustrated entrepreneur forced by her gender to pursue her business in the domestic sphere.<sup>2</sup> The critical preoccupation with the novel as a fictionalization of Wharton's personal experiences explains why those who have so frequently praised its fine prose and unflinching social observation have either exaggerated Undine's "success" or felt, with Percy Lubbock, that the novel lacks "a controlling and unifying center" (53). In this article, I argue that *The Custom of the Country* should be read as a novel about changing property relations and the ways in which those property relations are constitutive of personal identity. Reading the novel through this lens discloses its carefully constructed narrative structure and thematic coherence—a coherence distorted by readings concerned primarily with its treatment of gender inequality or divorce. *The Custom of the Country* traces the impact of the destabilization of value,

and ultimately meaning, on personal identity as volatile economic conditions erode familiar social structures. Certainly, modern marriage and divorce are satirized in the novel. But Wharton is specifically interested in the way new economic conditions are reflected in modern marriage, and divorce's rearrangement of property interests *between* persons and property interests *in* persons.

This reading is itself supported by aspects of Wharton's private life. Throughout R. W. B. Lewis's biography, Wharton's sensitivity, not only to the people around her but to her physical surroundings, documented in letters and journal entries, is apparent—as is Teddy Wharton's.<sup>3</sup> One place that mattered a great deal to them both was The Mount, their house in Lenox, Massachusetts, which Wharton describes in *A Backward Glance* as her "first real home" (125).<sup>4</sup> Lewis emphasizes the trauma that the sale of The Mount late in 1911 caused both Whartons—and the role that the sale and disagreements leading up to it played in their subsequent divorce (312–13). In fact, Lewis describes the several years before the Wharton's divorce—which involved a great number of displacements—as a struggle to maintain personal identity in the face of increasingly unstable conditions for both Teddy and Edith.<sup>5</sup> After her divorce (and World War I, which followed hard on its heels), Wharton's purchase of the two homes in France between which she would divide her years helped her recover a sense of calm and normalcy. Indeed, when she purchased her country house, Ste. Claire, in 1919, she wrote to a friend, "I feel as if I were going to get married—to the right man at last" (qtd. in Lewis 421).

Lewis writes of Wharton, "[h]er establishments, with her large staff of servants and gardeners, gave her what her bountiful nature desired: an ordered life, a carefully tended beauty of surroundings, and above all, total privacy" (449). In response to friends who considered her lifestyle extravagant, Wharton explained that she was "a rooted possessive person, and I always shall be" (qtd. in Lewis 449). Wharton's association of rootedness with possession reflects her understanding of the constitutive relationship between identity and property. It is clear in *A Backward Glance* that this understanding is inherited from the liberal republican traditions of the New York society into which she was born. Wharton remarks on her mother's astonishing memory for clothing, but Wharton's own is no less impressive, from her description of the winter bonnet she wears in the opening scenes of the autobiography (a bonnet instrumental, she tells us, in the awakening of her own particular self-consciousness) to her anecdotal story of an impromptu hat shopping expedition with Henry James (17, 2, 175). While it is tempting to reduce her attention to clothing and decoration to a kind of leisure-class, female sen-

sibility, her eye for material detail was sufficiently technical to have produced distinguished texts on interior and landscape design.<sup>6</sup> As she became a writer, Wharton's interest in things, and the way individuals are affected by those things, became increasingly professional.<sup>7</sup>

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton praises Balzac for his attention not merely to detail, but to the relationships between characters and their material surroundings: "[he] was the first not only to see his people, physically and morally, in their habit as they lived, with all their personal hobbies and infirmities, and make the reader see them, but to draw his dramatic action as much from the relation of his characters to their houses, streets, towns, professions, inherited habits and opinions, as from their fortuitous contacts with each other" (8). Wharton's insistence on "viewing each character first of all as a product of particular material and social conditions" might be attributed to the class-preoccupation of the novelist of manners (9). But she is, in fact, invoking the traditional liberal idea that the individual is constituted by her relationship to her surroundings. Wharton's observation that "the bounds of a personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line, but that each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things" reflects her sense of the interdependence of identity and the external world (10).

According to traditional liberal theory, "to achieve proper self-development—to be a person—an individual needs some control over resources in the external environment. The necessary assurances of control take the form of property rights" (Radin, *Reinterpreting* 35). Legal scholar Margaret Jane Radin has recently argued that property relations play a significant (and too often overlooked) role in personal identity, since

personal contextuality . . . relates to a certain stability of one's environment. When things are too chaotic around the person, the person cannot develop adequately; self-constitution is hindered. . . . Moreover, if things are too chaotic around a well-developed person, maintenance of her personhood will be threatened. At the extreme, if *everything* around me were in flux all the time, so that *nothing* I could think or do would have predictable results in the world, it would be hard to say that there was a "me" at all. (*Contested* 60)

In order to describe competing understandings of the relationship between personhood and property, Radin develops the terminology of "thick" and "thin" "theories of the self."<sup>8</sup> A thick theory of the self includes not only one's "endowments and attributes," but also some of one's "products and possessions" as constitutive of selfhood and

therefore a *sine qua non* of it. A thin theory of the self considers the self "readily detachable" not only from one's "products and possessions," but also from one's own "endowments and attributes" (Radin, *Reinterpreting* 26). My reading of *The Custom of the Country* takes Radin's analysis of the relationship between persons and property as its point of departure.

Radin argues that a market-driven tendency toward commodification assimilates "personal attributes, relations, and desired states of affairs to the realm of objects by assuming that all human attributes are possessions bearing a value characterizable in money terms, and by implying that all these possessions can and should be separable from persons to be exchanged through the free market," militating toward a thin conception of the self (*Contested* 6). The developing market economy also transforms the nature of ownership from possession for personal use to possession for exchange, effectively destabilizing the relationship between persons and their property, again militating toward a thin conception of the self. It is clear from the early chapters of *A Backward Glance* that Wharton grew up in a context as yet little affected by changes wrought by the new market economy in which "thick" relationships between people and their possessions were the norm. Nevertheless, Wharton's powers of observation were sufficiently larger than her own experience to recognize that the new regime of property relations necessarily signaled a corresponding transformation of personal identity—of what comprises personhood. *The Custom of the Country* tests the likely results.

Undine provides the extreme case: as a creature of new market conditions, her willingness to exchange sex for status and her child for cash reflects Wharton's concern that the collapse of stable property relations precipitates a failure of interpersonal relations. But Undine is only one case. Wharton is at least as interested in how changing property relations affect such characters with more robust senses of personhood as Ralph, Raymond, and even (I will argue) Moffatt. Each of these characters requires some form of meaningful relationship to his material surroundings in order to maintain his sense of self, a requirement that involves the protection of some property from assimilation into the market. Much of the tension in *The Custom of the Country*, therefore, is tension between competing views of what is appropriately fungible.

