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A Reversal of Perspective: The Mother's Voice in Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense*

In 1984 Tillie Olsen wrote, "Most of what has been, is, between mothers, daughters, and in motherhood, in daughterhood, has never been recorded, not (even as yet) written with comprehension in our own voice, out of our own lives and truths" (1984, *275*). The way in which women have been portrayed in Western cultural tradition has been largely shaped according to male-determined and male-oriented assumptions which consider women largely in terms of their relationship first with men and then with their (preferably male) children. Women have thus been deemed important only in so far as they were wives, mothers or "love" interests of men. But what happens when a woman gives birth to another woman if, as Adrienne Rich puts it,

> there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other? (1976, *225-26*)

Since society expects a mother to perform a role-perpetuating function, raising her daughter to be a wife and a mother in her turn according to specific, preestablished social standards,[1] most of what is entailed by the relationship between mother and daughter falls outside of what is the accepted social context of men-women relationships, and, for this reason, it remains unsaid. As Signe Hammer argues,

> This has the paradoxical effect of making the mother-daughter relationship an "underground" one, whose emotional power and importance may be

> increased precisely because it is "underground," with no wider context than the immediately personal through which it can be channeled into a more conscious and concrete form. What is taken for granted, and therefore ignored, may be the most powerful. *(xiii)*

We need to call into question these constants of our culture that perpetuate a stereotype which prevents mother and daughters (as potential wives and mothers) from seeing themselves or each other as separate people, individuals, independently of the role they are expected to play in/by society.

Over the past decade, however, the lamented lack in mother-daughter literature has been alleviated by the publication of a wealth of studies in different disciplines, which thus sanction its centrality in feminist scholarship. But the focus in this "charmed preoedipal dyad" (Kahn *72-88)* has been almost exclusively on the child, and the mother exists not as a subject in her own right but only in relation to her child. As Louise Bernikow has contended in her book *Among Women,*

> The daughters have taken it upon themselves to tell the story of mothers and daughters, partly to break the silence of the mothers and daughters, partly to break the silence of the mothers, and partly to stand against the primacy of the fathers in our lives, in culture and in history. In becoming archaeologists of the world of our mothers, we are trying to retrieve the female past and to invent a future. *(46)*

Bernikow's statement points to a tendency which has been dominant even among feminists: writing has been mostly a "daughterly" activity, and motherhood and the maternal have been investigated from the perspective of the daughter. The mother's subjectivity often disappears, displaced by the foregrounding of the subjectivity of daughters. The "daughter-centricity" (Reddy and Daly 2) that characterizes most feminist studies of motherhood has brought about a silencing of the mother's voice which Jessica Benjamin, in *The Bonds of Love,* claims is a consequence of the perception of the mother developed by theories of self which express a view "deeply embedded in culture as a whole," namely that" [the mother] is the external reality —but she is rarely regarded as another subject with a purpose apart from her existence for her child" *(23-24).*

As Marianne Hirsh points out in *The Mother-Daughter Plot,* "in her

maternal function, [the mother] remains an object, always distanced, always idealized or denigrated, always mystified through the small child's point of view" *(167).* Thus, my aim in this paper is to analyze the potentially disruptive force of the mother's voice when she speaks as a subject who shapes "herstory." I hope to show how the mother's voice comes into play as the ground on which an inherent ambivalence towards the identification within traditional codes of behavior and their subversion is played out in a search for self and identity which tells a different story of motherhood.

In Western literary tradition, the realist mother-daughter narrative has presented maternal absence and silence as the *conditio sine qua non* for the daughter's development, for the successful outcome of her process of individuation-separation. It is the mother's disempowerment or elimination that allows the heroine access to the plot.

> The bond between mother and daughter, daughter and mother, must be broken so that the daughter can become woman. Female genealogy must be suppressed, in favor of the relation son-Father, of the idealization of the father and the husband as patriarchs.[2]

While retaining the presence of the maternal figure as necessary but continuing to adopt a daughterly perspective, most feminist scholarship seems to ally itself with patriarchy by relegating the mother to a position of object, thereby keeping maternal discourse outside of representation. Metaphors of sisterhood ("sisterhood is powerful") or of friendship became the dominant images in the representation of female and feminist relationship in the 1970s, in a rejection of the maternal as a continued bondage to men and patriarchy. The mother is thus stigmatized as the "root of all evil," either feared as the all-powerful Phallic Mother or criticized as the powerless mother, helpless in the face of a patriarchal society which she is seen as perpetuating.[3] As Rich argues,

> Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers'; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery. *(236)*

Even within feminist discourses, then, the mother is an "absent presence" (Kaplan 3), displaced as the (M)other in a perpetuation of patriarchal discourse.

