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Subverting Romantic Comedy: Edith Wharton's Reading of Shakespeare in *The House of Mirth*

by Caroline McManus

THE theatrical nature of Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth* and its protagonist, Lily Bart, has been elucidated by a number of critics. Cynthia Griffin Wolff and Bruce Michelson have linked the novel to the conventions of the "well-made play," and Maureen Howard has done the same with nineteenth-century melodrama.¹ Less often noted, however, are Wharton's numerous Shakespearean allusions, direct and indirect. An early epigraph for the novel, deleted in later drafts, was taken from *Richard II*: "A brittle glory shineth in this face— / As brittle as the glory is the face."² Lawrence Selden, disgusted by Ned Van Alstyne's salacious admiration of Lily's figure during her performance as one of the Brys' tableaux vivants, invokes *The Tempest*: "Does one go to Caliban for a judgement on Miranda?"³ Melville Stancy, the lawyer who introduces Norma Hatch to Carry Fisher and hence Lily Bart, is described as "the Falstaff of a certain section of

¹ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Lily Bart and the Drama of Femininity," *American Literary History* 6 (1994): 71–87; Bruce Michelson, "Edith Wharton's House Divided," *Studies in American Fiction* 12 (1984): 199–215; Maureen Howard, "The Bachelor and the Baby: *The House of Mirth*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, ed. Millicent Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 137–56. See also Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "The Conspicuous Wasting of Lily Bart," *ELH* 59 (1992): 720–31, and Candace Waid, "Building *The House of Mirth*," in *Biographies of Books: The Compositional Histories of Notable American Writings*, ed. James Barbour and Tom Quirk (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 167.

² Waid is one of the few critics who has commented on Wharton's debt to Shakespeare; for discussion of the *Richard II* quotation (4.1.287–88), see "Building," 175. All Shakespearean quotations are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997) and will be cited in the text.

³ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 217–18. Subsequent quotations from *HM* will be from this edition and cited in the text.

festive club life" (441). Lily's desperate desire for sleep at the end of the novel—"Where was the drug that could still this legion of insurgent nerves?" (520)—echoes Macbeth's craving for sleep, and her blowing out her candle poignantly recalls Lady Macbeth, whose death, like Lily's, is an ambiguous suicide. Even Selden's tragically mistimed final visit to Lily evokes Romeo's discovery of the seemingly dead Juliet, the name Wharton initially gave to her heroine.⁴

Having read as a child her father's calf-bound volumes of Shakespeare, Wharton also enjoyed staged productions of the plays. As she enthused in a letter to Sally Norton dated 25 January 1907, "Any Shakespeare on stage is thrilling."⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, that multiple Shakespearean scripts serve as subtexts for *The House of Mirth*. Wharton's novel alludes most specifically to *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado about Nothing*, not only in naming the Trenors' country house "Bellomont" and Selden's apartment building the "Benedick," but also in its dominant concerns: the commodification of human relationships, the thoroughly social nature of ostensibly private courtship, and the power of slander to destroy women as marketable goods in the sexual economy of marriage. Wharton's Shakespearean echoes are thus noticeably dissonant. Lauded by Mary Cowden Clarke (whose *Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* went through twenty-one editions between 1850 and 1906) as the male writer who "has seen most deeply into the female heart" and claimed as "a valuable friend of woman-kind,"⁶ Shakespeare is embraced much more skeptically by Wharton. In the pages that follow, I examine the marked similarities between the high-stakes revelry and courtship games that take place in Shakespeare's Belmont and Messina and Wharton's New York and suggest that Wharton's text critically interrogates the conventions of Shakespearean romantic comedy, particularly as it was staged in her day.

What Shakespearean plays were being staged in New York, and in

⁴ On the *Romeo and Juliet* parallel, see Waid, "Building," 174, and Waid, *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 39.

⁵ On Wharton's childhood reading, see her autobiography *A Backward Glance* (New York and London: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934), 64–65. The letter to Norton is cited in Shari Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), 157. Wolff points out that Wharton was "writing extensively for the stage" while she was composing *The House of Mirth* ("Lily Bart," 72).

⁶ Cowden Clarke cited in Ann Thompson and Sasha Roberts, eds., *Women Reading Shakespeare, 1660–1900: An Anthology of Criticism* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 82 and 101. See also Julie Hankey, "Victorian Portias: Shakespeare's Borderline Heroine," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45 (1994): 441 n. 58.