The first section of this article discusses the relationship between identity and property in the three distinct social worlds—which correspond to distinct property regimes—that Undine traverses. In the second section, the conflicting expectations of Undine and her husbands are explored in terms of the different conceptions of mar-

riage associated with each of those regimes. The third section discusses the effects of market-driven commodification on personal identity in the novel. Wharton's sense that the destabilization of value in both the economy and society corresponds to a destabilization and proliferation of linguistic meaning is discussed in the final section.

### Identity and Property

*The Custom of the Country* is organized less around Undine's marriages than around competing views of what is or should be fungible. Her three husbands mark points along a continuum of relationships between persons and their property and personal attributes. At the thick end of the spectrum lies the French aristocrat Raymond de Chelles and his family, whose relationship to their property is constitutive of their identity, and for whom physical property, let alone personal attributes, are nonfungible. Thick identity corresponds to a status-based conception of personhood, whereas thin identity reflects the logic of contract. The Invaders (including Undine's first and fourth husband Moffatt, her lover Van Degen, and the Spraggs themselves) populate the thin end of the spectrum.<sup>9</sup> While the constituents of this group are different in important ways, they all operate in a universe where everything is potentially for sale. Ralph Marvell and the old New York Dagonet family he represents straddle these extremes, hoping that the increasingly fragile distinction they make between their private world of inalienable value and the public world of appropriately fungible objects will survive.

Throughout the novel, characters are rendered in terms of the things they own and the places in which they live. We know nearly everything we will need to know about the Spraggs from early descriptions of the Hotel Stentorian and about the Dagonets from Ralph's meditation on the facade of their house in Washington Square. This is also true of Saint Désert, the Chelles family château, where Undine perceives "[s]ome spell she could not have named [that] seemed to emanate from the old house which had so long been the custodian of an unbroken tradition: things had happened there in the same way for so many generations that to try to alter them seemed as vain as to contend with the elements" (445). Undine's suggestion that Raymond sell Saint Désert in order to better afford her strikes him "as something monstrously, almost fiendishly significant" (453). Without Saint Désert, Raymond (as he knows himself) cannot exist, since "[t]o *faire valoir* the family acres had always . . . been Raymond's deepest-seated purpose" (427). Similarly, when Undine puts a cash value on the tapestries given to his family by Louis XIV, Raymond is incredulous: "that's all you feel when you lay hands on things that

are sacred to us!" (467). Not only is Raymond unwilling to sell—it is inconceivable to him that the familial, historic, and aesthetic value of the tapestries could be reduced to a cash equivalent.

Because Undine is so deeply uncomprehending of Raymond's relationship to property, she incorrectly believes that the rift between them is caused by her "constitutional inability to understand anything about money" (427). For Raymond, money represents not, as Undine would have it, "the means of individual gratification but the substance binding together whole groups of interests, and where the uses to which it might be put in twenty years were considered before the reasons for spending it on the spot" (427). However, this "policy," which Undine accurately perceives to be larger than Raymond himself, is not aimed at the accumulation of capital, but at the preservation of property (and not just any property—the property that is constitutive of the identity of the family). The rift between Undine and Raymond is actually the result of her constitutional inability to conceive of anything as nonfungible.

It is clear to Wharton that identity as thick as Raymond's cannot be sustained in the new market economy. Hubert's marriage to Looty Arlington (as well as Raymond's own to Undine) reflects the pressures of changing economic conditions (and their corollary social possibilities) on even the Faubourg Saint Germain. Hubert and Looty are allowed to have the *premier* in the Chelles' Paris house in exchange for its modernization, and the precious tapestries are ultimately sold when the Arlingtons' fortunes are reversed. Moffatt implies that the Chelles are not the first to succumb to these pressures: "When the swells are hard-up nowadays they generally chip off an heirloom" (460). We might expect Wharton to regret the erosion of Raymond's thick identity, but her own sensibilities are too thoroughly republican to prefer the paternalistic regime that the maintenance of such thick identity requires. Much as the shift from status to contract is associated with an increase in freedom in liberal theory, Wharton (through Bowen) associates the thickness of Raymond's identity with intellectual inflexibility:

If Raymond de Chelles had been English he would have been a mere fox-hunting animal, with appetites but without tastes; but in his lighter Gallic clay, the wholesome territorial savour, the inherited passion for sport and agriculture, were blent with an openness to finer sensations, a sense of the come-and-go of ideas, under which one felt the tight hold of two or three inherited notions, religious political and domestic, in total contradiction to his surface attitude. . . . [H]e was the kind of man who would inevitably "revert." (245)

There is a superficial resemblance between the dependence of the Chelles' family identity on its property and the relationship of the Dagonets to their more modest holdings and possessions. We are told, for example, that "the Dagonet attitude, the Dagonet view of life," is expressed in "the very lines of the furniture in the old Dagonet house" and that "mounting his grandfather's doorstep," Ralph "looked up at the symmetrical old red house-front, with its frugal marble ornament, as he might have looked into a familiar human face" (76, 77). But Ralph's sense of self does not depend on the house in Washington Square itself so much as on the ideas that it stands for. His relationship to constitutive objects involves the worldview those objects represent, like the books and sketches in his room, which both inform and reflect the aesthetic and intellectual groundwork of his identity. Ralph's inherited expectations require that "he should live 'like a gentleman'—that is, with a tranquil disdain for mere money-getting, a passive openness to the finer sensations, one or two fixed principles as to the quality of wine, and an archaic probity that had not yet learned to distinguish between private and 'business' honour" (78). The conflation of "finer sensations" with the objects that elicit them (for example, wine) reflects the Dagonets' understanding of the difference between fungible objects and objects whose aesthetic or intellectual associations preclude translation into market terms. After teasing that she has brought Paul "a vulgar expensive Van Degen offering," Clare's gift of "a battered old Dagonet bowl" is more a gift of a shared sensibility than of an "heirloom" (192, 193).

The Dagonets observe a strict separation between business and private life, believing that the stability of the (still status-regulated) domestic sphere can insulate society from the instability of the market. According to the Dagonets' thick theory of the self, a person is more than the sum of his properties, and his life is therefore more than the sum of his market relations. The problem, as Ralph Marvell quickly learns, is that the boundary between market and nonmarket spheres breaks down when money acquired in business can be deployed to obtain social standing and power. Instead of acknowledging this reality, however, the Dagonets show what Jackson Lears has since described as a pattern of "evasive banality"—a "denial of the conflicts in modern capitalist society" and self-deceiving insistence on "continuing harmony and progress"—on the part of late Victorians (17). Although Wharton shares their liberal conception of personhood, she is critical of the Dagonets' failure to adapt their principles to new social conditions. Far from displaying the apologist nostalgia for the world of the Dagonets, of which she is often accused, Wharton highlights its tendency to denial and self-deception in *The Custom of the Country*, and explores the consequences through

both Ralph's response to the narrowness of the Dagonets' horizons and the gradual broadening of his own.