The maternal as the *locus* of silence and absence, of the "mother-as-she-is-spoken-about," has to become the *locus* of the mother as subject, the "mother-as-she-speaks," who ceases being merely the object of the discourse of the other. Only thus can mothers and daughters speak to one another and become subjects of their own reality.

Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense*[4] puts an end to the cultural muteness of the mother, filling with voice the vacant space of a silence which Tillie Olsen defines as "unnatural":

> Literary history and the present are dark with silences ... These are not *natural* silences ... that necessary time for renewal, lying fallow, gestation, in the natural cycle of creation. The silences I speak of here are unnatural: the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot. *(Silences 6)*

This novel is thus the portrayal of a first attempt towards emergence from the silence required of a woman and a mother as such, a silence socially imposed and psychically internalized which Wharton makes both the stifling and muffling of human creativity and speech, and the particular silence of women who speak, but cannot quite hear themselves or be heard by others.

It is interesting to note here that a first incomplete manuscript concerning the upper class New York Clephane family had been written in 1902. Cynthia Wolff points out that an outline and notations on this novel were present in all of Wharton's notebooks until 1925. According to Wolff,

> in some form Edith Wharton carried the fictional world that is finally realized in *The Mother's Recompense* for more than twenty-five years. It is the more persistent, the more firmly tenured, of all the residents in the shadow world from which her novels emerge. *(357-58)*

The focus of interest of the fragment, however, is mainly on the abandoned daughter, as she contemplates her loneliness and her dependence on her rather since her mother's desertion, even though Wolff concludes that the tracing of the daughter's "disintegration ... does not successfully dominate

the unfinished work, for another theme erupts with contrapuntal insistence, introducing another possible set of problems and another locus of interest. This is the plight of the mother" *(100).*

Wharton's explicit redefinition of her focus to center on the mother is immediately established in the choice of the title itself, which is particularly telling in the way it inscribes the narrative within an established, popular literary tradition and in so doing ironically undermines it (thus anticipating the mode of development of the narrative proper). In fact, Wharton took her title from a popular novel, *The Mother's Recompense,* written by Grace Aguilar in 1850, and, aware of her ironic use, she placed an apology at the beginning of her own novel "to the decorous shade of Grace Aguilar, ... for deliberately appropriating, and applying to uses so different, the title of one of the most admired of her tales." The Victorian novelist had written a didactic narrative intended to demonstrate the effects of conscientious maternal devotion which has as its reward after all the rebellions that the mother must endure to secure her daughter in a good marriage: the enriched closeness not only of mother and daughter but also of the entire family.

> There are many sorrows and many cares inseparable from maternal love, but they are forgotten, utterly forgotten, or only remembered to enhance the sweetness of the recompense that ever follows. Do you not think to see my children, as I do now around me, walking in that path which alone can lead to eternal life, and leading their offspring with them, bringing up so tenderly, so fondly their children as heirs of immortality, and yet lavishing on me, as for all which for them I may have done or borne? *(498)*

In her novel, Wharton plays on the traditional encoding of woman-as-mother and as incarnation of the ideal of "true womanhood" that Aguilar's text sets out to glorify. In fact, she turns this traditional structure on its head, creating in Kate's fragmented voice a denial of what Dale Bauer defines as the "ideologerne of the mother-woman" *(130)* and, consequently, of the ideologeme of "the true woman." But, at the same time, the ambivalence inscribed within Kate's voice testifies to the strength of the cultural code, of the tradition she has internalized and that has constructed her "as the subject of a particularly American ideology" (Bauer *130).*

The mother in Wharton's novel is the focalizer of the story (that is, the agent whose perceptions orient the presentation): only her perspective is

given, and through it are sifted all the events that take place in the narrative and the other characters' discourses, thus enacting a resistance to the monologic voice of cultural prescription. At the outset of the novel, Kate Clephane is a woman who, threatened with the slow annihilation of a lifeless marriage, has abandoned her husband and has therefore subverted her position within the social roles advocated by the ideology of true womanhood, which are, as Mary Papke points out,

> possible self-fulfillment as mother, wife and lady free from the toil and exploitation of the marketplace.... The woman who approached the ideal obliterated her sense of self and virtually existed only in relation to others. The ideological demands, in other words, necessitated that woman exploit a male ideal of womanhood and thus erase her own specificity and self-will. *(16)*

In order to gain a self, she must reject the cultural ideology that defines her as object, possession, body with economic value.