what fashion, during the years preceding the publication of *The House of Mirth*? Augustin Daly was the most notable manager/director of 1890s New York, and as theater historian Marvin Felheim notes, Daly's Shakespearean productions "had particular significance because his was the foremost theater in America and consequently set the style."⁷ Daly's seasons, either in New York or on tour in London, inevitably featured at least one Shakespearean play, most often romantic comedy. During the thirteen years between 1886 and 1899, for example, Daly produced at least once each (and in many cases more frequently, given his numerous revivals) *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1885–86), *The Taming of the Shrew* (1886–87), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1887–88), *As You Like It* (1889–90), *Love's Labour's Lost* (1890–91), *Twelfth Night* (1892–93), *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1894–95), *Romeo and Juliet* (1895–96), *Much Ado about Nothing* (1896–97), *The Tempest* (1897–98), and *The Merchant of Venice* (1898–99). Because of his predilection for these plays, along with Restoration comedy and European farces, Daly's theater was known as "the home of joyous comedy."⁸ Interestingly, Daly's brother alluded to Wharton's novel to highlight the director's bent towards "mirth": "The play on the first night of the season, October 5, 1886, at Daly's Theatre, was 'After Business Hours,' from the German of Oscar Blumenthal; and his theme was the craze for money, dress, and display. The pathetic story of Lily Bart in Mrs. Wharton's *House of Mirth* discloses the tragic side of one such story. In this play the theme is treated humorously."⁹ New Yorkers who were reading Wharton's novel in 1905 might also have recently seen Julia Marlowe and Edward H. Sothorn (sponsored by Daniel Frohman, brother of Charles Frohman, who mounted the Clyde Fitch stage adaptation of *The House of Mirth* in 1906–7) perform *Romeo and Juliet* (17 October 1904), *Much Ado* (1 November 1904), and *Merchant* (30 October 1905) at the Knickerbocker Theatre. Charles Shattuck's observations that "The New York critics, like the Chicagoans, found *Much Ado* a much more agreeable experience than *Romeo and Juliet*" and that *Much Ado* was "a great favorite in the 1904–5 and 1905–6 seasons" underscore the prevailing taste for Shakespearean comedy.¹⁰

⁷ Marvin Felheim, *The Theater of Augustin Daly: An Account of the Late Nineteenth-Century American Stage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 269. Although I have no direct evidence that Wharton attended specific Daly productions, she must have been familiar with his work, given his prominent position and her interest in both Shakespeare and contemporary theater.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 228–29, 234.

⁹ Joseph Francis Daly, *The Life of Augustin Daly* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 425.

¹⁰ Charles Shattuck, *Shakespeare on the American Stage: From Booth and Barrett to Soth-*

Daly not only catered to (or dictated) public taste by promoting comedy over tragedy; he also freely cut the scripts to make them even more charming and inoffensive than the Shakespearean source texts. As critic William Winter, Daly's textual consultant, proudly explained of the 1889–90 *As You Like It*, "Every tone and every tint of melancholy was rigorously excluded, equally from the performance and from the picture. The old theory, which mingled pensive sadness with buoyant gaiety in the interpretation of that piece, was abandoned."¹¹ Daly's efforts to make Shakespearean comedy strictly mirthful included cutting all mention of the King of France's death in his 1891 *Love's Labour's Lost* and sentimentalizing *Twelfth Night* by cutting Malvolio's prison scene and all his subsequent appearances.¹² A similar goal is reflected in Winter's comment on the Daly *Merchant of Venice*, which played from 19 November 1898 to 2 January 1899: "a few passages have been omitted, and a few passages have been transposed, in order, while accelerating the movement, to harmonize it with the scenic pictures and to augment the pleasurable effect of the entire representation." The "aim" of this production of *Merchant* was to "treat the work in the spirit of pure comedy, to set it in a series of beautiful pictures, and to impart all its charm, by giving a fair, even, correct, and adequate interpretation of all its characters."¹³ Daly somewhat contradictorily believed that "the stage should hold the mirror up to Nature," even as he chose to "veil in delicate language and soften by gentle contrasts the terrible lessons which everyday life teaches."¹⁴

Daly's 1896–97 production of *Much Ado* also exuded an ebullient comic spirit. Its "happy revelry" was acclaimed by the *Tribune* reviewer, who pronounced it "one of the most delicious presentments of Shakespearean comedy that have been effected in our time."¹⁵ To achieve this

ern and Marlowe, 2 vols. (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library; London: Associated University Presses, 1987), 2:269–70; 261, 263, 266.

¹¹ William Winter, *Ada Rehan: A Study* (1891; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969), 66.

¹² On *LLL*, see Felheim, *Theater*, 250–51; on *TN*, see Shattuck, *Shakespeare*, 86. Consider as a postmodern contrast Kenneth Branagh's Renaissance Theatre Company production of *TN*, which features a brutalized Malvolio and concludes with the alcoholic Feste singing his final song looking through the prison-like bars of a gate as snow falls.

¹³ Winter, ed., *The Merchant of Venice. Arranged for present production by Augustin Daly* (New York: privately printed, 1898), 6–7. This text is part of the Folger collection.

¹⁴ Daly, letter to William Winter, 9 June 1870, quoted in Felheim, *Theater*, 221.

¹⁵ Cited in Winter, ed., *Much Ado About Nothing. As arranged for production at Daly's Theatre by Augustin Daly* (New York: privately printed, 1897), 33. This text is part of the Folger collection. Kathleen Carroll, "The Americanization of Beatrice: Nineteenth-Century Style," *Theatre Survey* 31 (1990): 67–84, argues that Daly's 1896 *Much Ado* presents Beatrice

effect, Daly tinkered freely with the text. For example, the monument scene in which Claudio enacts repentance (5.3) was cut entirely. Even Borachio's comment "it drizzles rain" (3.3.104) was cut, lest it detract from the sunny mood Daly wished to establish. Throughout, Daly was careful to remove any lines that were less than complimentary to his leading lady, Ada Rehan (such as Benedick's lines about Beatrice's "infectious breath," 2.1.248-50), as well as lines that hinted at knowing female sexuality. For example, the whole of 3.4, the exchange between Margaret, Hero, and Beatrice prior to the wedding, was cut, as were the sexual double entendres ("swords," "bucklers," "pikes," etc.) in Margaret's and Benedick's dialogue in the final act. In fact, Margaret wasn't in the scene at all, Daly having assigned her lines to the less sexually culpable Ursula. Daly also purified Benedick's character, cutting his lines about hanging his "bugle" in an "invisible baldrick" (1.1.241-42), changing "brothel-house" to "public house" (1.1.253), and deleting references to cuckoldry (1.1.240-41, 263). Tellingly, one of Benedick's lines frequently cut in many recent productions, "if I do not love her, I am a Jew" (2.3.263), was left intact by Daly, suggesting that his audiences may have found sexual indelicacy more socially offensive than anti-Semitism.

