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Spiritual Practitioners, Storytelling Markets, and the Economics of Consolation in Wharton's Postwar Fiction

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Abstract

In this article, I look at how a particular type of fictional character that I refer to as a spiritual practitioner—a woman who presents herself as medium, clairvoyant, or spiritual guide and earns a living through that role—makes its way into Edith Wharton's postwar writing. In the first section of the article, I examine two works that suggest that issues of faith and power, both gendered and economic, are central to Wharton's postwar fiction: A Son at the Front *and "The Looking Glass." Here I interrogate what I call the economics of consolation in these narratives, analyzing the arrangements—both emotional and financial—that spring up between Wharton's spiritual practitioners and the clients who seek comfort from them. In the second section, I show that Wharton is attuned to the dangers of occult economics, a claim I build through a reading of* Hudson River Bracketed. *Wharton uses the spiritual practitioner Grandma Scrimser to offer a meta-commentary on the spiritually bankrupt postwar publishing industry. Wharton parallels Grandma's career as an artist of sorts with that of Vance Weston, the more obvious author in the novel. As such, she invites us to read spiritual work as an allegory for modern authorship and readership.*

Keywords

spirituality, economics, the occult, A Son at the Front, Hudson River Bracketed, *"The Looking Glass"*

Spiritualism and other alternative spiritual practices typically associated with the nineteenth century were not only intensely popular in the post-WWI era but also taken seriously as expressions of faith. As thinkers like Janet Oppenheim, Alex Owen, Pamela Thurschwell, and Tatiana Kontou, among others, have

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shown, the turn into the twentieth century witnessed a rise in what can loosely be described as "occult" spiritual practices.[1] After the First World War, these movements took on new articulations as a physically and psychologically devastated population sought out new ways to cope with grief. For example, Spiritualism—the faith system organized around communicating with the dead through techniques like table turning, mediumship, and automatic writing—reached its peak in the interwar period (Hazelgrove 14),[2] as "new converts" reacted to "the unprecedented horrors of World War" (Oppenheim 2). Grieving survivors looked for unconventional ways to mourn their lost loved ones, and stories of "spirit soldiers return[ing] home—writing, speaking, and sometimes even materializing through mediums"—were quite common (Kontou 6).

This moment of collective mourning dovetailed with academic inquiries into the occult and supernatural phenomena. For example, the Society for Psychical Research (or SPR), which sought scientific explanations for supernormal events, was founded in the late nineteenth century, but the organization's work thrived in the twentieth. And it is not coincidental that two of its most outspoken advocates, renowned physicist Sir Oliver Lodge and beloved detective fiction writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, had both lost sons to the war. Lodge's *Raymond; or, Life and Death* (1916)—which presents the physicist's scientific justification for supernormal phenomena and includes transcripts of sittings wherein he, his wife, and his living son, Alec, communicated with the dead son, Raymond—became a bestseller and was highly influential within the general population. Jay Winter explains that *Raymond* "shows the dead themselves attempting to reach the living in order both to help them cope with the pain of bereavement and to help establish the truth of the spiritualist message" (62). Spiritualism, among other alternative faiths, therefore offered what we might think of as a public service of consolation.

I demonstrate in this article that this historical moment, marked by spiritual seeking and experimentation, is recorded not only in the SPR's minutes, the many journals devoted to psychical inquiry and the occult published during and after the war, or specialized hybrid works like *Raymond* and Doyle's fictional defense of spiritualism, *The Land of Mist* (1926), but also on the pages of literary fiction from the 1920s and 1930s. Specifically, I look at how a particular type of postwar fictional character that I refer to as a *spiritual practitioner*—a woman who presents herself as medium, clairvoyant, or spiritual guide and earns a living through that role—makes its way into Edith Wharton's postwar writing. I begin by examining two works that suggest that issues of faith and power, both gendered and economic, are central to Wharton's fiction of the

period: *A Son at the Front* (1923) and "The Looking Glass" (1935). In the first section of the article, I interrogate what I call the *economics of consolation* in these narratives, analyzing the arrangements—both emotional and financial—that spring up between Wharton's spiritual practitioners and the clients who seek comfort from them. Wharton's spiritual practitioners engage in acts of deception, at times even deliberately lying to their customers, and yet Wharton suggests that these transactions are fair and even moral. Indeed, as I will show, Wharton's fiction consistently maintains that belligerent and postwar societies give rise not only to new economic systems but also to new ethical ones.

At the same time, Wharton is attuned to the dangers of occult economics, a claim I build through a reading of *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929). As I argue in the second section of this article, Wharton uses the spiritual practitioner Grandma Scrimser to comment on the postwar publishing industry, which Wharton depicts as spiritually bankrupt because it is driven solely by economic concerns. Wharton overtly parallels Grandma's career as an artist of sorts—she is a public performer who occasionally publishes her thoughts in religious periodicals—with that of Vance Weston, the more obvious author in *Hudson River Bracketed*. In this way, Wharton invites us to read spiritual work—in other words, the storytelling her spiritual practitioners engage in—as an allegory for modern authorship and readership.