What Kate undermines with her escape is the tie established between marriage and identity, culture's predilection to identify marriage for a woman as the only approved source of her identity and outlet for her energies. In fact, in her discourse marriage is often associated with images of captivity ("[she felt] the closing-in on her of all the old bounds," *59)* and asphyxiation, with the stifling of the self and of identity rather than with its fulfillment.

Kate refuses her reduction to sign status, that she will be whatever is necessary and desirable for her to be, the "signifier" which is attached to a range of "signifieds" ("the real nature of the true woman is that she is other, sign—she does not exist for and in herself'"):

> In her first years of marriage there had been the continual vain effort to adapt herself to her husband's point of view, to her mother-in-law's standards, to all the unintelligible ritual with which they barricaded themselves against the alarming business of living. *(73)*

Her "vain effort" to submit to the standards of a culture that constructed "femininity," fashioning women to be ornamental and inarticulate, is also her rejection of a constructed identity, formed by/for others, of a commodified self as a "property" which her husband includes (significantly,

at the end) in the list of his possessions: "John Clephane, at the foot of the table, [was] proud of his house, proud of his wine, proud of his cook, still half-proud of his wife" *(66)*. This passage echoes the conventional belief that a man's self and status are reflected by and find confirmation in the appearance and style of his wife and material possessions.[6] Thus, when Kate rejects culture's definition of her role, she comes dangerously close to overthrowing the primacy of the male's monolithic discourse of subjectivity (and it is probably for this reason that, even after years of irreprehensible behavior on her part, her husband still mistrusts her).

Inverting the lesson of socialization and submission that is internalized by women in patriarchy, she becomes "socially unplaceable" (Goodwin *86*): she is without the definition (wife, mistress, mother) with which she would have been provided through her relationship with a man. Having broken out of "the prison of her marriage" *(73)*, she had also stepped out of her role as a mother, a role towards which her deep ambivalence is revealed in one of the most telling passages in the text:

> She had left Anne when Anne was a baby of three; left her with a dreadful pang, a rending of the inmost fibers, and yet a sense of unutterable relief, because to do so was to escape from the oppression of her married life, the thick atmosphere of self-approval and unperceivingness which emanated from John Clephane like coal-gas from a leaking furnace. *(16)*

Thus Kate has outgrown traditional roles when the incident which initiates the novel's action occurs: the telegram that announces the death of Mrs. Clephane and whose ironic ambiguity links together the old Mrs. Clephane, "the one who used to be her mother-in-law" *(9)*, and Kate herself. This death brings about Kate's rebirth as mother to Anne, the daughter she had "lost" *(16)*, the daughter against whom "she had barricaded her heart" *(9)*: Anne's mother had been born again ... on the gang-plank of the liner that had brought her home" *(71)*.

Her identity seems now to be fixed in references to her simply as "the mother," and it is only in her reinstatement within the codified role of motherhood that society is "delighted to have her back" *(71)* and can forgive her previous betrayal of the sacred institution of the family. But, to reposition herself as a mother, she must walk along a treacherous path of self-effacement, repeatedly described in the novel as that of lying on the verge of the abyss. As Adrienne Rich observes, "Institutionalized

motherhood demands of women maternal 'instincts' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" *(42).* Thus Kate must efface every detail of her life consequent to her abandonment of her daughter and her husband in order to be reborn as a mother, awakened from a life among the ghosts, as the image "the cable in her hand a cockcrow" *(10)* suggests. But, as Papke has pointed out, this image also "intimates ... that a betrayal has taken place" *(159),* and it is a betrayal of the "real self" which had "cost" her so much and which had evolved out of her sexual awakening in her relationship with a younger man, Chris Fenno, a relationship which had surpassed in intensity of passion both her marriage and her maternity:

> For the first time, when she met him, her soul's lungs seemed full of air. Life still dated for her from that day ... he had yet given her more than he could take away. At thirty-nine her real self had been born; without him she would never have had a self... And yet, at what cost she had bought it! ... [Chris] had caught her up into an air she had never breathed before. *(18-19)*[7]