Above all, Daly left no doubt about the happy outcome of the lovers' romance. In Winter's words, the play's theme

is the cheery, kindly, piquant collision of two natures that are strongly egotistical, buoyant with gayety, exuberant with animal life, and prone to raillery and banter. . . . in the breezy, careless joy that animates the writing of "Much Ado" there is abundant evidence of the pleasure that he [Shakespeare] found in diffusing an atmosphere of life, love, and frolic, and in depicting the clash, the gleeful dissonance, the "merry war" between a gay, satirical, quizzical cavalier, and an arch, laughing, dazzling, tantalizing lady, the representative type of exultant physical happiness and mental freedom. . . . It is evident, from the first, that they were born for each other; that beneath their bickering there is a strong, however secret, inclination for alliance; and that, notwithstanding all their jibing and flouting, they will end in perfect concord.

Winter explains that because Beatrice has "long been secretly inclined toward Benedick, . . . she is readily awakened, and by a simple stratagem, to the knowledge of her love."¹⁶

as the American "New Woman" in contrast to the more submissive Beatrice presented by Henry Irving and Ellen Terry in 1882. Even with this emphasis, however, Daly's version still represses the darker elements of his Shakespearean source.

¹⁶ Winter, *Ada Rehan*, 85-86, 92.

Wharton's construction of Lily and Selden's mutual attraction resembles that of Beatrice and Benedick in its sense of inevitability, yet Lily's "awakening" does *not* happen "readily" or "simply," and her one spontaneous act of love, destroying Bertha's incriminating letters to Selden, costs her both her livelihood and her life. *The House of Mirth* teases its readers by leading them to expect a typical romantic comedy that traces its heroine's progress towards marriage. Just as Leonato introduces this narrative trajectory by scolding Beatrice, "thou wilt never get thee a husband, if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue" (2.1.18–19), so Lily announces to Selden at the beginning of the novel, "people are getting tired of me; they are beginning to say I ought to marry" (13), yet while Beatrice eventually marries, Lily does not. Her initial greeting of Selden, "'What luck! . . . How nice of you to come to my rescue!'" and his chivalric response "that to do so was his mission in life, and asked what form the rescue was to take" (4) lead us to believe that the two will finally be united. Yet the novel's conclusion frustrates the reader's desires for the paradigmatic happy ending: Selden has consistently failed to rescue Lily Bart. In Shakespearean romantic comedy, one betrothal leads seamlessly to another, yet *The House of Mirth's* eighth chapter, which describes the wedding of Jack Stepney and Gwen Van Osburgh, ends with news of Evie's, not Lily's, engagement to Percy Gryce. The disrupted rites of Hero's wedding lead Benedick and Beatrice to abandon their postures of self-assurance and mockery and to declare their love, whereas Lily and Selden have no chance at Jack and Gwen's smoothly orchestrated social machine of a wedding to converse. Beatrice jokes about leading apes in hell and sitting with the bachelors in heaven, but Lily's spinster status becomes increasingly more dire, given her lack of money; as her failure at the milliner's shop indicates, she is a spinster who cannot even spin. Wharton thus denied her readers the comic conclusion they so craved. As William Dean Howells observed after the disappointing New York opening night of the dramatized version of *The House of Mirth*, "what the American public always wants is a tragedy with a happy ending."¹⁷

Lily and Selden, like Beatrice and Benedick, are past the first blush of youth and have occupied the same social stage for a number of years. They commence the narrative, as Beatrice and Benedick do, by declaring their lack of interest in each other as a potential partner (Lily "frankly" tells Selden, "you can't possibly think I want to marry you,"

¹⁷ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 147.

and he “absolves” her of that intention [11; for Beatrice and Benedick’s more public resolutions, see 1.1.126–32]). Benedick is initially more overt in his hostility to marriage than Selden, describing himself as a “profess’d tyrant” to the female sex (1.1.169), yet they both complacently assume that they are impervious to female beauty. Each claims to function merely as a detached observer of the social scene, Benedick wittily assessing Hero’s charms as Selden does Lily’s (albeit with greater aesthetic appreciation). Aware of how easily a woman can cuckold her husband (Selden should know, given his past affair with Bertha Dorset), they cynically avoid entrapment. Benedick’s assertion, “Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none; and the fine is (for the which I may go the finer) I will live a bachelor” (1.1.244–46), resembles Selden’s persistent suspicions of Lily’s sexual morality. When Selden and Benedick do entertain the possibility of marriage, they are so fastidious and exacting that they preempt any chance of finding the woman who would meet their requirements: Benedick claims, “till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace. Rich she shall be, that’s certain; wise, or I’ll none; virtuous, or I’ll never cheapen her; fair, or I’ll never look on her; mild, or come not near me; noble, or not I for an angel; of good discourse, an excellent musician, and her hair shall be of what color it please God” (2.3.28–35). Selden also prides himself on his discrimination, holding all women to the impossible standard of his idealized patrician mother, whose nonchalance about money seems to him infinitely superior to Lily’s pragmatic honesty. Unlike Benedick, however, Selden remains in the same place throughout the novel, both literally and metaphorically; he continues to dwell in “The Benedick,” which is, as its owner, Rosedale, explains, “an old word for bachelor” (22).

