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Silencing Women in Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence

BY CLARE VIRGINIA EBY

The most respectable women are the most oppressed.
—Mary Wollstonecraft

SILENCE has been designated “a category of intelligence of the twentieth century,” a response to the modern experience of “alienation from reason, society, and history.” Silence has also been called a feminist issue, one not confined to any historical moment but “a form of imposed repression” enforcing the traditional view of the “appropriate condition for women.”¹ Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (1920), a novel poised between the Victorian and modern eras which provocatively examines the potential for women’s freedom through a male center of consciousness, encourages a reading of its many silences.² The most momentous conversations never become articulated in the text: the plot pivots on May Welland Archer’s telling the Countess Ellen Mingott Olenska that she is pregnant, and is sealed by the tribe’s decision to cast off the recalcitrant Countess. The novel also illustrates the tragic consequences of evasion and under-specification for the three principal characters. But after recognizing the importance of silences, the interpretive question remains: does Wharton’s own rhetorical reticence align her with old New York’s last stand as a unified,

1. Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), 15, 13; Janis P. Stout, *Strategies of Reticence: Silence and Meaning in the Works of Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and Joan Didion* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1990), vii. Cf. Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence,” rpt. in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1976), 19: “Silence is often employed as a magical or mimetic procedure in repressive social relationships, as in the Jesuit regulations about speaking to superiors and in the disciplining of children.”

2. Stout, *Strategies*, 19, emphasizes the collusion between narrator and reader, the “use [of] silence rhetorically as an invitation to the reader to perceive more than is said or to perceive the fact of the imposition of silence.” Jean Frantz Blackall’s “Edith Wharton’s Art of Ellipsis,” *Journal of Narrative Technique* 17.2 (Spring 1987): 145, 156, similarly focuses on the role of the implied reader: “Most important, Wharton uses ellipses to entice the reader into imaginative collaboration with the writer.” Blackall declares “Whartonian silence . . . an obtrusive presence,” demanding to be read. Judith Fryer notes in *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1986), 117, 139, that in *The Age of Innocence* “spoken language often fails as a means of communication; the common language in this world is that of sign and gesture.” But Fryer’s conclusion, that women “command without speaking,” locates the power of silence in a different social place than I do. Carol Wershoven finds in *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1982), 82, 78, 92, that Ellen “speaks openly of the evasion of New York” and “exposes New York as a fortress of evasion.” Although seeing the Countess as the “most obvious victim of the cruelty of evasion,” Wershoven does not analyze how New York transforms passive evasion into active silencing. In *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 2: *Sexchanges* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 157, 158, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that “Wharton’s imaginings of change or at least of (momentary) freedom from institutions that may be changeless, are almost always mediated through allusions to what is literally or figuratively *unsayable*: through evocations of what is illicit, what is secret, what is silent,” but develop their argument in a different direction than my own. Gilbert and Gubar focus on Wharton’s messages “from beyond the grave,” her ghost stories, and her affair with Morton Fullerton.

cohesive society before it is splintered by twentieth century anomie, or does she expose the reticence of old New York, showing its cohesiveness to be maintained only by silencing dissent? Reading the silences in *The Age of Innocence* provides an approach into the debate over Wharton's feminism, itself part of a larger debate over her politics.³ I will argue that Wharton depicts silence and silencing as old New York's means of social control, particularly for maintaining a constricting definition of "the feminine." Contrasting New York's responses to the subversive words spoken by Newland and Ellen, Wharton exposes a sexual double standard. She indicts Newland Archer for his failure to shatter silences and to live by his words. Wharton's treatment of silences calls for a modification in the dominant interpretations of the novel which overstate both her sympathy for Newland and the power of New York women.⁴

Old New York's capacity for silent communication indisputably reflects its cohesiveness as recognized even by a representative of the younger generation, Dallas Archer, in the coda. When Ellen falls from grace, "The Mingotts had not proclaimed their disapproval aloud: their sense of solidarity was too strong."⁵ As Cynthia Griffin Wolff rightly says about *The Age of Innocence*, one of New York's "great strengths . . . lay in its powerful, unspoken capacity for complex communication." Wolff finds New York's silences "rich with communication," suggesting a "totality of understanding" that the twentieth century will make obsolete. But strength is not necessarily benevolent, and Wolff's premise that Wharton depicts the New York of her youth in *The Age of Innocence* as "prelapsarian"⁶ obscures the novelist's critique of the politics of silence. The unity of old New York is that of a police state—its silences resonant, yes, but used as a means of surveillance and control. This can be seen by examining two arbiters of silence and speech, the van der Luydens and Sillerton Jackson.