Thus, in what she repeatedly refers to as "her new life" *(105),* she begins her apprenticeship to being a mother: "she no longer had time for anything but motherhood" *(104).* And her radical change into the social (patriarchal and male-dominant) image of the "Perfect Mother," always available, all-giving, self-effacing seems to be taking place: "had she been . . . changed from a self-centered woman, insatiable for personal excitements, into that new being, a mother, her center of gravity in a life not hers?" *(104).* The use of a passive verb meaningfully points to the subtle ambivalence which characterizes the mother's voice towards her mothering: she is not the agent of this "change," she is rather the passive recipient of a constructed role superimposed on what she considers her real self. This implicitly denies the myth of the all-powerful mother who is held totally responsible for the result of her mothering and "is blamed for everything from her daughter's limitations to the crisis of human existence" (Chodorow and Contratto *55).* Thus the text engages in the baring of the internalized patriarchal conventions shaped by male expectations and structures, which have traditionally influenced the understanding of motherhood. If, on the one side, she tries to activate the process of self-effacement required of her as a mother by immersing herself "in the blessed anonymity of motherhood" *(81),* on the other, her language points to her

awareness that what she is taking on is just another "role": "[she was] play[ing] the part of Anne's mother—the one part, she now saw, that fate had meant her for" *(87)*, or again "It was the character she had herself chosen" *(135)*.

But from the beginning Kate has difficulty conforming to her latest identity because of the deep conflict she feels between maternal and sexual roles. It is clearly not syntonic with Western culture to imagine mothers *qua* mothers as sexually desiring creatures: mothering is immediately and automatically construed as taking sexuality away from women. A split between the sexual and the maternal is deeply embedded in our consciousness and the idea of "'la mère qui jouit' (no longer barred from sexual pleasure)" (Jacobus *29*) is an oxymoron to our ears: in fact we live in a civilization that has elevated to the rank of dogma the idea of virginal, a-sexual maternity, "une fécondation sans sexualité, selon laquelle une femme, préservée de l'intervention masculine, conçoit seule avec une 'troisième personne,' une non personne, l'Esprit" (Kristeva *228*). Kate somehow feels that the mother of a grown-up daughter should not be concerned with her own attractiveness to men. She should immerse herself in motherhood. Chodorow points out how "[o]n the level of the relational triangle . . . there can be a contradiction between women's interest in children and in men" *(203)*.

When she receives the summons from her daughter to return to New York, Kate is both pleased and disturbed at this reminder of her own maturity. As if anxious to impress upon herself the fact of her forty-three years, she holds imaginary conversations with others:

> My daughter ... my daughter Anne ... Oh, you don't know my little girl? She has changed, hasn't she? Growing up is a way children have ... Yes, it is ageing for a poor mother to trot about such a young giantess ... Oh, I'm going gray already, you know—here, on the temples. *(15)*

On her trip to the dressmaker that day, she orders more sober clothes to replace her usual youthful frocks. As she thinks of meeting her old friend Fred Landers, she repeatedly imagines pointing out her gray hair to him.[8] It is as if her return to Anne means that she must assume a more dignified, matronly image, denying the passions that have animated her imagination so recently.

Her close identification with her daughter makes it possible for her to

deny, at least for a while, her own separate yearnings. Nancy Chodorow suggests that the mother-daughter relationship is characterized by an essential continuity not present in mother-son relationships. While mothers treat sons as separate beings, encouraging their autonomy, mothers identify with their daughters, treating them as extensions of themselves:

> Primary identification and symbiosis with daughters tend to be stronger and cathexis of daughters is more likely to retain and emphasize narcissistic elements, that is, to be based on experiencing a daughter as an extension or double of a mother herself, with cathexis of the daughter as a sexual other usually remaining a weaker, less significant theme. (Chodorow *109)*

Thus Kate feels as if

> they were two parts of some delicate instrument which fitted together as perfectly as if they had never been disjoined—as if Anne were that other half of her life, the half she had dreamed of and never lived. To see Anne living it would be almost the same as if it were her own; would be better, almost; since she would be there, with her experience, and tenderness, to hold out a guiding hand, to help shape the perfection she had sought and missed. *(75-76)*

At first, then, she submerges herself entirely in Anne, remembering that "it was Anne who mattered, not Anne's mother" *(81).* She looks to her daughter for love and security, so that Anne never appears "without instantly filling up every crevice of the present, and overflowing into the past and the future, so that, even in the mother's rare lapses into despondency, life without Anne, like life before Anne, had become unthinkable" *(104-05).*