In its many reversals of the Shakespearean comic paradigm, especially as practiced by Daly, Wharton’s novel highlights the more ominous ambiguities of Shakespeare’s texts. One of those ambiguities is the seeming contrast between a corrupt social world and its idealized corrective in a more “natural” rural society. Recalling Portia’s estate, Gus and Judy Trenor’s country home is named Bellomont, and Wharton contrasts this pastoral retreat with the financial world of Wall Street, much as *Merchant* contrasts Belmont with the mercantile world of Venice.¹⁸ Belmont has traditionally been read, as Catherine Belsey suggests, as

¹⁸ See Susan Koprince, “The Meaning of Bellomont [sic] in *The House of Mirth*,” *Edith Wharton Newsletter* 2 (1985): 1, 5, 8.

a fairytale castle, where three suitors come for the hand of the princess, and undergo a test arranged by her father in order to distinguish between true love on the one hand and self-love and greed on the other. It is a refuge for eloping lovers, who flee the precarious world of capital and interest and trade, to find a haven of hospitality, music, poetry, old love stories retold in the night—and the infinite wealth (without origins) which makes all this possible. Belmont is the conventional critical *other* of Venice, its defining romantic opposite. Belmont, it is widely agreed, is feminine, lyrical, aristocratic—and vanishing—while Venice represents the new world of men, market forces and racial tensions.¹⁹

This binary opposition, however, collapses under further scrutiny; Belsey goes on to note that “true love turns out to rely on credit.” Wharton similarly deconstructs the myth of the New York country house. Bellomont is only another facet of the same materialistic social world that inhabits Wall Street and Fifth Avenue, Newport and the Riviera.²⁰ Despite its superficial similarity to the “green world,” to borrow Northrop Frye’s phrase,²¹ it is still dominated by the greenback. Lily recalls that her father spent his days making money downtown (45), but she is involved in the same entrepreneurial enterprise, though obliquely, in the social realm. When living in the feminine world of Belmont, presided over by Judy Trenor, Lily assists her hostess with the “letters, bills and other domestic documents which gave an incongruously commercial touch to the slender elegance of her writing-table” (63), a description indicative of blurred boundaries. The landscape at Bellomont, “tutored to the last degree of rural elegance” (77), resembles early modern pastoral as a site inevitably marked by the corruption of the sophisticated urban society that has cultivated it.

Capitalizing on the interpretive openness of Shakespeare’s play scripts, Wharton demystifies courtship by exposing its commercial aspect. For example, the role of Jessica, a Jewish outsider, can be (and recently has been) played as being unsure of Lorenzo’s love for her, hence her “gilding herself with more ducats” prior to their elopement. Similarly, “the clink of Mr. Rosedale’s millions had a faintly seductive note” (185), as Lily considers money the means by which the socially marginalized Jewish businessman might become acceptable to “Christian”

¹⁹ Belsey, “Love in Venice,” *Shakespeare Survey* 44 (1992): 41.

²⁰ Koprince argues that Bellomont’s artificiality is an ironic contrast to the romantic nature of Shakespeare’s Belmont (“Meaning,” 5), but I would argue that Shakespeare’s Belmont is also ironic, or that the text certainly allows for it to be constructed this way.

²¹ Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 182.

society and to herself. Claudio carefully sounds out Don Pedro as to the extent of Hero's prospective dower ("Hath Leonato any son?" [1.1.294]), much as Lily shrewdly calculates the extent of Percy Gryce's fortune and as her cousin Jack Stepney does when wooing the plain but wealthy Gwen Van Osburgh. Attesting to women's financial as well as sexual and emotional desires, Shakespeare's Beatrice bluntly asserts, "With a good leg and a good foot, uncle, and money enough in his purse, such a man would win any woman in the world, if 'a could get her good will" (2.1.14–17).²²

Lily visits Bellomont much as Bassanio does Belmont: to invest time and money in pursuit of a wealthy mate, the extent of whose fortune has been carefully appraised. Lily is, like Bassanio, deeply in debt. As he tells Antonio,

I have disabled mine estate,
By something showing a more swelling port
Than my faint means would grant continuance.
Nor do I now make moan to be abridg'd
From such a noble rate, but my chief care
Is to come fairly off from the great debts
Wherein my time something too prodigal
Hath left me gag'd.