The values of the Dagonets are "small, cautious, middle class" (78). Their expectations fall far short of the "mysterious web of traditions, conventions, prohibitions that enclosed [Undine] in their impenetrable net-work" at Saint Désert, but they are no less rigidly held (444). Indeed, the Dagonets are so unwilling to change in the face of the "social disintegration" they have observed taking over Fifth Avenue that Ralph thinks of them as "Aborigines," and he likens them to "those vanishing denizens of the American continent doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race" (77). This glib comparison proves terribly accurate. Under the pressure of the Dagonets' horror at his divorce, Ralph decides to "turn his back on the whole business"—a choice that ultimately contributes to his suicide (379). When Undine asserts her custody of their son Paul (which Ralph has forfeited to her through his inaction), Ralph discovers that

[h]e had been eloquent enough, in his free youth, against the conventions of his class; yet when the moment came to show his contempt for them they had mysteriously mastered him, deflecting his course like some hidden hereditary failing. As he looked back it seemed as though even his great disaster had been conventionalized and sentimentalized by his inherited attitude: that the thoughts he had thought about it were only those of generations of Dagonets, and that there had been nothing real and his own in his life but the foolish passion he had been trying so hard to think out of existence. (378–79)

The fact that Ralph's culturally conditioned responses to both people and objects have actually deprived him of anything "real and his own in his life" is the consequence of a reified liberal idea of the self as prior to and privileged above the outside world. Before his breakdown, Ralph translates everything into its emotional, aesthetic, or intellectual value for him—a habit that is never more apparent than on his wedding tour with Undine. Ralph misses the many warning signs of Undine's limitations because his perception of the world around him is filtered through the "finer sensations" he has been taught to cultivate. Under the spell of a Siennese ilex grove, for example, Undine's hand strikes Ralph as "small and soft, a mere feather-weight, a puff-ball of a hand—not quick and thrilling, not a speaking hand, but one to be fondled and dressed in rings, and to leave a rosy blur in the brain" (135). It is not until much later, when working has blunted Ralph's impractical Dagonet sensibilities that he recognizes the inelasticity of that "miserly hand"—"for all their softness, the



fingers would not bend back, or the pink palm open" (167). Nevertheless, despite their aesthetic or intellectual abstraction, Ralph's values are always grounded in the external world. Before his marriage, his reality is constituted by his books and sketches; after his divorce, his "two objects in life were his boy and his book" (367). In the Dagonet worldview, value is fixed by a stable relationship between the self and specific people and things that are constitutive of identity.

In contrast, Ralph muses that the Invaders are really "just like the houses [they] lived in: a muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin steel shell of utility" (77). The Spraggs appear to have no constitutive relationships to the material world—no sense of home: "Ralph suspected that [Mrs. Spragg] depended on the transit from hotel to hotel as the one element of variety in her life. As for Mr. Spragg, it was impossible to imagine any one in whom the domestic sentiments were more completely unlocalized and disconnected from any fixed habits" (275). Undine's interest in the decoration of the West End house she shares with Ralph is perfunctory: in the drawing room she "adapted her usual background of cushions, bric-a-brac and flowers—since one must make one's setting 'home-like,' however little one's habits happened to correspond with that particular effect" (207). Undine buys a great many things (particularly dresses, which become almost immediately obsolete), but the only possessions of hers that are distinguished from this mass of undifferentiated purchases are the Dagonet family jewelry (which she has reset) and the pearls she is given by Van Degen (which she sells). The Dagonet jewelry is not, as the tapestries are for Raymond, directly constitutive of Ralph's identity. Instead, the pang he feels upon discovering they have been reset involves the realization that they have no emotional or aesthetic value for Undine: "[T]he discovery that she was completely unconscious of states of feeling on which so much of his inner life depended marked a new stage in their relation" (194). Despite his early, Pygmalion ambitions, Ralph is unable to remedy Undine's "obvious lack of any sense of relative values" (86). Instead, Undine's sense of value is determined by the extent to which "what belonged to her was coveted by others" (204).

Unlike Ralph, Undine desires two objects in life are intangible: "amusement and respectability" (308). For Undine, both physical objects and interpersonal relationships are merely the instruments of those goals. As in the free market, goods and people have value for her only insofar as they are either scarce or necessary to the attainment of her goals—she has no sense of intrinsic value. This is characteristic of the thin, commodified property relations of the Invaders. For Wharton, commodification means the destruction of the

specific identity of an object. For example, when Undine has the Dagonet family jewelry reset, she transforms the heirlooms into objects one might buy in any high-end jewelry store.

What turn out to be Undine's significant possessions—her beauty, her husbands, and Paul—are all "things" that the Chelles and the Dagonets consider nonfungible. But Undine treats them like commodities. In fact, Undine collects and exchanges people instead of objects: at the vacation resorts she drags her parents to, in her early days in New York ("she was going to know the right people at last—she was going to get what she wanted" [42]), on her honeymoon with Ralph in Europe, and later in Paris. When she can, she trades on her relationships—offering her Paris friends to Indiana Frusk in return for a meeting with Van Degen, and providing Moffatt access to the private collections of French society in return, essentially, for his renewed interest in her. Undine's extremely thin identity—her lack of constitutive relationships to anything fixed—represents the furthest reach of market logic into personal identity and interpersonal relations. Not only does she conceive of every interaction as a contractual exchange, she feels no obligation to fulfill a contracted promise unless the consideration she receives in return meets with her expectations (in other words, unless she gets what she thinks she wants). She feels no obligation to anyone or anything.

Unlike Undine, Van Degen's and Moffatt's thin identities are complicated by their awareness of a nonmarket realm of thicker identity. Moffatt, who will receive further attention below, collects "things that are not for sale"—objects that have value because of their thick aesthetic or historical identities (456). But by removing them from their appropriate contexts (the relationships that confer their value), he translates their value into market terms. In other words, by collecting rare items, Moffatt commodifies them—treating them as fungible and reducing their value to its cash equivalent. His ability to acquire objects associated with thick identity therefore expresses his power in the marketplace, but it does not thicken his own identity.

Van Degen, on the other hand, has adopted the social trappings of old New York society (he goes to the opera and galleries with his mother and he marries Clare) as a way of insuring his status, but doing so also fails to mitigate his thin identity. Van Degen's only constitutive possession is intangible: it is money. The market logic of cash equivalence mediates his every interaction with the external world. Wharton describes Van Degen in Paris as "lounging and luxuriating among the seductions of the Boulevard with the disgusting ease of a man whose wants are all measured by money, and who always has enough to gratify them" (157). When Undine sug-

gests that she must live with her mistakes (which means, at this point, her son and her husband), Peter replies, "Oh nonsense! There's nothing cash won't do" (210). Despite the "similarity of tastes" between Undine and Van Degen, and despite the fact that Undine admires his "contempt for everything he did not understand or could not buy" (176), Undine quickly discovers that Van Degen's money can provide her amusement, but not the respectability she also craves. The respectability Undine wants, however, is not the respectability of the Dagonets. Thin identity values respectability as a commodity like any other.