A role reversal gradually takes place, in so far as it is Anne who takes care of her mother, protects her, nurtures her, supports her financially, and Kate "liked better still to be 'mothered'" *(59),* The water imagery which Kate repeatedly associates with Anne suggests an infant's amniotic bliss: when, after their first meeting, Anne tells her mother not to worry, "[Kate] felt herself sinking down into a very Bethesda-pool of forgetfulness and peace" (57). Having apparently achieved the self-effacement required of a "good mother," Kate seems to want nothing besides this deep, satisfying interdependence with her daughter:

> To be the background, the atmosphere, of her daughter's life; to depend on

> Anne, to feel that Anne depended on her; it was the one perfect companionship she had ever known, the only close tie unmarred by dissimulation and distrust. The mere restfulness of it made her contracted soul expand as if it were sinking into a deep warm bath. *(87)*

This intensity, however, is woven with its own destruction, for the complete submergence of identity is bound to bring about the need for self-preservation. Even in the bliss of their initial reunion, there is something about Anne—a certain grimness of her brows, a finality in her voice—that makes Anne associate her with the old Mrs. Clephane, the stern mother-in-law who embodied all the rigid authority of New York society. Now Kate feels momentarily disturbed when she notices traces of the grandmother's manners in her own daughter. When Anne sends her to bed after her trip, Kate feels a "hint of finality in her solicitude that made Kate, as she sank into the lavender-scented pillows, feel—perhaps evoked by the familiar scent of cared-for linen—the closing-in on her of all the old bounds" *(59).* This sense of entrapment, however quickly denied, is what she had once run away from.

Thus, her attempt to relive a preoedipal plot of mother-daughter mirroring and symbiosis is gradually disrupted by the awareness of "their so different pasts" *(44)* which oppresses Kate. She repeatedly senses that "the abyss of all she didn't know about her daughter had once more opened before her" *(42).* Kate is still longing for "the round child's body she had so long continued to feel against her own, like a warmth and an ache, as the amputated feel the life in a lost limb" *(37).* As her language indicates here, she has irrevocably lost contact with Anne, now described as a "tall black-swathed figure" *(37),* and as close as they seem to be, mother and daughter do not really know each other.

Mothers and daughters may each long for oneness with the other, but separate needs invariably assert themselves. Anne's statement ("Mothers oughtn't ever to leave their daughters," *235)* reflects a fantasy rather than a real possibility. And the reappearance of Chris Fenno, Kate's former young lover, as Anne's fiancé and later husband foregrounds the irreconcilable dilemma which originally confronted Kate on her return: to be a mother is to abjure self, and to desire selfhood is to abnegate motherhood.

Adeline Tintner explains the tragic implications of the story as Sophoclean, and the horror that Kate faces at the revelation of her daughter's relationship with Chris as that of incest." But I would rather

argue that what Kate has to face here is the return of her repressed sexuality, whose threat she had repeatedly tried to ignore and which she had displaced onto Lilla Gates, the slangy, vulgar daughter of the prim Enid Drover. With her dyed lashes and sultry ways, Lilla epitomizes the cheapness and shallowness which Wharton observed in American society after the war but, most importantly, she embodies the ever-present threat of sexuality. If Anne is represented as pure and rather remote, "perfect," Lilla seems grotesquely sexual, a painful reminder to Kate of her flighty past, of the frailty of her new bond with Anne. In her disregard for conventions, Lilla is a caricature version of Kate's younger self, just as Anne is an idealized version of it. When Kate sees Lilla in the neighborhood of Chris Fenno, she remembers her own youth:

> The sight of Lilla lingering in that deserted path had called up old associations. She remembered meetings of the same kind—but was it her own young figure she saw fading down those far-off perspectives? Well—if it were, let it go! She owned no kinship with that unhappy ghost. Serene, middle-aged, respected and respectable, she walked on again out of that vanishing past *(106)*.

She denies her still active passions in an attempt to be "serene, middle-aged, respected and respectable" and projects those passions onto Lilla, who thus sums up in her person all the sexuality which Kate tries to ignore in herself and in her daughter.