(1.1.123–30)

Daly cut the unromantic final sentence, as he did Bassanio's assessment of Portia as a "golden fleece." Winter's blithe exoneration uses the mystification of romance to gloss over the blatant materialism of Bassanio's comments—"It is not possible to sympathize with a fortune-hunter who purposes to rectify his financial affairs by marrying a wealthy heirless, but it is easy to perceive that *Bassanio* is substantially a good fellow, and that he is truly in love with *Portia*, as *Portia* certainly is with him, and, so perceiving, it is pleasant to follow the course of their love-story to its happy close"²³—but Wharton allows no such mystification. The novel establishes an implicit parallel between Bassanio and Lily, both of whom must contrive to outfit themselves richly enough in order

²² For an analysis of the commodification of human relationships in *The House of Mirth*, see Wai-Chee Dimock, "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," *PMLA* 100 (1985): 783–92, and in *Merchant*, Lars Engle, "Thrift is Blessing': Exchange and Explanation in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1986): 20–37. Paul Gaudet, "Lorenzo's 'Infidel': The Staging of Difference in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Theatre Journal* 38 (1986): 275–90, describes a production featuring an extremely anxious Jessica.

²³ Winter, *Shakespeare on the Stage*, 2 vols. (1911; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969), 1:211.

to maintain a place at the marital gaming table. In her own way, Lily undergoes, and fails, the casket test that Bassanio wins. She hazards first on Percy Gryce, the golden casket ("Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire"), eventually seeks out the Jewish Rosedale, the silver ("Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves"), and rejects the "leaden" attorney Selden ("Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath"). Throughout, Selden judges Lily for aligning herself with a world "still deceiv'd with ornament" (*MV* 3.2.74), although Selden is also a failed Bassanio, in that he had two times been ready "to stake his faith on Lily Bart; but the third trial had been too severe for his endurance" (517).

Lily's encounters with Selden speak to their mutual desire to dwell in a green world, an idealistic alternative to their sordid capitalistic society, but these moments, each marked by the possibility of fulfilled romance, are fleeting. Lily's initial conversation with Selden in his rooms is marked as a retreat, an escape from crowds and dinginess into an urban pastoral: "Someone has had the humanity to plant a few trees over there. Let us go into the shade" (7). The houses look "fresh and inviting with their awnings and flower-boxes" (8), yet the innocence of the encounter is sullied by Rosedale's observation of Lily's departure. During their fateful walk at Bellomont, they "reached a zone of lingering summer . . . the country unrolled itself in pastoral distances" (100-1), but Lily cannot resist returning to the house in pursuit of Percy Gryce's fortune. Their most opportune moment for romance, following the tableaux vivants, also occurs in a pastoral setting, the Brys' conservatory. Lily and Selden walk, significantly, "against the tide" of the group heading to supper and find themselves in a moonlit world similar to that of Jessica and Lorenzo's Belmont and the woods of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

they passed through a glass doorway at the end of the long suite of rooms and stood suddenly in the fragrant hush of a garden. Gravel grated beneath their feet, and about them was the transparent dimness of a midsummer night. Hanging lights made emerald caverns in the depths of foliage, and whitened the spray of a fountain falling among lilies. The magic place was deserted; there was no sound but the splash of the water on the lily-pads, and a distant drift of music that might have been blown across a sleeping lake. Selden and Lily stood still, accepting the unreality of the scene as a part of their own dream-like sensations. (221)²⁴

²⁴ Michelson comments on the narration's drift "into stage directions which all but summon Oberon and Titania out of the wings" (213), but the "midsummer night's" con-

The Bry residence is a notably theatrical place ("so recent, so rapidly-evoked was the whole *mise en scène* that one had to touch the marble columns to learn they were not of cardboard, to seat one's self in one of the damask-and-gold arm-chairs to be sure it was not painted against the wall" [212]), and this "unreal scene" in the conservatory bears a striking resemblance to late nineteenth-century stage sets for *Merchant's* final act. In keeping with Lorenzo's famous line, "How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank" (5.1.54), Daly's staging included a fountain, music, and a very obvious moon. This scene was exploited for all the romance possible, yet to do so Daly had to cut not only Jessica's "I am never merry when I hear sweet music" but also the references to Dido and Medea. Wharton, however, does not shy away from the stories of unrequited, doomed love informing Lorenzo and Jessica's stichomythic duet; Lily and Selden will soon reenact Troilus's lack of faith in Cressid, the mistiming of Pyramus and Thisbe's assignation, Aeneas's desertion of Dido, and her ensuing suicide. Jessica and Lorenzo's "romantic" exchange is interrupted, as is Lily's and Selden's, but only to receive news that they have been awarded Shylock's fortune. Like Jessica, Lily is a spendthrift, but she is not so rewarded, and she exits the scene alone. These pastoral moments are poignantly recalled as Lily and Selden briefly sit together in a Monte Carlo garden after her public humiliation by Bertha. Back in New York and poverty stricken, Lily sits alone on a park bench in a deserted pleasure ground, where she is discovered not by Selden but by Nettie Struther. Whereas *Merchant* concludes with Bassanio firmly ensconced at Belmont, Lily is gradually excluded from the charmed, luxurious realm of her social set. She is last seen renting a room in a street "in the last stages of decline from fashion to commerce" (464), an emblem of Lily's own decline and a bleaker version of Bellomont's blurred boundaries.