### **Marriage as a Test Case**

Before Undine's marriage to Raymond, Madame de Trézac explains to her that "when a Frenchman marries he wants to marry as his people always have. He knows there are traditions he can't fight against—and in his heart he's glad there are" (350). The French aristocrat's status-based conception of marriage corresponds to his thick relationship to property. Despite Undine's assertions to the contrary, this conception is fundamentally different from a business contract. Traditional marriage certainly has an economic aspect—a good wife, like Raymond's mother "whose head is as good as a man's," is able to recognize a sound investment in the family's future as readily as her son (433). But ultimately, this kind of marriage maintains the status quo by ensuring continuity of value and of ownership. Hence Raymond's expectation that Undine bear a son (to preserve both the name and the holdings of the family) and make sacrifices for the long-term survival of the family (and those holdings). The Church's opposition to divorce is less significant to the Faubourg Saint Germain in the novel than the way in which divorce disrupts long-established social norms designed to protect property interests.

The Dagonet view of marriage also preserves the status quo, but by emphasizing a sentimental ideal of communion, of shared sensibilities. As is the case with their more general view of property relations, the Dagonets believe in the preservation of private, domestic life against more worldly concerns. Undine quickly perceives that the way to reassure her skeptical future in-laws about her motives is to appear "very much in love" (93). And Ralph is thrilled to perceive (mistakenly) that Undine shares his disdain for the material preparations for their marriage (114). Bowen's assertion that Undine and Ralph's marriage is "a love-match of the good old kind" when he and Raymond see her alone in Paris with Van Degen reflects the power of this ideal to mask new social realities (246). In fact, Ralph's

marriage to (and divorce from) Undine enacts the collision of a sentimental, status-based conception of marriage with a modern, contractual one.

In New York, divorce had always involved a scandal because adultery was the only permissible grounds.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, nineteenth-century debates over divorce reform in New York frequently associated divorce with the free love movement, or conflated easy divorce with institutionalized prostitution (Blake 97, 59). According to Victorian rhetoric, indissoluble marriage was supposed to protect women from commodification (by protecting them from men who might use and then discard them). Hence the Dagonets' sense that divorce is always a "catastrophe" (273). In contrast, Undine's ability to conceive of divorce as, in Indiana Frusk's words, "a good *thing* to have" (302; emphasis added), her comfort assessing her marriage to Ralph as a "mistake" (291), and her expectation that he acquiesce to her plea of desertion and her Dakota divorce all reflect an understanding of marriage as merely contractual. As far as Undine is concerned, Ralph has failed to live up to his end of the bargain, so she has no obligation to remain married to him: "Ralph had gone into business to make more money for her, but it was plain that the 'more' would never be much, and that he would not achieve the quick rise to affluence which was a man's natural tribute to woman's merits. Undine felt herself trapped, deceived" (205). Undine's solution is something like modern "no-fault" divorce.<sup>11</sup> In other words, her understanding of marriage corresponds to her thin identity with regard to her property and personal attributes. The possibility of divorce simply reinforces her belief in the fungibility of interpersonal relationships.

In *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America*, Elaine Tyler May argues that the increasing demand for amusement and pleasure (generated by the new abundance of consumable items), and the "decline of personal satisfaction" in the workplace (caused by corporatism) combined with pressures exerted by the marketing interests of business and advocates of cultural reform to redefine the home as an "institution for satisfying personal desires" (50, 58). A successful marriage needed to "maintain a delicate balance between old-fashioned duties and modern excitement" (61). The key to achieving this balance was articulated in terms of "romantic courtship," the merging of Victorian concerns about morality with corporate marketing practices (72). This cult of romance can be understood as an intermediary step between traditional marriage (a thick conception of marital obligations) and marriage as a commercial contract (the thinnest version). In practice, the cultivation of youthfulness and beauty came to represent the romantic ideal—

"romance was an intangible quality, [but] appearance was real enough" (63).

Undine's expectations of marriage throughout the novel are clearly informed by what May identifies as the cult of romance, but Ralph's decision to marry her can also be understood as an expression of the same ideal. Ralph rationalizes his desire for Undine by pretending that the values of the Spraggs are not really so different from those of the Dagonets, but he is, in fact, infatuated with her physical beauty. Wharton provides enough of their courtship conversation for the reader to understand that aside from a "frankness" about her life that Undine affects because she perceives it is the right way to respond to him (74), Ralph and Undine share neither sensibilities nor interests. Instead, Ralph's decision to pursue her is described in terms of his physical attraction to her and his desire to complete her spiritually.

In the cult of romance, the perfect man is not only a good spender and personally attractive, he is a kind of "hero" (May 68)—and his heroism is accomplished through the Pygmalian transformation of the impressionable girl into a "true woman," as described in a 1903 *Cosmopolitan* article:

The true woman is not won by ordinary means. . . . It is not enough that he satisfy the physical and mental . . . but he must reach and awake and satisfy the ethical, spiritual part of her nature—else there must be something lacking, something unfed, some little empty void between them which constitutes a gap in the otherwise perfect understanding. (qtd. in May 67)

Ralph's literary ambitions fuel his enthusiasm to rescue and transform Undine: "He seemed to see her—as he sat there pressing his fists to his temples—he seemed to see her like a lovely rock-bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster of Society careering up to make a mouthful of her; and himself whirling down on his winged horse—just Pegasus turned Rosinante for the nonce—to cut her bonds, snatch her up, and whirl her back into the blue" (86). Wharton's interruptions of this flight of fancy highlight its artificiality. But Ralph has bought into the romantic ideal sufficiently that its artificiality seems to be part of its truth. Wharton warns that "his faith in the great adventure to come" is what makes him "so easy a victim when love had at last appeared clad in the attributes of romance: the imaginative man's indestructible dream of a rounded passion" (85).