Wharton's description of the couple at the top of New York's "small and slippery pyramid," Mr. and Mrs. Henry van der Luyden, to whom other New Yorkers turn for the "Court of Last Appeal" (49, 56), illustrates the use of silence for social control. Judge as well as jury, the van der Luydens are "mouthpieces of some remote ancestral authority," a phrase which aligns sanctioned discourse,

3. That the current debate over Wharton's feminism participates in the larger question of her political allegiances is evident in James W. Tuttleton's "The Feminist Takeover of Edith Wharton," *The New Criterion* 7.7 (March 1989): 6-14.

4. My reading of *The Age of Innocence* is most in line with Elizabeth Ammons, *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1980), 126, 131. She finds all of Wharton's "long fiction from *The House of Mirth* to *The Age of Innocence* tak[ing] up the woman question." She sees through the nostalgic veneer of the latter novel to locate a "severe and radical criti[que] . . . of] underlying social structures and ancient taboos that buttress patriarchal attitudes and prohibit freedom for women."

Patriarchy is an unfortunately vague concept, its meaning best understood by analysis of power relations in a specific community, factual or fictional. Patriarchy is also a necessarily vague concept, for its continuance is most assured when its existence is masked. As Adrienne Rich remarks in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1986), 57-8: "The power of the fathers has been difficult to grasp because it permeates everything, even the language in which we try to describe it."

According to Wharton's friend, Henry Adams, in "Primitive Rights of Women" (1891; rpt. in *The Great Secession Winter of 1860-61 and Other Essays*, ed. George E. Hochfield [New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1963]), 360, who dates the subjection of women to the growth of the Church, "patriarchal theory" derives from "a curious conglomeration of Old Testament history and pure hypothesis."

5. *The Age of Innocence* (1920; New York: Scribners, 1968), 260. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically.

6. *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 331, 321, 313.

power, and maintenance of the status quo. Their position as official “mouth-pieces” permits their determination of what can be said and what must be silenced. Firmly aligned with “authority,” the van der Luydens literally speak the law. That this law sustains a “remote ancestral authority” underscores the antique roots of the status quo. Significantly, a private conversation offstage always precedes a van der Luyden verdict (56, 53). The power they wield over the rest of New York, kept “remote” by withholding its operation from public view, is the prototype for maintaining hegemony in this small world.

Wharton's reference to the van der Luydens' “remote ancestral authority” participates in the archaeological and anthropological imagery that helps to define her attitude toward her subject. As R. W. B. Lewis has demonstrated, *The Age of Innocence* shows Wharton's “entirely new consciousness of history” brought about by World War I. This new historical consciousness accounts for Wharton's bifurcated perspective.⁷ Old New York emerges both as a singular historical moment (one which, as the ticking clocks in the novel remind us, will soon end) and as a manifestation of an institution that stretches back through a succession of like moments to the “dawn of history” (179). *The Age of Innocence* seems both ancient and well-preserved, like the braided hairs in the locket of my Civil War ancestress. But Wharton felt her own ancestresses to be anonymous. Even the constrained and conservative *A Backward Glance* (1934) suggests the difference between male history (visible, voluble, and accessible) and female history (invisible, silent, and buried):

I know less than nothing of the particular virtues, gifts and modest accomplishments of the young women with pearls in their looped hair or cambric ruffs round their slim necks, who prepared the way for my generation. A few shreds of anecdote, no more than the faded flowers between the leaves of a great-grandmother's Bible, are all that remains to me.⁸

Wharton is as conscious of her matrilineage as she is of its muteness. *The Age of Innocence* suggests why Wharton's ancestresses left no verbal record. Like her contemporary, Thorstein Veblen, Wharton adopts an anthropological stance to examine critically the origins and continuity of patriarchal power.⁹ From the

7. *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 423. On changing views of history in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America and the impact on literature, see Susan L. Mizruchi, *The Power of Historical Knowledge: Narrating the Past in Hawthorne, James, and Dreiser* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988).

8. *A Backward Glance* (1934; New York: Scribners, 1964), 15. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically.

9. Lewis, 432, notes that Wharton, “always addicted to anthropology,” drew upon her readings of *The Golden Bough* in *The Age of Innocence*. Ammons describes Wharton's anthropological posture as enabling a “laboratory study of the fundamental, primitive attitudes that mold patriarchal aversion to the mature female” (144), whereas Fryer argues that women “transcend domestic limits . . . by creating their own society” and sustaining it by rituals (131).