The Economics of Consolation

Wharton was not alone in examining the economics of consolation in her late works. During and after the First World War, a wide range of women of letters—from experimental authors like H.D., Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Mary Butts, to more formally conservative ones like May Sinclair and Dorothy Richardson, or largely forgotten figures like the practicing occultist Dion Fortune—wrote about alternative spiritualities, and many of them explored how unorthodox faiths could generate new social and economic opportunities for women. These were live and contestable views in the period. Indeed, as early as 1916, one publication, *The Umpire*, "complained that mediums 'preyed' on the emotions of the war dead, a view that was regularly preached by the press and clergy throughout the duration of the Great War" (Hazelgrove 4). At the same time, others viewed mediums as offering genuine "therapeutic services for the bereaved. As Europeans grieved over the losses in the Great War, the impulse to maintain relationships with the dead was strong. Spiritualism supplied an

outlet for this emotion" (Hazelgrove 35). And, with room for some exceptions, those mediums themselves sincerely viewed their work as a humanitarian public service, as Jay Winter and Jenny Hazelgrove have convincingly argued.

Wharton weighs in on this cultural debate through characters like Mme. Olida of *A Son at the Front* and Mrs. Attlee of "The Looking Glass," women whose careers as spiritual practitioners thrive, and in Mrs. Attlee's case begin, during the war. Contemporary reviews of both works took note of this topic. For example, Maurice Francis Egan, reviewing *Son* for the *New York Times Book Review*, stated that "when the clairvoyant, Mme. Olida, enters [the novel], one recognizes a common phase of the effect of war on restless and darkened souls. Spiritism and black magic and white magic, crystal globes and all manner of esoteric divinations were resorted to" (Egan in Tuttleton et al. 328). Similarly, a reviewer of Wharton's *The World Over* (1936), in which "The Looking Glass" was collected, acknowledged that the spiritual practitioner Mrs. Attlee "brightens the life of a client by pretending to bring spirit messages" (G.S. in Tuttleton et al. 536).

These commentaries are illuminating on various levels. First, Egan's review demonstrates that Spiritualism and other occult rituals were commonplace during the war, as were discussions of how those practices were used to compensate for losses stemming from the conflict. Second, both reviews not only point to the interpenetration of the occult and economics but also imply that dishonesty is not necessarily amoral. Neither reviewer passes judgment on the spiritual practitioner under discussion; if anything, Egan expresses sympathy for Olida, whose dark arts cannot help her save her own son, Pepito (Tuttleton et al. 328), while the reviewer of *The World Over* explicitly approves of Mrs. Attlee's methods. As such, these reviews gesture toward the complex morality that Wharton elaborates in her postwar fiction about the market for solace.

Before turning to these spiritual practitioners and the moral spheres in which they reside, it is important to acknowledge that Wharton was aware of, and deeply critical toward, those who exploited the war for their own personal gain. These concerns run through her wartime correspondence and undergird subplots of *A Son at the Front*. They also fundamentally motivate "Her Son" (1932), a disturbing story that, like *Son*, focuses on war, grief, and filial bonds. Set in postwar Europe, "Her Son" features Mrs. Glenn, a widow who, having lost her legitimate son to the war, determines to search for another, Stephen, whom she put up for adoption when he was a baby. A profiteering threesome posing as the now-grown Stephen and his adoptive parents latches onto Mrs. Glenn and capitalizes off her pain. Wharton plainly wants us to feel the horror of the situation—"Her Son" carries Gothic overtones in some places and

resembles captivity narratives in others—and to condemn the three racketeers, who drain Mrs. Glenn's finances until all four are approaching destitution.

However, I would argue that even in this bleak story about war-related grief, economic manipulation, and emotional blackmail, the ethical conclusions Wharton arrives at are complicated. In several places, Wharton demonstrates that Mrs. Glenn derives a great deal of comfort, albeit sometimes of a masochistic sort, from the unusual situation. She even implies that Mrs. Glenn senses she is being swindled and accepts it, viewing it as a perverse form of expiation for the perceived sin of giving Stephen up for adoption. In other words, the foursome's bargain hinges on an economic exchange, wherein Mrs. Glenn, in one very important sense, pays to be deluded. Moreover, when Mrs. Glenn's friend Norcutt, who is the narrator of the story, discovers the truth about the criminals' identities, he begs them to keep lying because he believes the truth will destroy Mrs. Glenn. Deceit, he understands, can be benevolent. He articulates these inverted ethics when he warns the man posing as Stephen, "It [telling the truth] will be the most unpardonable. . . . The time's past for trying to square your own conscience. What you've got to do now is to go on lying to her" (570). This intricate and sophisticated moral design, produced by what I call the economics of consolation, lurks just under the surface of "Her Son"; in *A Son at the Front* and "The Looking Glass," it emerges more openly and forcefully.

One subplot of *A Son at the Front* showcases Mme. Olida, a clairvoyant who relays prophecies to elite women who have sons in the war. Invariably positive, Olida's messages, delivered for a fee, provide tremendous comfort to the mothers, who anxiously await news of their loved ones through more traditional outlets like letters and war communiqués. To an extent, Olida takes her place alongside the greedy charity workers whom Wharton exposes as fraudulent humanitarians elsewhere in the novel. When John Campton's ex-wife Julia asks him to go to a sitting with her to get information about their enlisted son George—"Everybody goes to her—everybody who's anxious about anyone. Even the scientific people believe in her"—he reluctantly agrees, thinking to himself that it is "pseudo-scientific humbug" (129). His skepticism is ultimately confirmed once the sitting begins. In an odd plot twist, we learn that Campton and Olida had an affair when they were younger, and Olida uses knowledge of Campton's past—specifically, what he looked like, including his full head of red hair before it thinned and went gray—to make her divinations convincing. Guessing that the son takes after the father, Olida accurately describes George's features and hair, information she supposedly sees in her mystical "visions" (130) but that she actually gleans from her memory of material reality.