But Ralph quickly learns that Undine is not, in fact, as mutable as he had imagined. Undine shows no interest in escaping from "the bareness of the small half-lit place in which [her] spirit fluttered"

(140). Here Wharton exposes the internal contradiction of a sentimental vocabulary serving commercial and normative interests. Undine likes it when Popple, who "'spoke beautifully,' like the hero of a romance novel," talks to her like a "true woman" (174). But her idea of marriage is of perpetual courtship (and perpetual spending), not perfect understanding. The "formula" Undine has learned from magazines and novels is "to hide one's true nature, and keep each other busy having fun. It was a matter of perfecting a technique rather than deepening an intimate relationship"—the trick was to "preserve the illusions" (May 70).<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Ralph's actual expectations of marriage conform to the Victorian values with which he was raised and against which his courtship of Undine is a kind of final, ineffectual resistance. Mrs. Marvell and Laura may be right that Ralph "was 'made' for conjugal bliss," but he has married the wrong girl (81).<sup>13</sup>

The rationale for marriage marketed in early-twentieth-century popular culture was not love or stability or even financial support, but the achievement of personal satisfaction through a very specific lifestyle. In response, reformers who had long argued that divorce was necessary for "women to gain independence from oppressive marriages" began to talk about divorce in terms of a "concern for marital happiness and the right of either partner—but especially the woman—to free herself from an unsatisfying union" (May 103). This attitude was especially apparent in Western states where "divorce colonies" acknowledged a variety of legitimate grounds for divorce.<sup>14</sup> Conjoined with the cult of romance, the liberalization of divorce laws ultimately failed to promote women's rights (which divorce reformers had originally set out to secure), but effectively reinscribed female dependence on men.<sup>15</sup> None of the women who divorce in *The Custom of the Country* do so to gain their independence—they all divorce in order to remarry in pursuit of a more satisfying lifestyle.<sup>16</sup> The divorce colonies Undine eventually visits (Sioux City and Reno) are remarkable for the alacrity with which such remarriages occur. In this way, the cult of romance rationalizes and may even encourage opportunistic divorce, but it does not begin with that goal. Rather, its commercialization of marriage promotes thin marital identity—a self-interested and contractual conception of marriage—while its sentimental vocabulary simultaneously masks this effect.

Both Wharton and her characters frequently borrow from the vocabulary of business in settings other than traditional market transactions. And throughout the novel, market rhetoric is contrasted with the vocabulary of the cult of romance—what Elmer Moffatt calls "magazine" talk (492). This vocabulary is moralistic and sentimental—as May argues, it is drawn from the vocabulary of Victorianism, but it has been coopted in the service of market forces. Undine doesn't

have a sentimental bone in her body, but she is convinced that "finding and catching the right man [is] the key to personal fulfillment—the very essence of life" (May 71). Her adherence to the prescribed behaviors of the cult of romance effectively precludes her from being cold and calculating as Elmer Moffatt and Indiana Frusk are. Instead, Undine confuses the commercial reality of the "modern marriage" May describes for the romantic fantasy of finding "the right man" (May 218). Wharton reveals the way in which this sleight of hand of market forces leads Undine to effectively commodify herself, her husbands, and her son while simultaneously insisting that marriage should be more than "just a business contract" (489). Both Moffatt and Indiana appeal to Undine's sense of reality to no avail: Moffatt tells her that "it ain't that kind of a story" when she starts to cry after he has successfully negotiated her promise to marry him (494); when Undine protests that Van Degen is under a moral obligation to her, Indiana rebukes her: "But that's just talk" (305). Undine's blind (and self-serving) devotion to the idea of landing "the right man" provides her with a necessary excuse for her constant dissatisfaction—her inability to get what she wants.

Wharton articulates Undine's own assessment of her marital career in terms of "mistakes" and "failures." Nevertheless, literary critics have consistently described the trajectory of Undine's marriages as a "meteoric rise from Apex City through the New York 400 and the French Faubourg Saint Germain to a commanding position in modern New York society" (Papke 138). Even those who are more circumspect about Undine's triumph conceive of her as a methodical social climber, viewing each marriage and divorce as a business transaction.<sup>17</sup> But these readings miss the fact that despite Undine's self-dramatization as a businessperson, she is usually the one being manipulated.

Not only is Undine's understanding of her marriages muddled by the ideology of the cult of romance, but Wharton repeatedly suggests that Undine does not understand the principles that underlie the market vocabulary she uses. She does not conceive of divorce as a commodity until Indiana educates her—it is Indiana who epitomizes the opportunistic use of divorce, not Undine—and it is Moffatt who conceives of marriage as a bargain, while Undine recasts her decision to (re)marry him in a romantic light. When Wharton writes that Undine is "too sternly animated by her father's business instinct, to turn aside in quest of casual distractions" (212), the "business" at hand is her running away to Europe to be with Van Degen (an affair based on the pursuit of casual distraction). Undine tells herself she has successfully curbed "her impatience to enjoy" Van Degen's money through an "instinct for holding off and biding her

time that resembled the patience and skill with which her father had conducted the sale of his 'bad' real estate in the Pure Water Move days" (183), but she loses Van Degen in part because she grows impatient. She tells herself that her decision to sleep with Van Degen is "a bold move, [that] it had been as carefully calculated as the happiest Wall Street 'stroke'" (317), but it really precipitates their retreat from the Paris society she is with him to enjoy and all but ruins her reputation. What's true is that "business" is a "mystery" to Undine—she merely employs market rhetoric when it strikes her as convenient or convincing (213). Thus, although Undine imagines herself as a businessperson (knowing as she does that business is where money and power come from), she does not make successful, or even particularly rational, business decisions. This is certainly the case in her relationship with Van Degen, but she also miscalculates with regard to Ralph and again with regard to Raymond—both relationships increase her social *currency*, but neither provides the *lifestyle* she expects. And at the end of the novel, we understand that she is not far from determining that her (second) marriage to Moffatt is a failure as well. The mistake, however, is not simply that Ralph and Raymond do not have enough money or that Moffatt, for all his millions, does not have enough class. The mistake is that she is looking for fulfillment in marriage, but she is incapable of feeling fulfilled.

Perhaps the clearest evidence against the notion that Undine is an entrepreneur is the fact that she doesn't comprehend the potential of self-conscious self-commodification until her conversation with Mrs. Heeny about Van Degen's pearls. In much the same way Clare will have to interpret Undine's motives for a sentimentally blinded Ralph when Undine offers (later) to sell Paul (385), Mrs. Heeny has to explain to Undine that she need not think of the pearls sentimentally as Van Degen's, that they are perfectly fungible. In a matter of days, Undine goes from thinking of the pearls as a tangible reminder of "the price of her shame" to believing that Van Degen's "obligation to her represented far more than the relatively small sum she had been able to realize on the necklace" (327, 329). This shift in Undine's thinking is less significant with regard to the pearls themselves (we suspect the real reason she has continued to wear them is that she likes how they make her look) than it is with regard to her understanding of both sex and herself as commodities. "The pearls are hers, after all" because she has paid Van Degen for them (with sex and with the enjoyment of being seen with her) (328). Selling the pearls symbolically confirms that she has sold herself (a reality that has been veiled by the romantic rhetoric with which she has, and still will, justify the act to herself) and, more importantly, that she can continue to sell herself to get what she wants. Mrs. Heeny's predic-



tion that Undine will "get others" proves correct (329). Undine owns three different sets of pearls over the course of the novel: the pearls Ralph gives her (which Van Degen insists "ain't big enough" when he sees them in Popple's portrait [173]), Van Degen's, and the pearls Moffatt gives her (which the papers identify as having belonged to "an Austrian Archduchess" [501]). By selling Van Degen's pearls, Undine acknowledges the market she has been on since arriving in New York, but she is never an agent *in* the market (the way Indiana Frusk is), she is only ever *on* the market—as a commodity.