In *Merchant*, *Much Ado*, and *The House of Mirth*, the courtship of the principal characters is furthered by supportive friends. These efforts, however, are not always disinterested, friendship as well as romance being commodified. (Daly, of course, played down these aspects of Shakespeare's text, one example being his deletion of Leonato's surmise that Margaret was "Hir'd" by Don John to play Hero in the performance to deceive Claudio.) Bassanio first broaches his plan to Antonio in homosocial terms that appeal also to Antonio's self-interest: Antonio,

text of conspicuous consumption and display suggests to me *Merchant's* Belmont as well as *Dream's* enchanted wood.

by "investing" in Bassanio one more time, will help him to win Portia's wealth and therefore enable him to repay the large amount he already owes Antonio. Whatever Antonio's "motives" are, he supports Bassanio's wooing of Portia to such an extent that his hold on Bassanio must forever surpass Portia's (he is willing to give his life for his friend). The stratagem concocted by Don Pedro to bring Benedick and Beatrice together originates not as an altruistic gesture but merely as a way to while away the week between Claudio and Hero's betrothal and marriage. Linking the two becomes a matter of sport, as Claudio's and Ursula's hunting, fowling, and angling imagery suggests. Just as spreading the "net" (2.3.213) for Beatrice and Benedick is a communal effort, so too is Lily's attempt to snare Percy Gryce at Bellomont, although the women in *The House of Mirth* are less scrupulous than Hero, whose assent to the plot is conditional: "I will do any modest office, my lord, to help my cousin to a good husband" (2.1.375-76). Judy Trenor is described as "glowing with her sex's eagerness to smooth the course of true love" (72), but the allusion to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* resonates with irony, given that the reference to "true love" immediately follows her rhapsodizing over Percy Gryce's "eight hundred thousand a year." Although she has no mother to arrange for her, Lily does find herself "the centre of that feminine solicitude which envelops a young woman in the mating season. A solitude was tacitly created for her in the crowded existence of Bellomont, and her friends could not have shown a greater readiness for self-effacement had her wooing been adorned with all the attributes of romance" (73). All play supporting roles, waiting expectantly for a triumphant betrothal which never occurs.

Yet Lily's "friends" ultimately care more for money than they do for her welfare. Carry Fisher, although one of the most sympathetic of Lily's female friends, must continue to "fish" not for husbands for her friend but for money and connections for herself and her daughter. Judy Trenor's desire to prevent Carry's preying on Gus causes her to distract her husband with Lily's charm, and Lily comes to realize, after Judy cuts her in public, that if Judy "was careless of his affections she was plainly jealous of his pocket" (369). The women attending the reading of Mrs. Peniston's will hedge, scared to snub Lily in case she is to inherit the bulk of the estate. Even the good-natured Mattie Gormer succumbs and places money over friendship, cutting Lily and taking up Bertha, whose "social credit was based on an impregnable bank-account" (421). The ironically named Grace refuses to borrow money on her expectations from Mrs. Peniston's estate when Lily asks for a loan, in a re-

versal of Antonio's willingness to abandon his principled opposition to moneylending for Bassanio's sake. Although Antonio's farewell in the trial scene can be interpreted as laying a burden of guilt on Bassanio, his self-righteousness is nothing compared to Grace's: "it was the idea of your being in debt that brought on her illness. . . . if I can do anything to make you realize the folly of your course, and how deeply *she* disapproved of it, I shall feel it is the truest way of making up to you for her loss" (371). Claudio's bitter pronouncement, "Friendship is constant in all other things / Save in the office and affairs of love" (2.1.175-76) might be amended by Wharton to "affairs of finance." Although Gerty Farish is the purest of Lily's friends, even she briefly hates Lily for having gained Selden's love. In another ironic revision of the *Much Ado* plot, in which Beatrice believes in Hero's innocence because they have slept together every night except for the one prior to Hero's wedding day, Lily seeks help from Gerty and shares her bed only once, the night of Trenor's attempted rape. The intimacy between the two women, as noble as Gerty is and as much as she later tries to recuperate Lily, is founded on nothing but Gerty's idealism and comes nowhere near Beatrice's fierce, sustained loyalty to Hero.

The means by which the social group helps to destroy as well as encourage courtships in *Much Ado* and *The House of Mirth* are often rumor and outright slander, and Selden's susceptibility to believing slander of his beloved echoes that of Claudio, a more disturbing parallel than Benedick. Left unstaged in Shakespeare's text, Borachio's assignation with Margaret served as the finale to Daly's second act: "The Serenade is heard in the distance as they [Don John, Don Pedro, and Claudio] withdraw into the arbor above, and presently BORACHIO comes before HERO'S window; he gives a signal, and MARGARET, heavily veiled, comes from the window and upon the balcony. Tableau and Curtain as the others advance a step leading DON JOHN." This interpolated scene enabled Daly to cut Borachio's later account of Margaret-as-Hero's sexually assertive behavior (bidding him "a thousand times good night," 3.3.146-48) and to generate heightened sympathy for Claudio.²⁵ In Wharton's analogous scene, Selden witnesses Lily leaving Trenor's townhouse at a compromisingly late hour. However, Selden, unlike Claudio, is never fully disabused of his suspicions. Like Claudio, Selden has been primed to think ill of his beloved by

²⁵ Kenneth Branagh's 1993 production also stages this scene but to the opposite end, deliberately drawing attention to female sexual desire rather than attempting to occlude it.