While Campton knows enough to see through Olida's performance, Julia is taken in. As she exclaims to Campton afterward, "Isn't she wonderful? Didn't you see how she seem [*sic*] to *recognize* George? There's no mistaking his hair! How could she have known what it was like? Don't think me foolish—I feel so comforted!" (132). Here and elsewhere—as when Olida claims she possesses "magical secrets that will protect" George at the front, including a "Moorish salve, infallible against bullets . . . handed down from King Solomon" (205; ellipses orig.)—the medium comes across as a fraud of the worst variety.

And yet Wharton's treatment of this character is anything but straightforward and simplistic. For one, Wharton, like Egan in the review of *Son*, refuses to unequivocally condemn Olida. Instead, she casts her as a savvy businesswoman navigating the realities of single motherhood and immigrant status in a belligerent society. Here Olida's backstory, which Wharton traces in some detail, is important. Readers learn that after Olida had her affair with Campton in Spain, where she was born and raised, she married a Frenchman who took her from her homeland. At first the couple ran a successful "Beauty Shop" in Biarritz, but after she gave birth to their son Pepito and lost her beauty, he abandoned her, running away with a "manicure and all their savings" (204). She "had had a struggle to bring up her boy; but she had kept on with the Beauty Shop, had made a success of it, and not long before the war had added fortune-telling to massage and hair-dressing" (204). Narrating her more recent history to Campton, Olida says, "When the war broke out I came to Paris; I knew that all the mothers would want news of their sons. I have made a great deal of money; and I have had wonderful results—wonderful!" (204).

Olida, to be sure, profits off the conditions of war, including stricken mothers' vulnerability. But at the same time, Wharton seems to admire Olida's fortitude and craftiness. Significantly, Olida works stereotypes of Spanish exoticness to her advantage. Olida's literal and figurative accessories—including her "gold ear-rings gleam[ing] under her oiled black hair"; the "vases of pampas grass" and a "stuffed monkey" hanging "from the electrolier" in her salon; and her assistant, "a young man with Levantine eyes," who wears "a showy necktie" and "a large emerald . . . on his manicured hand" (130)—neatly conform to sitters' expectations about the fortune-telling industry. In this way, Wharton takes pains to show that the clairvoyant—herself a mother with a son at the front, bereft of her husband and dispossessed of her homeland—has adroitly found a way to anchor herself within a foreign community and economy.

In addition, Wharton indicates in several places that Olida's prophecies are genuine. As a young woman, Olida predicts that she and Campton will

"'come together' again" someday (129), an event clearly borne out in the plot. Moreover—and more importantly—her wartime predictions generally come true. At the original sitting, Olida prophesies that George will send his parents a letter soon, which he does. She also sees a vision of a wounded young man in a German hospital trying to communicate with Campton, apparently Campton's young acquaintance Benny Upsher, who in fact has been injured during combat and taken captive by the Germans. Although the incredulous Campton thinks that it is "absurd to attach any importance to poor Olida's vaticinations," "the vividness of her description of the baby-faced boy dying in a German hospital . . . haunt[s] [his] nights" (135). Therefore, while elsewhere Olida's occult skills seem questionable—she cannot generate news of her own son, instead seeking information through governmental channels, and at one point she admits that she lies to her clients—Wharton refuses to categorically label Olida's practices as genuine or fraudulent. What *is* indisputable, however, is the consolation her sitters receive from her practice.

As cited above, Julia leaves the first sitting feeling "so comforted!" (132), a pattern that continues through nearly the rest of the novel. Whenever Julia feels distressed about George, she, like the other mothers in her social circle, visits Olida to get positive messages. The men in Julia's life—Campton, her husband Brant, and George himself—concede the value of the fortune-telling industry even as they lack belief in the occult themselves. For instance, George, describing an encounter with his lover Mrs. Talkett "at the new *clairvoyante*'s," states, "with his all-embracing tolerance," that "it does them all [women] a lot of good" (201). Similarly, Brant, while conversing with Campton, says, "This *clairvoyante* business: is there anything to it, do you think? You saw how calm . . . Julia was just now: she wished me to tell you that Spanish woman she goes to . . . had absolutely reassured her about . . . the future. . . . Julia put every kind of question, and couldn't trip her up; she wanted me to tell you so. It does sound . . . ?" (203). He concludes this uncertain evaluation of Olida's arts more decisively, stating, "Well, at any rate, it's a help to the mothers" (203). In fact, this consolation service is so important—with Julia at one point declaring that "so many mothers depend on her—*I couldn't live without her*" (207; emphasis mine)—that Campton begs Olida to skirt the truth regarding her inability to channel news of her son Pepito rather than cast any doubt on her skills. As he realizes, she must not "betray her private anxiety to the poor women who came to her for consolation" (206) lest the entire business fold. Whether that business is sustained through ruse or verity is, in this context, unimportant, both to Wharton's skeptical characters and, seemingly, to Wharton herself.