While much has been made of Wharton's decision to associate her protagonist with the mythological figure by the same name,<sup>18</sup> it seems that Undine's name is merely part of the romantic trap that Ralph falls into. The Spraggs name Undine after "a hair-weaver father put on the market the week she was born" (83). The only resemblance between Undine and the mythological Nereid by the same name is in Ralph's imagination. Undine is, in fact, an entirely modern creature. Undine may be "only a spoilt girl, used to having everything [she] wanted," but she is spoiled in a particular way (490). From Mrs. Heeny's initial observation that she has "never met a lovelier form," Undine is presented not as a person but as an object (21). And the Spraggs' decision to name her after a commercial product indicates that she has been, all her life, a kind of object in their eyes. There is no question that Undine has embraced this objectification—"Why does *she* want me?" she wonders when Ralph's sister asks her to dinner, "She's never even seen me!" (24). In Freud's terms, the primary experience of satisfaction to which all her future behavior endeavors to return her is not merely having her way, but also objectification—a kind of static and impersonal adoration of herself as a possession (Freud 51). Undine fondly remembers the way Moffatt "had taken instant possession of [her]" in Apex City and delights in Raymond's possessiveness (at least until it infringes on her own freedom) (471, 416).

Undine may be used to getting what she wants, but Wharton makes it clear that what she wants is nonspecific—her desire is without an identifiable object. "I want the best," she tells Mrs. Heeny, but must then rely on Mrs. Heeny to tell her what the best might be (38). Mr. Spragg observes that Undine "only want[s] most things once" (53). Later, she tells Mr. Dagonet that she expects "everything" from Ralph and tells Ralph that she wants "what the others want" (96, 100). The one thing to which she seems to consistently aspire is the "public triumph which was necessary to her personal enjoyment" (472). In other words, the closest thing to the satisfaction of her desires is to be desired by others. Indeed, the whole of her career—her initial idealization of the Fifth Avenue set she reads about in the

papers; her marriages to Ralph and Raymond (for status); her affair with Van Degen (for money); and her experiment in "belonging" to Moffatt (489)—can be understood as an attempt to recover the missing object of her desire by becoming an object of desire.

Undine is baffled by Moffatt's collecting because "the things he looked at moved him in a way she could not understand" (483). Undine appreciates objects only insofar as they enhance her desirability. She likes to have the "treasures" of Saint Désert "about her," for example, because "without any real sense of their meaning she felt them to be the appropriate setting of a pretty woman, to embody something of the rareness and distinction she had always considered she possessed" (471). In fact, despite her thin identity with regard to specific objects and persons, without a complementary setting and a desiring public, Undine as she knows herself ceases to exist. The relationship between Undine and the objects required to reflect her beauty in her surroundings makes her an indefatigable consumer, but consuming cannot satisfy her: everything she buys she buys in the service of marketing herself to a desiring public. Undine's self-marketing is more accurately understood, then, as the manifestation of her struggle for identity than as entrepreneurial ambition.

### **Self-Constitution under Market Conditions**

It is difficult to sympathize with Undine's inability to get what she wants, however, because she has no stable personality—she is all surface, all reaction.<sup>19</sup> But the novel is populated with characters who fall short of Undine's extremity, characters like Ralph (and to some extent, Clare) who attempt to preserve their identities against their increasingly unstable personal contexts, and characters such as Mr. Spragg and Moffatt, who attempt to constitute their personhood through the market. Lukács argues that in a full-blown market economy, "the individual object which man confronts directly . . . is distorted in its objectivity by its commodity character" (93). This distortion creates a crisis of authenticity because as everything becomes commodified, intrinsic value is lost. In Wharton's perception, this destabilization of value has at least two important side effects: a longing for (lost) authenticity, and the negation (or at least suppression) of difference.

Wharton depicts Moffatt's extraordinary collecting in terms of his desire for access to authenticity. Moffatt has a thin relationship to objects—his "great representative assemblage of unmatched specimens" is not constitutive of his identity (462). Rather, it manifests Raymond's description of the Invaders "wanting the things we want

but not knowing why we want them" (468). But Moffatt's collecting is not merely what Veblen would call "emulation" (84)—he thinks of it as more than an expression of his market power. "I mean to have the best," Moffatt tells Undine, "not just to get ahead of the other fellows, but because I know it when I see it. I guess that's the only good reason" (462). Moffatt collects the things he collects in order to reassure himself that originality and authenticity (intrinsic value) exist in the world, and that he can know them when he sees them. This is important to Moffatt, who has invented himself through imitation of the success to which he aspires because he wants there to be something that is uniquely him underneath the carefully manufactured facade. Undine tells herself that

[u]nder all [Moffatt's] incalculableness there had always been a hard foundation of reliability: it seemed to be a matter of choice with him whether he let someone feel that solid bottom or not. And in specific matters the same quality showed itself in an accuracy of statement, a precision of conduct, that contrasted curiously with his usual hyperbolic banter and his loose lounging manner. No one could be more elusive yet no one could be firmer to the touch. (224)

But Wharton reveals that Moffatt's hard foundation of reliability is merely his self-identification with the market. When Undine suggests that there might be more to life than business, Moffatt insists "business is tied to *me*. . . . I've about as much idea of dropping business as you have of taking to district nursing. There are things a man doesn't do. I understand why [Raymond] won't sell those tapestries—till he's got to. His ancestors are *his* business: Wall Street's mine" (492). "Business" here is code for identity: Raymond's identity is constituted by his relationship to his family and his family's property, Moffatt's identity is dependent on his position in the market. In other words, the core of his identity is speculative—determined by constantly changing market conditions. His extraordinary collection confirms his instinctive ability to recognize value, but it is the instinct of a stock picker, not a connoisseur. Moreover, by removing the objects he collects from their contexts, Moffatt commodifies them—effectively destroying the intrinsic value he has recognized. Moffatt's very desire for authenticity destroys authenticity by consuming it.

Moffatt is comfortable contrasting himself to Raymond in the quotation above because he can obtain all the things that Raymond's thick identity is invested in. But Moffatt wants very much for there to be no difference between Ralph and himself. Ralph's "refinement"

makes him vulnerable, unable to adapt to a new cultural landscape—but Moffatt recognizes that its relative scarcity makes it valuable.<sup>20</sup> Ralph's intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities don't threaten Moffatt's power in the market, but they do represent a kind of vestigial authority (or authenticity) that can be neither purchased nor imitated. Moffatt ultimately destroys Ralph by translating those sensibilities into equivalence with his own desire, but that is not Moffatt's intention. Rather, the only way Moffatt can prove that he, too, not only recognizes, but also possesses Ralph's inherited discrimination and taste is to reveal that he and Ralph have both chosen Undine.