the gossip of others prior to this incriminating circumstantial evidence. Despite Selden's acknowledgment of his tendency to prejudge Lily—"It was pitiable that he, who knew the mixed motives on which social judgments depend, should still feel himself so swayed by them. How could he lift Lily to a freer vision of life, if his own view of her was to be coloured by any mind in which he saw her reflected?" (256–57)—the talk at Carry Fisher's predisposes him to condemn Lily. When the inexperienced young Farish blabs that he put Lily in a hansom and gave the Trenors' address, Selden adopts the cynical perspective held by Lily's cousins Jack Stepney and Ned Van Alstyne, who base their judgments on commercial gossip. Stepney notes in disgust, "*Town Talk* was full of her this morning" (254). Van Alstyne responds, "Yes: lively reading that was. . . . Buy the dirty sheet? No, of course not; some fellow showed it to me—but I'd heard the stories before." When Selden and Van Alstyne later see Lily emerge from Trenor's house, Van Alstyne unwittingly utters a truth ("appearances are deceptive" [260]), yet Selden prefers to accept his own suspicions as fact. Indeed, Van Alstyne's attempt to cover up his cousin's indiscretion might reinforce Selden's readiness to believe the worst, given that Van Alstyne's name had once been linked unsavorily with Lily's (she had borrowed money from him before borrowing from Trenor). Wharton's version of the episode departs from Shakespeare's and Daly's versions in that Lily, unlike Hero, is physically present, which is indicative of Lily's having compromised herself financially, if not sexually, with Trenor.

Only when Bertha publicly denounces Lily in Monte Carlo (Wharton's secular analogue to the condemnation of Hero in Daly's heavily religious church scene) does Selden play the chivalrous Benedick, and then a very reluctant, half-hearted one. Like Benedick, his allegiance is to the wronged woman, yet Selden never directly confronts Lily's accuser, Bertha, as Benedick does Claudio. Winter writes smugly, "The behavior of Don Pedro and Claudio toward Hero, in the church scene, would not be possible in actual life; gentlemen do not act in such a way toward women; but that part of the story Shakespeare found in Ariosto or Bandello, whence he derived the Claudio and Hero episode." Winter easily projects boorish behavior and arrogance onto the Italians, but Selden is more honest, eventually realizing that by remaining silent he has been complicitous in condemning Lily.²⁶

²⁶ Winter, *Ada Rehan*, 93. Waid links Selden with Othello, who "realizes that he has been wrong in believing the rumors about Lily's defilement" (*Letters*, 42), but I would argue that Selden is much closer to Claudio, who has not physically murdered his beloved,

In *Much Ado*, men engage in generalized, free-floating sexual slander (Benedick's initial line, for example, is a ribald jibe at the chastity of Hero's mother), yet the specific slander of Hero emanates primarily from a single source, Don John, who is captured at the end of the play. *The House of Mirth* presents a much darker vision of slander, which is so widely practiced that it cannot be contained. From first to last Lily's actions are subject to question. She rejects Selden's initial invitation—to take tea at Sherry's—because she wants to avoid gossip, but in going with him to take tea at his rooms she sets in motion Mrs. Haffen's suspicions and the letter plot. Judy warns Lily, "They're all alike, you know: they hold their tongues for years, and you think you're safe, but when their opportunity comes they remember everything" (121), a fact borne out by Grace Stepney, whose "mind was like a kind of moral fly-paper, to which the buzzing items of gossip were drawn by a fatal attraction, and where they hung fast in the toils of an inexorable memory" (196). Lily is not unfamiliar with such dangers; she "knew every turn of the allusive jargon which could flay its victims without the shedding of blood" (177). Just as Leonato fails to question the slanders put upon his daughter, Mrs. Peniston finds it easier to accept the gossip than to attempt to discover the truth, and "there remained in her thoughts a settled deposit of resentment against her niece, all the denser because it was not to be cleared by explanation or discussion. It was horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about; however unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made" (205). When Gerty urges Lily to tell her friends "the whole truth," Lily responds, "What is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe. In this case it's a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset's story than mine, because she has a big house. . . . the truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks" (363–64). The fatalism of Lily's nonchalant conclusion echoes Leonato's more impassioned assessment of the accused Hero:

O she is fall'n
 Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea
 Hath drops too few to wash her clean again,
 And salt too little which may season give
 To her foul tainted flesh!

(4.1.139–43)

but killed her socially by refusing to act on her behalf and retreating into the safe, male, bachelor world.

Even Lily's fantasies of social rehabilitation are couched in terms of rumor: "She had a passionate desire that some one should know the truth about this transaction, and also that the rumour of her intention to repay the money should reach Judy Trenor's ears" (472). In a significantly metafictional moment, Lily has earlier asked Rosedale if the falseness of the stories told about her wouldn't alter her desirability; he responds, "I believe it does in novels; but I'm certain it don't in real life" (412). Lily is not to be afforded a last-act vindication, *à la* Hero (book 2 contains no fifteenth chapter, no comic *deus ex machina* as does book 1), and no rescue from the tomb. Lily's death, unlike Hero's, is real. She is indeed "Done to death by slanderous tongues" (5.3.3).