The climactic scene in the novel, however, brings back in all its vividness her temporarily disclaimed sexuality, which she eventually has to face and come to terms with:

> in every cell of her body [Kate] felt that same embrace, felt the very texture of her lover's cheek against her own, burned with the heat of his palm as it clasped Anne's chin to press her closer.
>
> "Oh, not that—not that—not that!" Mrs. Clephane imagined she had shrieked out at them ...
>
> A dark fermentation boiled up into her brain; every thought and feeling was clogged with thick entangling memories... Jealous? Was she jealous of her daughter? Was she physically jealous? Was that the real secret of her repugnance, her instinctive revulsion? Was that why she had felt from the first as if some incestuous horror hung between them? *(278, 279)*

As Marianne Hirsh observes, "What this novel makes utterly and starkly clear is that mother and daughter cannot coexist together as adult *sexual* women. The secret that forever divides them is the secret of maternal sexuality" *(119-20).*

Kate is aware of the fact that society requires a "real" mother to renounce her sexuality. Thus, to conform to her role, she should give up what she had once called "her real self" and perhaps accept Fred Lander's marriage proposal and step into "the blessed anonymity of motherhood." Her sexuality has to be shrouded in silence so as not to cause her daughter any "sterile pain" *(266).*

In this society, then, Kate cannot be both mother and herself; her two lives, each speaking a different type of desire, cannot coexist and inform one another. Kate visits the maternal sphere but finds no place in it for her self precisely because a mother is denied a self, a past, or a desire beyond that of maternal love, and if she imagines she has found a self in the "role" she plays, it is as fragile as any culturally defined female selfhood because it is dependent on another's gaze, on Anne's gaze. The deeply alienated image that she gives of herself at an early point in the novel is very telling in this respect: "[She] continued to sit there . . . , hugging her new self in her anxious arms, turning its smooth face towards them, and furtively regulating its non-committal gestures and the sounds that issued from its lips" *(136).*

Her final "renunciation" *(276),* her giving up of the options offered her by society and her return, alone, to the French Riviera are not to be read as a giving in to and abiding by the silencing imposed by the institution of motherhood as fashioned by patriarchy. Rather, her renounciation gives her back a sense of self in a redifinition of motherhood, "which traditionally demands an even more devastating renunciation of sexuality and selfhood" (Hirsh *121*):

> Nothing on earth would ever again help her—help her to blot out the old horrors and the new loneliness—as much as the fact of being able to take her stand on that resolve, of being able to say to herself, whenever she began to drift toward new uncertainties and fresh concessions, that once at least she had stood fast, shutting awayin a little space of peace and light the best thing that had ever happened to her. *(342)*

By introducing a woman protagonist who is both a desiring and a speaking subject, Edith Wharton acknowledges in Kate the presence of a

maternal speaking subject split between the singleness of the symbolic or paternal discourse and the doubleness of her position as a mother. She rejects the myth of maternal plenitude and defines her own sense of self, thus opening new possibilities for women's self-definition.

1 Nancy Chodorow makes this point very clearly when she argues that "women's mothering is a central and defining feature of the social organization of gender and is implicated in the construction and reproduction of male dominance itself. ... Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. These capacities and needs are built into and grow out of the mother-daughter relationship itself" *(7, 9)*.

2 Luce Irigaray, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* (Paris: Minuit, 1984) 106. Translated and quoted in Hirsh *43*. The type of plot I am discussing here can be found in nineteenth-century fiction by women, like, for instance, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Jane Austen's *Emma*. In these novels the heroine, an orphan, tries to sever herself from the ties of a constraining past in order to invent her own story and to avoid the fate of her mother, whatever that might have been. The only positive mother figures are then absent or dead mothers.

3 On this double approach see Arcana, Dinnerstein, and Friday.

4 All page references are to the 1925 edition and will be given in parentheses in the text.

5 Allen *14*. Particularly uselful are the introduction, in which Allen discusses the notion of woman as sign, and the first chapter in which she analyzes the position of women in nineteenth-century society.

6 The contemporary view of woman as possession which enhances her husband's position in society can also be found in another passage describing Mr. Clephane's reaction to his wife's wearing jewels: "It certainly increased Kate Clephane's importance in her husband's eyes to know that, when she entered her box, no pearls could hold their own against hers except Mrs. Beaufort's and old Mrs. Goldmere's" (77).

7 I do not agree with Cynthia Wolff's assertion that "Kate has no sustained grasp upon her past" *(359)*. I would rather argue that New York society expects her to keep silent about her past: they have not forgotten or forgiven it, but they refuse to let it inform their present reality except as a negative force, a denial. Her past has been ignored because it is unpleasant and embarrassing, and her in-laws are experts at screening out the unpleasant, as in the case of Illness or misfortune *(183)*.

8 Significantly, her hair, whose grayness is here used in an attempt to justify and legitimize her inscription within the circle of mature motherhood, is otherwise referred to in the text almost exclusively as a symbol of her undeniable sexuality.

9 Lewis and Wolff demonstrate in their studies of Wharton's life and work that the theme of incest obsessed the novelist in her later years.

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