When Ralph first comes to Moffatt for help raising the funds to "buy" Paul back from Undine, Moffatt shows Ralph one of the pink crystal vases he collects and tells him, "now and then I like to pick up a pretty thing" (390). Later, during the conversation that precipitates Ralph's suicide, Moffatt shows Ralph "another little crystal vase" and asks him, "[a]in't she a peach?" (398). As David Holbrook has observed, Undine is equated with the vases in these exchanges, though Ralph doesn't yet understand that Undine is only a pretty thing (79). It is not until Ralph takes what Moffatt feels is "rather a high tone" with him about Undine's scruples that Moffatt finally announces, "I've been divorced from her myself" (402). Moffatt's insistence that Ralph "can't feel any meaner" about having lost Undine than Moffatt does makes all of Ralph's beliefs and impressions about his relationship with her suddenly seem indistinguishable from Moffatt's physical attraction to and sexual possession of her (405). Moffatt's insistence on the equivalence of his experience with Ralph's reflects the market logic of commensurability. Whereas Undine's self-objectification turns all her relationships into acts of possession, Moffatt's business instincts turn all his interpersonal relationships into conquests.

Moffatt may deliver the final blow, but the stability of Ralph's sense of self has already been seriously undermined by his agreement to enter business—despite his literary aspirations—in order to support Undine. Ralph quickly discovers "how killing uncongenial work is, and how it destroys the power of doing what one's fit for, even if there's time for both" (282). The combination of his working life and Undine's emotional inaccessibility systematically erodes the values that were once constitutive of Ralph's self-perception. He is profoundly alienated from himself by his work—so much so that he thinks of his pre- and post-Undine identities as different selves (269). After Undine leaves him, Ralph's "first effort had been to readjust his values—to take an inventory of them, and reclassify them, so that one at least might be made to appear as important as those he had lost; otherwise there could be no reason why he should go on living" (367).

He turns to writing, but his literary ambitions are no longer epic: "he wanted to do something in which men should look no bigger than the insects they were" (370). In other words, he tries to do what the Dagonets have failed to do: he tries to adapt his intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities to the conditions of the new market economy.

Ralph's own assessment of the difference between the "plodding citizen" he has become and the "lyric idiot" who fell in love with Undine is a critique of both the cult of romance and the rigidity of the Dagonet code that made him such an easy victim (394). But when Ralph realizes not only that Moffatt "doesn't even know what [Ralph is] feeling" about having unwittingly shared his wife with Moffatt, but that in a commodified world there is no longer any materially grounded difference between himself and someone he considered as unlike himself as he considers Moffatt to be, "the whole archaic structure of his rites and sanctions tumbled down about him" (404–05). Outside Moffatt's Wall Street office, Ralph suddenly notices the tyranny of sameness that defines what remains:

the swirls of dust in the cracks in the pavement, the rubbish in the gutters, the ceaseless stream of perspiring faces that poured by under tilted hats. . . . The blindness within him seemed to have intensified his physical perceptions, his sensitiveness to the heat, the noise, the smells of the disheveled midsummer city; but combined with the acuter perception of these offenses was a complete indifference to them, as though he were some vivisectioned animal deprived of the power to discriminate. (406)

Ralph's suicide is precipitated by the realization that he cannot adapt his expectations and values to those of the new market economy without becoming unrecognizable to himself.

Had Wharton ended the novel with Ralph's suicide, we might have to conclude that Wharton believes the new market economy precludes stable personal identity and the formation of lasting interpersonal ties. Instead, Wharton ends the novel with the unlikely family of Moffatt, Undine, and Paul. I believe Wharton hopes that something like stable personal identity and the formation of lasting interpersonal ties are possible under the new social conditions of the market economy. Indeed, as a divorced woman making her living in no small part from mass-marketed magazines, living in a foreign country, and observing the apparently irresistible trend of commodification, she has a personal investment in that possibility. Paul, whom Moffatt predicts will someday be "the richest boy in America" (505), who has been raised by families with thick identities but has not had enough stability in his own short life to have thick

identity himself, will ultimately be the test case for whether some viable balance between Ralph's well-developed sense of self and Undine's kenotic adaptability can be achieved. But Wharton stops short of trying to imagine how Paul's life will unfold.

### **The Effects on Language**

Longing for the companionship of a book in Moffatt and Undine's beautifully furnished but impersonal Paris house, Paul finds all the books locked up because they are too valuable to be touched (497). He responds to the dizzying array of objects in the Paris house with a desire to "know about" them (496), but Mrs. Heeny's newspaper clippings describe only their market value. Mrs. Heeny's clippings are equally unsatisfactory with regard to Paul's curiosity about his mother and Moffatt—the clippings include nothing personal, recording only their movements and acquisitions (501). In fact, there is not a single printed word available to Paul that can either comfort him or help him understand his life.

Spoken language at the end of the novel is no more promising. When Paul asks Mrs. Heeny why Undine is married to Moffatt, he is really asking why she is no longer married to Raymond. But Mrs. Heeny's answer is nonresponsive: "She's married to him because she got a divorce—that's why" (501). What's worse, though, is the discovery that Undine "said things that weren't true"—"[t]hat was what he had always feared to find out" (503). This discovery is devastating because Undine is Paul's last and only link to where he comes from and therefore who he is. If she cannot be trusted, his personal history is lost. But it is also devastating because it means he cannot trust language. Debra Ann MacComb argues that what Paul learns from Undine's lie about Raymond is that "words may be separated—divorced—from the truth to satisfy a personal and immediate need," leaving him in "a world in which language has jettisoned its referentiality to be of 'use'" (288).

Throughout *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton is sensitive to the relationship between the transformation of property relations and the stability of meaning. Ralph observes early in the text that the Invaders "spoke the same language as his, though on their lips it so often had a different meaning" (82); later Raymond complains that people like Undine "come among us speaking our language but not knowing what we mean" (468). As Candace Waid argues, "[t]he invaders have not only conquered a race; through their imitation of 'the speech of the conquered race,' they have robbed language of meaning" (153). But in the novel, linguistic meaning is inextricably

linked to the social meaning of things: Ralph's observation is precipitated by the gaudy and superficial tastes of the Invaders; Raymond's complaint comes in response to Undine's desire to sell the tapestries. Thus, it is not merely through imitation, but through the appropriation and commodification of the very objects that language refers to that this change is affected. The fluidity of both possession and value makes an unprecedented number of linguistic meanings possible—a development Wharton seems as much to explore as to resist.

