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Mythological Versions of May and Ellen: a Reading of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

Edith Wharton demonstrates in *The Age of Innocence*, as she does in her other texts, how life has influenced her. Her ability to see the ugliness within the beautiful sounds morbid, but her realistic views allowed her to see what she believed was wrong with society. In the most basic analysis, Wharton wrote *The Age of Innocence* from her perspective of old New York society. Rather than focusing on the familiar argument of male dominance over women, she believed the problems women faced in America had more to do with society in general than with men specifically. Most people in society believed they had a duty to follow society's rules or conventions. The origin of these rules is uncertain and unclear, but that is not the issue. What made these rules problematic was how they afforded both men and women little freedom from society's conventions. Both sexes expected certain behaviors from men while women were to behave in an "appropriate" manner as well. Men were to have only certain professions such as banking or law, not politics, because these professions were seen as more distinguished and thus, acceptable. Men were additionally expected not to fail in their expected duties. Women acting according to society's conventions portrayed innocent wives, mothers, and daughters. As a result, people had unrealistic expectations of each other, and the treatment people received tended to be unfair regardless of gender.

Along with unfair and unrealistic treatment, the unspoken words of communication were this society's language. Men had extramarital love affairs in secret to avoid disgracing their wives and the rest of their family, but having these affairs was acceptable as long as it remained unspoken and unmentioned in society. Unlike men, a woman having a love affair was scandalous because such behavior from a woman was not considered innocent or virginal, and as a result would always turn into a public matter regardless of the circumstances. Sometimes the mere rumor of a supposed affair was enough to ruin a woman's reputation for the rest of her life.

Where does this leave women? According to Wharton, men are not solely to blame, but how do women find power and freedom in a society that does not recognize their right to be free? How does a woman acquire the freedom to define her own identity when only one ideal woman figure, the innocent virgin, is allowed? Is it even possible? Wharton doesn't seem to think so, or at least she does not believe a woman is able to exercise the freedom she deserves by America's standards at the turn of the 19th-century.

In an attempt to overcome these restrictive American morals, Wharton searched outside America and the 19th century to empower *The Age of Innocence's* two main female figures, May Welland and Ellen Olenska, with the characteristics of freedom and self identification. While Wharton believed European society, particularly French society, had a better understanding of the individual spirit, she probed further to create her female characters' identities by turning to her interests in Greek and Roman mythology. I believe Wharton saw that men in America were granted more power and freedom by both men and women because of their gender. While men in

American literature played the role of the hero by hunting or fighting, women stayed at home to be “heroines,” but often became trapped within the demands of marriage and motherhood.

Therefore, women who wanted to overcome their entrapment had to struggle much harder than men to become powerful. But how could they become powerful in a society which resisted change and the empowerment of women? In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton solves this problem by using mythological references to empower May and Ellen in a world where they cannot otherwise achieve complete power or control.

Wharton’s fascination with mythology and tribal rituals is worth investigating before deconstructing May and Ellen. Wharton read Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, which studies the magic and mystery surrounding mythology and religion, a few years before writing *The Age of Innocence*. Not only does this text influence her to use allusions to classical mythology, she also learns about the often merciless power of Diana and her desire to protect her family. Furthermore, Wharton seems to identify with the text in chapter 22, “Tabooed Words.” “Unable to discriminate clearly between words and things, the savage commonly fancies that the link between a name and the person or thing denominated by it is not a mere arbitrary and ideal association . . . primitive man regards his name as a vital portion of himself . . . of his personality”(Frazer, 284). Wharton seems to have agreed and intentionally chose the names May, Ellen, and Newland to create a “link” between their label and their mythological counterpart. May, which is also a month in the peak of spring, symbolizes Diana, the goddess of nature, fertility, and childbirth. We can easily associate the month of May with a time strongly

influenced by nature because of the rejuvenation process from winter to spring. Ellen's name rhymes with Helen. It is probably not a coincidence that Wharton gave her the name Ellen as a variation of Helen, the Greek protégée of Aphrodite, the ideal of beauty and passion (Moseley, 157). Newland's last name is ironic; Wharton seems to make a pun out of this one. His last name Archer refers back to archery, the sport May and Diana, a huntress, excel in. Obviously, Wharton is quite aware of the names she chooses for her characters. Frazer also influences Wharton in another way in his chapters related to taboos. Frazer writes in depth about the sacredness of certain words such as personal names, relations, the dead, as well as gods, kings and other sacred people. To say certain words such as your name reveals too much of one's identity. Old New York practiced this tradition. Many subjects and topics were taboo such as feelings and sexual desires. It is no surprise then that Wharton's tribal society would not speak of certain words in order to refrain from revealing anything unpleasant.