In this respect, the spiritual consolation portrayed in *Son* is different from that depicted in the satire *Twilight Sleep* (1927), wherein Pauline Manford patronizes multiple messiahs, occasionally paying steep prices for their services. In *Twilight Sleep*, Wharton exposes how spiritual practitioners function as a crucial mechanism in Pauline's carefully constructed machinery of avoidance; Pauline's main life goal is to prevent private pain at all costs or, more aptly, to avoid even thinking about anything that might ruffle her serenity. Wharton is concerned, in the satire, with delving into the personal and public costs of such a life. By contrast, in *Son*, Wharton's views toward Olida—a different sort of messiah—and her clients are more generous. Unlike Pauline, the women who patronize Olida are suffering intensely; while one could argue that they, like Pauline, are avoiding reality by seeking out dubious occult messages, the truth is that they are surrounded by reality—namely, the agonizing trauma of the war being waged around them. That trauma is unavoidable, omnipresent—there is no outside to it, as it permeates their daily lives, including ostensible escapes like social functions. Therefore, Wharton suggests that, in the context of war, spiritual practitioners, even if they are phonies, can offer brief periods of respite to their clients, giving them the much-needed strength to face the turbulent world they occupy.

The complex moral contracts drafted among Wharton's characters in *Son* become further complicated in the scene wherein Campton asks Olida to lie—or, at least, to evade the truth about the reliability of her skills. When he makes this request, Olida "fixe[s] her tortured velvet eyes on him reproachfully," responding, "How could you think it of me, Juanito [her nickname for him]? The money I earn is for my boy! That gives me the strength to invent a new lie every morning" (206–7). Olida's defensive interrogatory remark here—"How could you think it of me?"—carries equivocal meaning. What is she accusing Campton of thinking: that she is a liar or that she is incapable of lying to protect others? While both interpretations have merit, her subsequent words gesture toward the latter, since, even though elsewhere she claims that her powers are genuine, here she implies that her business rests on deception. But it is a dishonesty born of necessity and circumstance and, to an extent, selflessness, since she performs the questionable work in order to raise her son. Similarly, her sittings for the elite mothers of Paris, while lucrative, contain altruistic dimensions—as will the new lie she will uphold at Campton's behest. The moral apparatus structuring this subplot of *Son* is exceptionally wrought, but I argue that, in her final estimation, Wharton suggests that Olida and her clients participate in a balanced exchange: Olida receives money for her

family while the women who patronize her receive solace through her visions, however fabricated they may be.

A similarly complicated moral logic—that is, one that muddies traditional understandings of lies and deception—shapes the short story "The Looking Glass," originally published as "The Mirrors" in *Hearst Magazine* in 1935 and collected in *The World Over* in 1936. The first sentence of the story introduces the problem that motivates the story: "Mrs. Attlee had never been able to understand why there was any harm in giving people a little encouragement when they needed it" (254). While an omniscient voice delivers this line in an opening frame, the tale primarily is recounted from the point of view of Mrs. Attlee herself, providing the reader intimate access to the ethical reasoning of a spiritual practitioner. And as we soon see, for Mrs. Attlee, it doesn't matter if the "encouragement" the narrator mentions is rooted in dishonesty; what matters is people's well-being. That is, there isn't "any harm" in lying, so long as the lied-to are comforted through the deception.

The Irish Catholic Mrs. Cora Attlee, like Olida, had a profitable career as a clairvoyant during the war. Describing to her granddaughter Moyra how she became a spiritual practitioner, Mrs. Attlee explains that the war gave rise to predatory schemes targeting desperate people:

> Well . . . you know what happened in the war—I mean, the way all the fine ladies, and the poor shabby ones too, took to running to mediums and the clairvoyants, or whatever the stylish folk call 'em. The women had to have news of their men; and they were made to pay high enough for it. . . . Oh, the stories I used to hear—and the price paid wasn't only money, either! There was a fair lot of swindlers and blackmailers in the business, there was. I'd sooner have trusted a gypsy at a fair . . . but the women just *had* to go to them. (259)

Mrs. Attlee firmly distinguishes herself from these manipulators. In fact, seeing others being victimized is what inspires her to enter "the business" herself, despite misgivings based on her Catholic faith. As she explains:

> I got more and more sorry for those poor wretches that the soothsaying swindlers were dragging the money out of for a pack of lies; and one day I couldn't stand it any longer, and though I knew the Church was against it, when I saw one lady nearly crazy, because for months she'd had no

> news of her boy at the front, I said to her: "If you'll come over to my place tomorrow, I might have a word for you." (259–60)

In this first sitting, Mrs. Attlee gives the woman a positive message that gets confirmed the next day, and, as she says, "After that the ladies came in flocks" (260). Her secret practice, however, is ultimately exposed and, after being reprimanded by her church's priest, Father Divott, she gives it up. She refuses, however, to classify what she did as a sin, saying, "How could I help it? For I *did* see things, and hear things, at that time. . . . And was I to blame if I kept hearing those messages for them, poor souls, or seeing things they wanted me to see?" (260).