Although Lily is clearly culpable for some of the moral mess taking place on the *Sabrina* (another ironic allusion to Renaissance drama, this time to Milton's nymph of chastity in *A Masque*), she at least displays a Beatrice-like devotion to Bertha, the woman who "was actually pushing away her rescuing hand" (338). Lily's fear that Bertha might have killed herself harks back to the numerous Renaissance texts that advocated female suicide as a response to sexual shame and is also highly ironic, given the circumstances of Lily's own death. Lily's fate undercuts *New York Times* critic Edward Dithmar's glib distinction between Shakespeare's day and the more "civilized" late nineteenth century, especially as Daly constructed it: "The tragedy of Hero, horrible as it is, (a bit of mediaeval brutality,) is but mock tragedy, and the play ends in sunshine and laughter."²⁷ Daly trivialized the significance of Hero's social death by cutting the Friar's back-up plan, which is to send her off to a convent if the masquerade fails to achieve the desired effect, and Daly greatly minimized Claudio's culpability by cutting the monument scene altogether. Even in Shakespeare's text, the scene of mourning is very brief (33 lines in contrast to the denunciation scene's 336) and ends with Don Pedro hailing the approaching dawn, signaling a return to the comic mode. Wharton, however, ends her novel with a highly ironic inversion of this scene, as Selden moves from the hopeful sunlit exterior ("he had found the word he meant to say to her. . . . It was not a word for twilight, but for the morning" [524-25]) into a darkened house of mourning. The Shakespearean text marks Claudio's new understanding of Hero's innocence by having her unmask, but Selden, looking down at Lily's body, can see only "the sleeping face which seemed to lie like a delicate impalpable mask over the living lin-

²⁷ Dithmar in the Winter/Daly edition of *Much Ado*.

ements he had known" (526). Whereas Hero unmasks at last, revealing herself to Claudio and preparing for the full knowledge of the marriage bed, Lily retains her mask in death, lying on her deathbed.

Like *Much Ado* and *Merchant*, *The House of Mirth* ends with the comic device of letters restoring fortunes and hearts.²⁸ Hero and Claudio produce the telltale letters that Beatrice and Benedick have written in secret, and much was made of this moment in the final scene of Daly's 1897–98 *Much Ado*, the stage directions indicating, "Both hold up papers exultingly." In a sense, Selden receives written testimony of Lily's love for him in the form of his own note, written after the Brys' entertainment on an impulse to propose to Lily, which he peruses "with a strange commotion of the heart" (530). Yet Lily's hand has most recently written the check to Trenor, which revives his suspicions: "had not all his old doubts started to life again at the mere sight of Trenor's name?" (530). Selden evokes the sentimental yet suspicious Claudio even as he remains an unreclaimed Benedick, who can indulge his repentance without ever having to relinquish his bachelorhood. Selden's lack of assurance that Lily was innocent in her relations with Trenor recalls the unsettling conclusion of *Merchant*, with its emphasis on unruly female sexuality. Most nineteenth-century productions had concluded with the trial scene, until the final act was restored by Henry Irving in the 1880s. Yet even though Daly produced the final scene, he cut much of the sexual badinage and especially Gratiano's final speech about "keeping safe Nerissa's ring." By concluding reassuringly with Portia's "We will answer all things faithfully," Daly created an impression of dutiful, obedient, and chaste womanhood, reinforced by the cheerful group entrance into the domestic realm of the house accompanied by music ("All go into the house, as the Musicians repeat their piece and the curtain descends"). Wharton's final scene, however, restores the anxiety generated by the ring trick—the possibility of women using their bodies as currency that circulates among men.

Rosedale's final visit to Lily takes place in a parlor decorated with "discoloured steel engravings of sentimental episodes" (482). Wharton's text, too, "discolours" the more sentimental aspects of nineteenth-century Shakespearean romantic comedy, especially as staged by Augustin Daly, by drawing on the plays' darker, more ambiguous moments that simultaneously expose and perpetuate romantic fictions.

²⁸ Wolff, "Lily Bart," 75, associates French playwright Victorien Sardou with the popularization of the letter-as-plot device, but Shakespeare had also relied heavily on the letter in both *Merchant* and *Much Ado*.

Even as she "authorizes" herself early in her career as a novelist by incorporating the revered Shakespeare's texts into her own, Wharton conspicuously departs from his paradigms or employs them ironically in creating a romantic heroine who, unlike Portia and Beatrice, possesses neither wealth nor loving relations nor assured social status. Wharton's novel anticipates not only the strategies of many postmodern productions of Shakespeare in its social critique but also the practice of several contemporary American women novelists whose work reveals "the limitations of [Shakespeare's] plots as well-known cultural myths about women's possibilities."²⁹ Restoring the bite, the edge to Shakespearean comedy that Daly's relentlessly charming productions so scrupulously excised in the interests of good taste, pictorial quality, and, of course, marketability, Wharton's novel quietly challenges such attempts to keep the theater an untainted "house of mirth" and situates her within a tradition of astute female critics of Shakespeare.³⁰

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²⁹ Marianne Novy, *Engaging with Shakespeare: Responses of George Eliot and Other Women Novelists* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 7.

³⁰ An earlier version of this paper was given at the Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association Meeting at the University of California, Irvine, November 9, 1996. I would like to thank Georgianna Ziegler of the Folger Shakespeare Library and Jean Beckner of the Honnold Library for their kind assistance and Miranda Johnson-Haddad for her willingness to comment on an early draft. I am also grateful for the opportunity to have participated in the NEH-funded Folger Institute "Shakespeare Examined Through Performance," which enabled me to begin research for this article at the Folger Shakespeare Library.