Wharton borrowed other rituals that Frazer touches upon. One he discusses extensively is the practice of public expulsion of evils, which is similar to a scene near the end of *The Age of Innocence*. May gives a seemingly kind going away party for Ellen, but instead the dinner party is a public display of May gaining control over her family by publicly expelling Ellen to France: "There were certain things that had to be done, and if done at all, done handsomely and thoroughly; and one of these, in the old New York code, was *the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe*" (276, emphasis mine). While society would not go so far as branding Ellen evil, she is an unpleasant reminder of reality, which old New

York seems to equate with evil.

Frazer's influence on Wharton goes deeper than taboos and tribal rituals. His discussion of mythology also did more than just help Wharton to create the three main characters' identities. His text seemed to inspire her to find a new community for her female characters to survive within. This new community, or society, is one that allows May to emulate Diana/Artemis as she hunts for her prey, and Ellen to symbolize Aphrodite/Helen of Troy by demonstrating the necessity to feel happy, to love, and to embrace sensuality.

Wharton often associates May with the Roman goddess Diana, who is equivalent to the Greek goddess Artemis. Diana is the goddess of fertility and nature while Artemis is the goddess of virgins and hunting. Besides being portrayed with a silver bow and arrow, both are highly protected women. One of the most famous poems about Diana, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, involves the mortal hunter Actaeon. Depending on the version, Actaeon accidentally sees Diana bathing in a large pool while hunting with his dogs. When the nymphs, who were protecting her, see him they try to hide the goddess but it is too late -- he had already seen her naked beauty. Angrily, the goddess punishes him by turning him into a stag. Once he sees his reflection in a river, he realizes he was no longer human. At the same time, he hears his dogs in the distance. His happiness is then shattered by terror when he realizes that they are now hunting him because they no longer recognize him as their master. He tries to escape but is ultimately attacked by the hounds and torn to pieces.

Wharton intentionally recreates this story using May and Newland instead of Diana and

Actaeon. May, through the mythological goddess Diana and Artemis, is both the image of innocence and death. In one of the early scenes of the novel, Wharton introduces the idea that May exemplifies innocent, yet athletic Diana-like qualities that Newland admires greatly. "In her dress of white and silver, with a wreath of silver blossoms in her hair, the tall girl looked like a Diana just alight from the chase" (53). In this mythological reference, the reader receives a subtle warning that May is more than just an innocent girl symbolizing youth and virginity. Perhaps she is also the goddess Diana, ready to manipulate her way around old New York by chasing after what she wants and trapping it for her pleasure. The white and silver dress and silver blossoms May wears suggests a connection with Diana's silver bow and arrow. Soon afterwards, we see how her hair shines like "silver wire" and her face has "the vacant serenity of a young marble athlete" (115). This is not a careless phrase of Wharton's -- she wants to clue her audience in that May, the beautiful athlete, is not truly an empty statue as Newland sees her, but is also like Diana, the huntress who ruthlessly attacked Actaeon for seeing her nakedness.

As Wharton's myth about old New York continues, we see that once the marriage became official, May knew she had won the hunt by playing the old New York game successfully. On the surface, May continues to portray an innocent woman who wears virginal white dresses and obeys all the codes of society. May's seemingly innocent behavior lures Archer to her and he dreams of sexually and intellectually enlightening her. In reality, she has perfected the manipulation of unspoken communication via her misleading appearance and actions. She seems to understand more about society than our narrator Newland recognizes she knows; she has

hunted for a husband and has successfully trapped him. “From one tribal doorstep to another . . . Archer . . . parted from his betrothed with the feeling that he had been shown off *like a wild animal cunningly trapped*” (56, emphasis mine). Before leaving for their European honeymoon, he finally begins to understand the trap he has fallen into and the power she has exercised over him:

Perhaps that faculty of unawareness was what gave her eyes their transparency, and her face the look of representing a type rather than a person; as if she might have chosen to pose for a Civic Virtue or a Greek goddess. The blood that ran so close to her fair skin might have been preserving fluid rather than a ravaging element; yet her look of indestructible youthfulness made her seem neither hard nor dull, but only primitive and pure. In the thick of this meditation Archer suddenly felt himself looking at her with the startled gaze of a stranger. (154-5)

From this brief moment of insight, he realizes she both attracts and repulses him. Is she the young, innocent bride Newland married or the cunning, powerful Greek goddess who has perfected the hunt? Newland doesn't seem to know at this point. At times, he sees her handsome “Diana-like” beauty, “The moist English air seemed to have deepened the bloom of her cheeks and softened the slight hardness of her virginal features” (158). But at other times he sees her as a sexless, passionless creature. He does not realize it, but she has skillfully taken on the characteristics of the powerful Artemis, goddess of the hunt. Figuratively, she will soon transform him into a “stag.” When he realizes May, who has become just like her mother, has

turned him into a replica of her father, just as readers of mythology saw Diana turned Actaeon into a stag, he finally realizes he is no longer “alive” because she has trapped him and has tried to change him into the ideal old New York man. “But I’ve caught it already. I *am* dead -- I’ve been dead for months and months” (244). She has not only managed to hunt him down, but succeeded in trapping him and taking away his freedom to love and marry another woman.

One of the most memorable scenes in the novel is May’s incarnation of Diana in the archery contest she participates in. The Newport Archery Club holds their meeting at the Beaufort’s during the middle of August. This date coincides with the annual festival for the goddess Diana that takes place on August 13. At the archery meet, May precisely personifies Diana’s attributes of hunting, virginal, and nature: “In her white dress, with a pale green ribbon about her waist and a wreath of ivy on her hat, she had the same Diana-like aloofness as when she entered the Beaufort ball-room on the night of her engagement” (173). The white dress indicates virginity while the ivy on her hat represents her relationship with nature. Wharton then describes the physical attributes of May that resemble Diana, the graceful Roman classical athlete and hunter: “She had her bow and arrow in her hand...she lifted the bow to her shoulder and took aim. The attitude was so full of a classic grace that a murmur of appreciation followed her appearance” (173). This sentence draws us to the attention that May is both admired and captivating. Because she has classical grace, she has drawn the center of attention to herself and has thus empowered herself in a society where women rarely do this visibly. None of the other women has “the nymph-like ease” of May (173).

After May shoots her target, Wharton quickly changes the pace of the scene to show yet another side of May that Newland is slowly understanding. “‘Gad,’ Archer heard Lawrence Lefferts say, ‘not one of the lot holds the bow as she does’; and Beaufort retorted: ‘Yes; but that’s the only kind of target she’ll ever hit.’” (173). Newland realizes he can not change her to become the free thinking woman he believes he wants. Moreover, instead of being trapped she succeeds in trapping him, but Newland does not fully understand this yet. “As he looked at May, returning flushed and calm from her final bull’s-eye, he had the feeling that he had never yet lifted that curtain” (173). Instead of Newland changing her, she has chosen to live by society’s standards and play the game because she succeeds at it so thoroughly. She understands the code of old New York better than most because she has the power of a classical goddess. May has been able to capture her prey and hit her target, Newland, exactly. He thinks of her as naive when in reality, all of her actions are intentional and calculated.

May contains goddess-like characteristics that enable her to take control of her life. Although this control she has is not true freedom by today’s standards, she takes command of the situation by understanding how to manipulate people within the rules of the game. She can ultimately destroy anything that threatens to remove her control and wants to remain the innocent wife figure with Newland. She understands that he is attracted to and is in love with her cousin Ellen, but allowing Newland to follow his feelings with her cousin would destroy the entire Mingott family and possibly weaken the infrastructure of old New York society. Like Diana, May does not want to see her world collapse. In order to follow the codes, she will demonstrate to

society her insistence on purity and chastity. She will also make evident her absolute devotion to her family. By imitating the goddess of fertility, May is able to predict her pregnancy two weeks before she knows for certain. While we do not ever know if she was truly pregnant when she tells Ellen, she becomes pregnant in a timely fashion and persuades Ellen to leave old New York for Paris so Newland can remain faithful to May for the sake of the child. Her family and the rest of old New York society – her “hounds” – help her expel Ellen to Europe and close in around Newland “like a Roman wall” (Nevius, 178) just as Actaeon’s hounds closed in on him.