While these recollections provide crucial background regarding Mrs. Attlee's principles, the bulk of the story that she narrates to her granddaughter is set after the war and focuses on how she revives her career as a spiritual practitioner for her client Mrs. Clingsland. Mrs. Clingsland is a depressed, aging woman whose insecurities about her fading beauty cause her great emotional anguish. Mrs. Attlee agrees to facilitate a spirit communication between Mrs. Clingsland and Harry—a young man Mrs. Clingsland loved in her youth who lost his life on the *Titanic*—in order to help her client feel energetic and beautiful again.

Mrs. Attlee initially resists resuming her role as a spiritual practitioner, which violates her religious convictions. But, in a repetition of her wartime experience, she yields when she sees that others are poised to swindle Mrs. Clingsland: "You see, Moyra, though I broke years ago with all that crystal-reading, and table-rapping, and what the Church forbids, I was mixed up in it for a time . . . and I knew . . . most of the big mediums and their touts. And this woman on [Mrs. Clingsland's] doorstep was a tout, one of the worst and most notorious in New York; I knew cases where she'd sucked people dry selling them the news they wanted" (264). In a sense, then, she worries that Mrs. Clingsland will be taken advantage of by others if she doesn't take advantage herself. "If I was to save her from those gangsters," she tells her granddaughter, "I had to do it right away, and make it straight with my conscience afterward—if I could . . ." (264).

Mrs. Attlee completely manufactures the spirit letters from the dead Harry. Fearing her own writing skills will betray the scheme—"Writing wasn't ever my strong point; and when it came to finding the words for a young gentleman in love who'd gone down on the 'Titanic,' you might as well have asked me to write a Chinese dictionary" (267)—she hires a gifted young man with an alcohol addiction to compose the otherworldly messages for her. In this way,

Mrs. Attlee's practices are unlike her sittings during the war, which she claims were genuine. But, as in "Her Son" and *Son*, Wharton casts Mrs. Attlee's deception as a benevolent lie.

For one, Mrs. Clingsland rises out of her depression; as Julie Olin-Ammentorp puts it in *Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War*, "A patent lie can create real comfort" (207). Moreover, Mrs. Clingsland becomes a better ethical being because of the spiritual practitioner's "fraud" (269). Once "sour and bitter" (262), Mrs. Clingsland develops patience, treats her servants and family members better, and starts donating to charity cases (269). When she gives Mrs. Attlee a large sum for the young man who, unbeknownst to her, has been writing the spirit messages and has succumbed to his addiction, Mrs. Attlee reinvests it in a different spiritual economy by giving it to her church to say masses for the man's soul. As Mrs. Attlee recalls, "I had hard work making her believe there was no end to the masses you could say for a hundred dollars; but somehow it's comforted me ever since that I took no more from her that day" (274). The story concludes on this act, suggesting that Mrs. Attlee has effected a closed circuit of economic exchange.

However, the traffic of money and goods in the story—and the moral underpinnings of this trade—are more complex than they first appear. First and foremost, although Mrs. Attlee gives this last sum of money to the church, she has profited economically in other, less direct ways from her deceptive practices. Likely a widow—a Mr. Attlee is never mentioned in the story—and certainly an independent, mature woman of the working class, Mrs. Attlee is nevertheless able to purchase a home and replace her roof because of this incident with Mrs. Clingsland. Viewing Mrs. Attlee as a trusted friend, Mrs. Clingsland continues to seek out her beauty services and, even more profitably, helps her invest money in the stock market (256).

In a compelling article on the figure of the servant in Wharton's ghost fiction, Karen Jacobsen notes these plot points, which get buried within Mrs. Attlee's more sensational recollections: "Forever grateful to her 'loyal' servant for communicating Harry's messages of love, Mrs. Clingsland gives Mrs. Attlee enough money to buy a home and keep her comfortable financially in her old age" (109). Jacobsen concludes from this development that the spiritual practitioner's "primary goal is money," categorizing Mrs. Attlee as one of Wharton's servants who resent "being economically exploited" (109). Wharton certainly wants us to perceive Mrs. Attlee's acquisitive nature. Mrs. Attlee's repeated protestations of innocence and selflessness—"All I wanted was to help" (256); "I wasn't going to let it [others' schemes] happen to my poor lady" (266)—accumulate

so abundantly that they begin to read suspiciously. Nevertheless, I would argue that Wharton's stance on this character is much more ambiguous than Jacobsen allows for.

As in *Son*, all parties concerned in this deception—Mrs. Clingsland, the young man who writes the letters, and Mrs. Attlee herself—benefit from the arrangement, which Wharton depicts as utilitarian in nature: Mrs. Clingsland becomes a happier, more magnanimous person; the young man, miserably dying from his addiction, receives Mrs. Attlee's cheerful and attentive tending while writing the bogus letters; and Mrs. Attlee acquires money for herself, her future beneficiaries—including the granddaughter to whom she narrates this story—and the church. This last exchange also functions as recompense for the hazarding of her soul, since she is participating in a scheme she knows Father Divott would characterize as "wrong and immoral" (268). Mrs. Attlee instinctively grasps all these intricacies and turns them to her own, and others', advantage.

In both "The Looking Glass" and *Son*, then, Wharton constructs complex moral microcosms based on economic consolation, ones in which traditional ethics fail to obtain. Moreover, she casts single, older women as leaders within these alternative communities, women at risk of further disenfranchisement because of their national, ethnic, and religious identities. Olida is a Spanish immigrant who has settled in France, while Mrs. Attlee is a second-generation Irish Catholic immigrant living in a WASP-dominated United States. But occasionally Wharton points to the darker side of occult economics.