Thorstein Veblen's *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts* (1914; New York: Norton, 1964), 94, theorizes that women initially occupied the “chief place in the technological scheme” during what he terms the “primitive phase” of human evolution. But, as he reasons in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899; New York: Modern Library, 1934), 23, 83, the “ownership of women” dates back to “the lower barbarian stages of culture” and marks the beginning of the institution of ownership: “The original reason for the seizure and appropriation of women seems to have been their usefulness as trophies.” Veblen finds “as the latter-day outcome of this evolution of an archaic institution, the wife, who was at the outset the drudge and chattel of the man, both in fact and in theory,—the producer of goods for him to consume,—has become the ceremonial consumer of goods which he produces. But she still quite unmistakably remains his chattel in theory.” An 1894 essay, “The Economic Theory of Woman's Dress” (rpt. in *Essays in Our Changing Order*, ed. Leon Ardzooni [New York: Augustus M.

"inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of [Newland's] forefathers thousands of years ago" mentioned in the novel's first chapter to the "tribal rally around a kinswoman" occurring in the penultimate (4, 334), nothing changes. The source of this immutable tribal power extends back to the hieroglyphs and pyramids associated with old New York (45, 49). Like Veblen's alignment of leisure-class institutions with barbaric rituals, Wharton's descriptions of New York make the familiar and hegemonic seem like a queer anachronism. Institutions, whether marriage, social calls, or going to the opera, come to seem less inspired by God or "nature" than a product of, as Veblen says, a "habitual frame of mind which experience and tradition have enforced upon [one]."¹⁰ An anthropological perspective on powerful institutions tends to erode their credibility. No wonder that the one archaeologist in the novel, Professor Emerson Sillerton, is considered "revolutionary" and dangerous. The Professor "filled [his] house with long-haired men and short-haired women" (220) who, like Ellen, resist tribal categorization.

A second arbiter of speech and silence is the gossip monger, Sillerton Jackson. As much as the van der Luydens, Jackson helps to sustain the status quo by surveillance and control. By carrying a mental (that is, an unspoken and unwritten) "register of most of the scandals and mysteries that had smoldered under the unruffled surface of New York society" (10), Jackson provides a sanctioned context for speaking the unspeakable, a steam valve that helps to sustain the illusion of an unchanging, unruffled surface. Any action, presumed action, or speech labelled scandalous is publicly suppressed and privately processed by Jackson.¹¹ Wharton ironically remarks that he "was fully aware that his reputation for discretion increased his opportunities of finding out what he needed to know" (10). If the van der Luydens provide the Court of Last Appeal, Jackson functions as a secular priest hearing confessions. His predictable reticence ensures that actions the community deems sinful will be confessed and thereby can be checked. Sillerton Jackson co-opts the potentially subversive.

Old New York does not rely entirely on the van der Luydens and Jackson to sustain its hegemony. The ability to silence dissent is a communal power, and New York silences whatever it designates "unpleasant": scandal, authentic suffering, anything "foreign," any harbinger of change. Thus they "ignore[d social transitions] till they were well over, and then, in all good faith, imagin[ed]

Kelley, 1964]), 67, provides an example of the continuation of patriarchal ownership of women especially relevant to the fashionable world depicted in Wharton's novels: "Still even today, in spite of the nominal and somewhat celebrated demise of the patriarchal idea, there is that about the dress of women which suggests that the wearer is something in the nature of a chattel." Veblen's comment in "The Barbarian Status of Women" (rpt. in *Essays*), 56, that "the masterless, unattached woman . . . loses caste" concisely describes Ellen Olenska's fate.

10. "Barbarian Status," 54.

11. Old New York's dread of scandal also determines the plot of *The Custom of the Country* (1913; New York: Scribners, 1941), 437, 436. Ralph Marvell's breakdown results from internalizing the family code: "For Paul's sake! And it was because, for Paul's sake, there must be no scandal, that he, Paul's father, had tamely abstained from defending his rights and contesting his wife's charges, and had thus handed the child over to her keeping!" Immediately thereafter Marvell recognizes his "innate" "weakness." His maintenance of "all the old family catchwords, the full and elaborate vocabulary of evasion: 'delicacy,' 'pride,' 'personal dignity,' 'preferring not to know about such things,'" associates rhetorical evasion with destruction, as in *The Age of Innocence*. Ralph's suicide marks a terrifying silence.

that they had taken place in a preceding age" (259). Like silencing, ignoring is not the absence of actions or speech but their active suppression and denial. Consequently, ignoring permits what Wharton ironically terms "good faith," lying to one's self as well as harming others. The insidious use of silence and silencing culminates in the expulsion of Ellen and subsequent cover-up. At the climactic dinner party Archer, facing "a band of dumb conspirators" and "silently observing eyes," suddenly finds "a deathly sense of the superiority of implication and analogy over direct action, and of silence over rash words, clos[ing] in on him like the doors of the family vault" (335-36).¹² Newland apprehends the undeniable, the "superior" power of his community's silence. But the pervasive death imagery makes clear that this silence is not benign, much less prelapsarian. New York's unspoken communication is a power that kills. Because it does not need to speak, New York can erase the trace of its own sentence. Right after the verdict comes the "obliteration": "The silent organization . . . was determined to put itself on record as never for a moment having questioned the propriety of Madame Olenska's conduct, or the completeness of Archer's domestic felicity" (339). So successful a masking of power accounts for its persistence.