Most of the characters in the novel are verbally schizophrenic: Mr. Spragg's business and legal vocabularies outmatch his domestic and emotional ones (381); Moffatt vacillates between "accuracy of statement" and a "half-humorous minor key" (224, 403); Clare's surprising energy and facility in the negotiations over Paul contrast with the way in which (385, 388), in her other interactions with Ralph, her talk "sometimes missed the mark" though "her silences never did" (395). Even Ralph acquires a new vocabulary when he goes into business. The man who sees words "flashing like brilliant birds through the boughs overhead" on his honeymoon later appears for Paul's birthday protesting, "[i]t's outrageous of me to be so late, and I daren't look my son in the face! But I stayed down town to make provision for his future birthdays" (134, 190).

Undine's remarkable (and somewhat inexplicable) imitative "verbal range," her uncanny facility for acquiring new vocabularies, allows her to appear to be what she is not (270). From her first dinner at Laura Fairford's to her negotiation with her father about leaving Ralph to her early days with the Princess and the Duchess on the Riviera, Undine is constantly "trying to think far enough ahead to guess what they would expect her to say, and what tone it would be well to take. . . . [I]t was instinctive with her to become, for the moment, the person she thought her interlocutors expected her to be" (335). Undine's thin relationship to property is mirrored in her thin relationship to language: she is able to assume the verbal trappings of a particular social identity but not its content.<sup>21</sup> This thin relationship to language is much of what Paul finds disorienting and sterile in Moffatt and Undine's world. But Wharton is as skeptical of a thick or static relationship to language as she is of thick relationships to property. The "full and elaborate vocabulary of evasion" that imprisons the Dagonets is as responsible for Ralph's death and Paul's fate as Moffatt and Undine are (378).

In *The Custom of the Country*, one vocabulary does not necessarily replace another; rather the introduction of new ways of talking about the world makes new ways of being in the world possible. The competing vocabularies with which Wharton tells her story and

through which her characters express themselves correspond to the competing sets of values in the text. These multiple vocabularies require the compartmentalization of different facets of a person's life, militating toward thin identity. Thus Undine's abhorrence of intimacy can be understood as the necessary result of her multiglossic ability—every relationship she has must be compartmentalized within its own rubric. Though Wharton may fear that market rhetoric—and thin identity—will eventually transform much that she personally values, as a writer she takes full advantage of the proliferation of meaning generated by the social upheaval of the emerging market economy.

## Notes

1. For example, Cynthia Griffin Wolff asserts that the novel expresses Wharton's "desolate rage at what it meant—in this society—to be 'only a girl'" (246).
2. For example, Elizabeth Ammons argues that "Wall Street is the field of battle for the modern robber baron. Though his female counterpart, the modern 'warrior Queen,' is denied that battle ground, she is given her own stock exchange: the institution of marriage in which she herself is the stock exchanged. To create her empire, she invests herself in the right marriage. This enterprise Undine understands and embraces" (331). Other critical interpretations of Undine as an entrepreneur include Collins; MacComb; McDowell; Michaels, "The Contracted Heart" (518); Papke; and Wolff (236–50).
3. For example, Lewis observes that "Teddy flourished to some extent in places—like The Mount and salmon rivers—that were suited to his nature, but that the highly charged social and intellectual life of the Faubourg bored, wearied, and depressed him" (268). Wharton herself hated certain places and thrived in others.
4. Wharton carefully oversaw every detail of The Mount's construction, landscaping, and decoration. See Lewis 110–11.
5. Lewis asserts that "by the summer of 1911, Teddy might be said to have been fighting for his life: that is, he was fighting in no very coherent manner for his identity" (306). Wharton's decisions to sell The Mount and relocate permanently to Europe are described as "the loss of a central element in her own identity" (308).
6. See *The Decoration of Houses* (cowritten with Ogden Codman, Jr.) and *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*.
7. I mean here to invoke Amy Kaplan's argument that Wharton was a self-consciously "professional" writer. My reading of *The Custom of the Country* shares Kaplan's conviction that Wharton should be read as a realist (65–74).



8. Radin is clearly indebted to Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description" here. See Geertz 3–30.
9. Alfred Kazin contends that Wharton uniformly hates the Invaders (81), but the battle lines are not so clearly drawn in *The Custom of the Country*. As Michaels has suggested, "you don't like or dislike [the culture you live in], you exist in it, and the things you like and don't like exist in it too" (*Gold* 18). Indeed, when the novel was published in 1913, Wharton had herself divorced and enjoyed the freedom to support herself as a writer that the new mass market for novels made possible.
10. New York had the most stringent divorce policy in the colonies from the time the English took over from the Dutch in 1664. As a state, New York's divorce laws were far less liberal than those of New England and Southern states, which recognized more numerous grounds (including desertion, impotence, and cruelty). A 1787 New York divorce law allowed only the "innocent" party in a divorce to remarry (Blake 65). And despite an ongoing debate about divorce reform in the first half of the nineteenth century, New York became even more conservative in its attitudes toward divorce after the Civil War (79). It was not until 1879 that the "guilty" party in a divorce was legally permitted to remarry (after waiting five years) and not until 1919 that the waiting period was reduced to three years (201). In reality, though, New York's strict laws were circumvented easily and frequently, through migratory divorce (first in Pennsylvania, then Illinois and Indiana, and finally in divorce colonies like Sioux Falls and Reno) or through fraud ("faked evidence of adultery") (119).
11. The standard criticism of "no-fault" divorce is that it replaces "the vision of marriage as cooperative, altruistic relationship characterized by long-term commitment" with the "model of two self-interested persons . . . entering into a limited agreement in which both are likely to behave opportunistically" (Scott and Scott 205).
12. For an interesting analysis of how advertising perpetuates what I am calling thin identity in marriage, see MacComb.
13. May identifies the inconsistency between the self-absorbed, fun-loving girl a man is supposed to be attracted to and the attentive, maternal wife he expects as a frequent source of marital breakdown in post-Victorian marriage (79).
14. See Blake, chapter 9.
15. See, for example, May's discussion of the infantilization of the "flapper" (65); Michaels's discussion of Gilman in "The Contracted Heart" (500); and Basch.
16. This fact belies a close connection between Wharton's own divorce and her treatment of divorce in the novel.
17. See, for example, Patterson.
18. See, for example, Collins and Waid.

19. We sympathize with Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, by contrast, because she struggles to maintain her sense of self against a constantly changing background. She is flawed, to be sure, and she fails, but she fails because she refuses to jettison specific expectations about her moral and material circumstances that are constitutive of her identity.
20. Wharton describes the social world of the elite New York "republican" bourgeoisie into which she was born as having unsuspected value, despite its obsolescence: "When I was young it used to seem to me that the group in which I grew up was like an empty vessel into which no new wine would ever again be poured. Now I see that one of its uses lay in preserving a few drops of an old vintage too rare to be savoured by a youthful palate; and I should like to atone for my unappreciativeness by trying to revive that faint fragrance" (*A Backward Glance* 5).
21. As Waid observes, "[i]n the hand of Undine, language is a social garment, a kind of 'glittering equivocation' in which words are divorced from meaning" (153–54).

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