For example, at times Wharton casts Mrs. Attlee as a dangerous enabler. The consolation Mrs. Clingsland derives from the occult arrangement gets equated more than once with an addictive drug (268, 269–70). While we might view Mrs. Clingsland's dependency as a comeuppance of sorts, agreeing with Karen Jacobsen that "Mrs. Clingsland is depicted as so silly and vain readers cannot help but feel she deserves to be duped" (109), Mrs. Attlee's methods are also employed on the literal addict in the story, the young man whom she hires to write the letters. When she first describes their arrangement, she says that she remunerates him with "little dainties" (269), but later one wonders what precisely those dainties are. On her last visit to him—when she speaks to him as he lies in bed, not realizing that he is dead—she offers him "a pint of champagne and a thermos of hot soup," but declares that she will only give it to him after he has performed the writing task (271). Here Mrs. Attlee comes across less like a savvy financial manager or a compassionate clairvoyant and more like a conniving, even vicious Spiritualist.

The underside of spiritual consolation, though it emerges in different ways, is also on display in *Hudson River Bracketed*, which I turn to in the following section. On the one hand, the storyline of the spiritual practitioner Grandma Scrimser, even more than Mme. Olida's or Mrs. Attlee's, reveals the potential that alternative faith practices hold for older women seeking social, physical, and economic independence. But on the other hand, Wharton shows that spiritual consolation can become so commodified that it is rendered empty and meaningless. Unlike Mme. Olida and Mrs. Attlee, who operate their businesses within well-defined social microcosms, Grandma Scrimser, a spiritual practitioner of a different variety, literally goes on tour. Backed by a powerful department store based in New York City that bills her as "God's Confidante, Mrs. Loraine Scrimser" (443), she travels from town to town to spread her homespun message about "Meeting God" (428). But that message, initially distilled and genuine, both dissipates and curdles through the taint of corporate economics.

Storytelling and the Postwar Spiritual Marketplace

All three narratives under discussion contain male artist figures—Vance in *Hudson River Bracketed*, John Campton in *A Son at the Front*, and the unnamed letter writer in "The Looking Glass"—and all three also invite us to compare these men's creative productions (novels, paintings, and fictional letters) with the unconventional artistry of their female counterparts. For example, Mrs. Attlee hires the surrogate letter writer because "those big people, when they talk and write to each other, they use lovely words we ain't used to; and I was afraid if I began to bring messages to her, I'd word them wrong" (266); but the masterful crafting of the story she tells her granddaughter places her authorial power on par with his talents. The tensions between these two competing artistic visions—one coded as masculine, realist, and legitimate and the other as feminine, mystical, and suspect—are most palpable in *Hudson River Bracketed*, but they exist in all three works. Moreover, as I argue in this section, both Grandma Scrimser's staged religious performances and Mme. Olida and Mrs. Attlee's prophecies—all acts that entail inventing comforting stories and delivering them to an audience for a price—metaphorize the compacts that the postwar author must form and negotiate in order to survive within in an evolving, and increasingly materialistic and vulgar, literary marketplace.

Hudson River Bracketed opens in a humorous vein by recalling the protagonist Vance's attempts, as a nineteen-year-old, to "[invent] a new religion" (3).

While Wharton very obviously, and somewhat inelegantly, uses this anecdote to cast Vance as naïve, provincial, and egotistic—having grown up in the Midwest town of Euphoria, "a world in which everything had been, or was being renovated, . . . it struck him as an anomaly that all the religions he had heard of had been in existence ever since he could remember" (3)—it more subtly aligns him with his grandmother, the only figure in his youth similarly attuned to life's transcendent possibilities. Once Vance has moved away from home, he realizes that she "was the one human being at Euphoria who had dimly guessed what he was groping for: their souls had brushed wings in the twilight. . . ." (267; ellipses orig.). Vance and Grandma Scrimser are counterparts, then, both in their search for spiritual experience—or, as Horner and Beer put it, their shared "inclination for the numinous" (99)—and, later, in their artistic pursuits.

Prior to her husband's death, Grandma Scrimser, who "had always cared about it [religion] more than about anything else" (5), leads a rich spiritual life. Her faith practices—attending church, reading religious periodicals, and engaging in reform work—lend shape to her daily, small-town routine. Once she becomes a widow, however, Grandma Scrimser's "transcendental yearnings" (8) take on new expressions, ultimately leading her to a lucrative career in the spiritual industry, one that takes her out of Euphoria and across the country. In her new role as spiritual practitioner, Grandma Scrimser experiences exceptional freedoms—social, physical, and economic—that her long marriage to Grandpa Scrimser hindered.

In the first chapter of *Hudson River Bracketed*, the narrator states that Grandma Scrimser "had never been much of a hand at making or keeping money" (5), but this statement is belied throughout Wharton's paired novels. In this same chapter, for instance, we learn that the extended Weston family once "depended on [Grandma's] earnings" as a schoolteacher in Nebraska (4). This experience, mentioned only in passing, anticipates Grandma's offer later in the novel to financially support the struggling Vance and his ill wife, Laura Lou, after she has earned money on the preaching circuit. In a reversal of traditional gender roles, then, Wharton casts Grandma Scrimser in the role of family breadwinner. Moreover, in her treatment of Grandma's career as a spiritual practitioner, Wharton makes a subtle, but important statement about widowhood. Grandma's new single status does not force her onto the job market; rather, her marriage to Grandpa Scrimser obstructed her participation in the workforce. As the narrator states toward the end of *Hudson River Bracketed*, "Since Grandpa's death, she [Grandma Scrimser] had been able to give more

time to spiritual things" (428). Although she resides with the Westons when she is not on tour, her free time functions as a figurative room of one's own.