Unlike Artemis, Aphrodite is the Greek goddess of love, marriage, and sensuality. Wharton describes Ellen as sensual and exotic like Aphrodite to contrast her with May, the perpetual virgin. Wharton uses two radically different types of mythical characters to reflect and sharpen the differences between May and Ellen. For example, rather than wearing the virginal white tulle May wears, Ellen dresses in more provocative styles that depict her sensuality such as the dark blue velvet Josephine-style gown, which was “caught up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp” (7-8). Along with sensual beauty, Wharton also gives Ellen intellectual freedom and artistic sense. Like Aphrodite, Ellen is able to stir emotions and combine them with her intelligence. Ellen’s complex nature of both sensuality and intellect is apparent when she shows Newland her distress in failing to understand the ways of old New York by questioning him on the tribal rituals of old New York. According to Carol Singley’s book on Wharton, both Ellen and Aphrodite come from “ambiguous origins, both make marriages with unlikely men, and both are identified with roses . . . Crimson and amber are colors Ellen wears at

the van der Luyden's party and at her farewell dinner -- symbols of passion and decadence by Victorian standards, but also the colors most often associated with Aphrodite" (173). Ironically, not only is Ellen being expelled by them, she is also leaving willingly since Archer is to be a father and "must now demonstrate that loyalty to family he once urged on her" (Wershoven, 232). Seeing his loyalty to his family is important to her because she believes in faithfulness and love.

Ellen also behaves like Helen of Troy. Perhaps one of the most important characters in mythology, Helen of Troy caused two kingdoms to break out in war and fight over her for ten years. Furthermore, the Trojan war, which both Aphrodite and Helen contribute to, ties in to most of the Greek myths. At the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, Eris, the goddess of Discord, who was not invited, throws on a table the Golden Apple, an apple with the inscription, "For the most beautiful." Since Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera each wants to claim the apple, they must compete against each other. Paris, the son of King Priam of Troy, judges the contest and chooses Aphrodite because she promises him the most beautiful mortal woman alive. Unfortunately, the beautiful woman is Helen, who married Menelaus, king of Sparta. Nevertheless, Aphrodite keeps her promise; she causes Helen to fall in love with Paris and return to Troy with him. Because of Aphrodite's and Helen's actions, the Trojan war begins as the two sides fight over Helen. Ellen, like Helen of Troy and Aphrodite, has the power to destroy worlds with her beauty and power. If she wants to, she has the potential to start a war within the Mingott and Archer families, and destroy any resemblance of pleasantness they and the rest of old New York knows.

The Roman equivalent to Aphrodite is Venus, and one of the most admired statues of her is the beautiful “Venus de Milo,” which is referred to in the beginning of Ellen’s going away party. “A gilt bamboo *jardinière* . . . blocked the access to the bay window (where the old-fashioned would have preferred a bronze reduction of the Venus of Milo” (274). We should expect May, who is generally old-fashioned and behaves like her mother by following the codes of old New York, to have a replica of Venus, but May specifically chooses not to have such a statue in her home as a way of indicating Ellen’s expulsion from May’s society.

In the midst of all the mythology Wharton refers to, does she contradict her realist sense of viewing the world? The world Archer wants with Ellen does not exist nor does the world Wharton wanted when she was young. In hopes to solve her own struggle as a woman in society, she presents a method of how female characters in literature can be empowered. Unfortunately, regardless to what Wharton writes, the truth was that women had little or no power in society because the emphasis was in a hero who could produce money and women could not participate in the marketplace. A woman in America ended up depending on her husband, and sometimes other men like her father or brother, for money since she was not capable of making her own. Because she was excluded from the marketplace, she was also excluded from obtaining power unless the society changed somehow. Through her writing, Wharton was able -- if only partially -- escape from this mold for herself and her female characters. Wharton self-reliant economically because of her writing royalties. In her fictional writing, Wharton’s solution was to give May and Ellen unique qualities and create a world where women are strong because of their mythical

qualities. All female characters in mythology, just like Wharton's old New York, either embody the obligations and conventions established for women in Greek society or dramatically step out of their boundaries set by society.

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