To an extent, Wharton admires Grandma Scrimser's ability to earn a living through her spiritual work. She sets this character, with her financial acumen, in strong contrast not only to Vance—who is unable to net a living wage through his authorship, a failure that carries serious, arguably fatal consequences—but also, and more provocatively, to women of the upcoming generation. Laura Lou and Halo, Wharton makes clear, are not financially independent. In fact, they get ensnared in unofficial monetary contracts with men—Bunty Hayes and Lewis Tarrant, respectively—that want to marry them, obligations that objectify the young women and render them powerless.

At the same time as she seems to celebrate Grandma Scrimser's independence, however, Wharton has doubts about the arc of the spiritual practitioner's career. If, as Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith have observed, Vance's experiences as an author "voice [Wharton's] ambivalence about the costs of her [own] commercial success" (7), then Grandma's story reveals her deep anxieties about it. For Grandma's story, even more than Vance's, demonstrates how corporate greed and the vulgarization of popular taste can force artists to commit aesthetic treachery. Put differently, Vance's dealings with publishers allow Wharton to satirize, at a safe distance, a market-driven industry, while Grandma's experiences register darker, more personal concerns about her own participation in it.

Prior to being contracted to Storecraft, Grandma Scrimser travels widely, preaching an idiosyncratic spiritual message—Carol Singley describes it as "vaguely transcendental" (3) and a "curious blend of Christian fundamentalist and transcendentalist" (198)—that Grandma herself calls "Meeting God" (428). Containing elements of mysticism, transcendentalism, and Swedenborgianism, Grandma Scrimser's message becomes quite popular, with periodicals like *Spirit Life* inviting her to contribute pieces for their readership (428). Her spiritual vision is unworldly and nebulous, to be sure, but Wharton also describes it as almost painfully earnest. This is perhaps best exhibited in the chapter in which Grandma Scrimser travels to New York City to speak to "The Seekers," an elite group in search of the latest in spiritual fads. Grandma's plain speech falls flat with the audience, who seems to expect either a sensational medium or a "foremost exponent of the new psychical ethics" (434). While Grandma is not entirely immune from the social satire in this episode, Wharton nevertheless characterizes her as a genuine and sincere spiritualist, unlike the sham Seekers after a thrill.

Grandma's homegrown, unadulterated message of faith, however, comes under threat when the owner of Storecraft, a department store that "Supplies Taste and saves Money" (311), hears of her performance and hires her to go on a lecture tour. Founded and run by the enterprising Bunty Hayes, Laura Lou's erstwhile fiancé, Storecraft aims to bring refined culture to the masses—at a discount price. A mega-emporium located in New York City—perhaps, as Ann Patten has argued, modeled after Wanamaker's in Philadelphia (12)—Storecraft originally trades in such goods as haute couture French women's fashions by Chanel, Vionnet, and Patou. But Bunty has bigger dreams, as he explains to Vance: "We're going to move to Fifth Avenue next year. If you want to *do* big, you got to *see* big. That's my motto. See here, now; you live in the suburbs: well, we're the commuter's Providence. Supply you with everything you like. . . . We're going to have an art guild next year: buy your old masters for you, and all you got to do is to drive the hooks into your parlour wall and invite the neighbors" (312). His aim to commercialize high culture takes on even bigger proportions later when he hosts an exhibit for futurist art and enters the publishing market "to show the old fossils how literature ought to be handled" (508).

Wharton's cynical take on Storecraft reaches its climax when Bunty expands his enterprise to include spirituality: Storecraft, as Bunty proclaims, "aims to handle all the human interests. We can't leave out religion, any more'n we could art or plumbing" (440). Grandma earns a great deal of money by entering into a contract with Storecraft, but, as Vance points out, her message sours through the taint of corporate influence. When he refuses her offer of monetary help, Vance aligns their artistry, saying, "Don't you see, Granny, we can't either of us live on money that isn't honestly got?" (448). If the grandson and grandmother are paralleled at the beginning of *Hudson River Bracketed*, they continue to be so throughout the novel and here toward the end. Indeed, Grandma's path is the very one that Vance himself, as an author with an original, and spiritual, vision, spends the novel resisting, particularly after he enters into publishing contracts that he feels degrade his art.

By overtly aligning Vance and his grandmother in this way, Wharton implies that not just Grandma Scrimser but perhaps all of her spiritual practitioners are stand-ins for authors on the modern literary scene, specifically ones who sacrifice or modify their creative vision in order to get their work published and earn a living. Describing emergent storytelling markets in the 1920s, Botshon and Goldsmith focus on "women writers who successfully made transitions between literature and the burgeoning technologies of magazine publication, book clubs, advertising, radio, and film, institutions that deliberately targeted

'middle' audiences for maximum distribution and profits" (4). This, of course, was also Wharton's own dilemma. Nearly all of Wharton's novels from the 1920s, including *The Age of Innocence* (1920), were serialized in middlebrow magazines targeted toward a female readership.[3] Her memoir, *A Backward Glance* (1934), first appeared in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, while her short stories appeared in such venues as *Redbook* and *Woman's Home Companion*. Mrs. Attlee and Grandma Scrimser made their debut in, respectively, *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan* and *The Delineator*.

These are all publications that demanded that Wharton adapt, to a greater or lesser degree, her writing to suit their conventions. One figurehead at Appleton gently admonished that *The Age of Innocence* "was a little too fine" for the *Pictorial Review* readership (Reynolds to Jewett, 13 Oct. 1920, Appleton MSS, Box 21, Folder 2), while others gave more explicit instructions. For example, *Pictorial Review* managing editor Arthur T. Vance implored an agent at Appleton to caution Wharton about the expectations of his readership when composing *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922):

> I do wish . . . that you would impress upon Mrs. Wharton the fact that this story is planned to be run serially in a popular magazine and for the privilege of running it serially we are paying her a great sum of money and that we would most certainly appreciate it if she could divide her story in four parts, so that each part leads up to a climax or interesting situation that will leave the reader in suspense and eager to get the next issue of the magazine.

"Now please do not misunderstand me," he continues, "I do not expect Mrs. Wharton to do a dime novel climax or a family-story-paper break, but it can be done in a dignified, artistic way" (Vance to Reynolds, 13 Oct. 1920, Appleton MSS, Box 21, Folder 2). Through her spiritual practitioners and their moral quandaries, then, Wharton explores the artistic predicaments generated out of this sort of editorial mandate. What betrayals of the self and others—whether spiritual practitioner and clients or author and readers—must one engage in in order to survive?

Late in the novel, Vance, while preserving his own artistic purity, seems resigned to Grandma's path. His reasoning resonates strongly with the situation in which Wharton and other postwar authors found themselves: "The system was detestable, the results were pitiable. . . . But his grandmother had to have the money, and her audiences had to have the particular blend of homemade

religiosity that she knew how to brew. . . . The fraud was there, it was only farther back, in the national tolerance of ignorance, the sentimental plausibility, the rush for immediate results, the get-rich-quick system applied to the spiritual life. . . ." (497; ellipses original). While ostensibly about Grandma's lecture tour, this also reads as a damning indictment of the modern publishing industry: an untutored, but paying class of readers expects cheap thrills and sentimentality, and authors, knowing those tastes and how to concoct the mixture to satisfy them, participate in artistic "fraud." Not unlike Mme. Olida and Mrs. Attlee, who lie to their clients, authors hawk fake stories to placate their readers and earn their living. But in the case of authors, as the allegory within *Hudson River Bracketed* suggests, there seems to be no benefit or humanitarian impulse at work. Instead, they feed a monstrous system that destroys the very culture to which they aspire to contribute.

These spiritual practitioners allow us to think more carefully about Wharton's late fiction. Scholars have noted that primary male characters either are enfeebled or fail to appear altogether in much of Wharton's fiction from the 1920s and 1930s, and the works discussed in this article are no exception. In *A Son at the Front*, for example, the male characters die during the war (George Campton, Benny Upsher, etc.) or are rendered irrelevant because of it (John Campton); by contrast, the spiritual practitioner Mme. Olida not only survives the war but also turns it to her advantage. In fact, all of Wharton's spiritual practitioners surmount difficulties and flourish in modern settings, a fact that is even more remarkable when we consider that the aging female characters in Wharton's late fiction are generally disempowered.

Avril Horner and Janet Beer, in their study of middle-aged women in Wharton's late fiction, persuasively show how women like "Kate Clephane [*The Mother's Recompense*], Rose Sellars [*The Children*] and Laura Testvalley [*The Buccaneers*], are often . . . rootless and homeless. All are willing exiles, of course, but that sense of homelessness as the 'modern condition'—combined with a fear of aging—make them very twentieth-century women" (10). These characters find themselves adrift in what Wharton describes, in more than one postwar work, as the modern "whirl," "glare," or "void."[4] By contrast, the aging female characters I discuss in this article use their occupation as spiritual practitioners to secure themselves a physical, social, and economic place within an ever-shifting modern landscape.

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Notes

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1. Leon Surette, in *The Birth of Modernism*, defines occultism "as metaphysical speculation—speculation about the nature of ultimate reality and of our relation to it. Typically nontheistic and monistic, it is also typically mystical. All varieties of occultism of which I am aware assume the possibility of direct contact between living human beings and ultimate reality, the noumenal, the transcendent, or the divine" (13).

2. Hazelgrove, borrowing data from Geoffrey K. Nelson's 1960s study *Spiritualism and Society*, states that "in 1914, there were 145 societies affiliated to the Spiritualists' National Union (SNU); by 1919 there were 309. In 1932, the newly established Spiritualist London-based journal *Psychic News* announced that there were 500 societies affiliated to the SNU" (14).

3. *A Son at the Front*, an exception, was originally serialized by *Scribner's*. Most of Wharton's 1920s novels first appeared in the *Pictorial Review*.

4. See, respectively, *The Mother's Recompense* (240), *The Children* (274), and *Twilight Sleep* (74).

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