New York reacts so violently against Ellen because she says subversive things that challenge its hegemony. Even as a girl, she "asked disconcerting questions [and] made precocious comments" (60). Ellen repeatedly speaks the truth about New York: that the van der Luydens' house is "'gloomy'" (a comment giving Newland "an electric shock"); that New York studiously avoids the truth and fears privacy (73, 78, 133). But it is less what Ellen says than her assumption of free speech that must be silenced. Early in the novel, when the van der Luydens invite Ellen to dinner, she shocks everyone by "plung[ing] into animated talk" with the visiting Duke of St. Austrey. Wharton makes clear that this plunging into talk defies protocol, the very protocol celebrated by the first of two ritualistic dinner parties:

Neither seemed aware that the Duke should first have paid his respects to Mrs. Lovell Mingott and Mrs. Headley Chivers, and the Countess have conversed with that amiable hypochondriac, Mr. Urban Dagonet of Washington Square. (63)

It is telling—and prophetic—that although Ellen and another man speak improperly at this first dinner party, it is the woman who will pay for it. This is because the Countess' uninhibited speech challenges the socially constructed category of "the feminine." After twenty minutes with the Duke, Ellen walks over to Archer. The movement is considered unfeminine and defiant, for:

It was not the custom in New York drawing rooms for a lady to get up and walk away from one gentleman in order to seek the company of another . . . She should wait, immovable as an idol, while the men who wished to converse with her succeeded each other at her side. But the Countess was apparently unaware of having broken any rule. (64)

12. The deathly possibilities of silence are foretold by Newland's and Ellen's tête-à-tête at the end of Book I when "the silence that followed lay on them with the weight of things final and irrevocable. It seemed to Archer to be crushing him down like his own grave-stone" (170).

Ellen's assumption of free speech breaks a rule, so it is dangerous. As Janis P. Stout notes in her study of four women writers' uses of silence, "the woman is no more expected to 'lead' in conversation than she is in ballroom dancing."¹³ Ellen's oblivion to her lawlessness means she must be cast out. That she should choose her conversational partner seems to suggest, to the minds of the van der Luydens' guests, that she might be capable of breaking other rules—perhaps even choosing her sexual partner. No wonder that Newland is titillated by this "undeniably exciting" woman (64).¹⁴

Readers who contend that women wield the power in this novel need to scrutinize the narrow boundaries within which these "idols" function. R. W. B. Lewis is one of the more authoritative voices to see May "thwart[ing] her husband and cousin's illicit affair"; James W. Tuttleton is one of the more recent to declare that the women "dictate the constraining forms and terms and conditions of . . . New York". It would be more accurate to say that the women *take* dictation.¹⁵ How actions that predictably, even monotonously, uphold a hegemonic code are "free" is difficult to see. Wharton illustrates the circumscription of female power through her treatment of May's relationship to language and silence. May is, it is true, adept at silencing the distasteful, a characteristic trait of powerful figures in the novel. Early in their courtship, Newland celebrates his betrothed's "resolute determination to carry to its utmost limit that ritual of ignoring the 'unpleasant' in which they had both been brought up" (26). But as Newland soon grows to resent May, he "wonder[s] at what age 'nice' women began to speak for themselves" (82). The answer, of course, is never. It is May's "duty" neither to speak nor to think for herself; her duty is to wait until men speak to her, to "have no past" and to acquire no experience (44), to remain an undefiled, indeed an untouched, idol. That the category of the "nice" woman is as much a social construct as the "unpleasant," Wharton emphasizes by enclosing each word in quotations marks. These social fabrications, indeed, are mutually reenforcing. May's silencing others' "unpleasant" behavior leads, as Newland quickly discovers, to her self-censorship. This self-regulation is the ultimate goal of institutionalized silencing.

One of the primary social uses of silence in the world of this novel is to contain women within the category of "nice."¹⁶ That Wharton makes this point most strongly through Newland's consciousness has caused many readers to bewail

13. On women who speak out, Stout comments: "'impertinent' speech that challenges the male's 'sentence' of perpetual self-denial and subservience had better be squelched unless one is prepared to pay a very high price indeed" (*Strategies*, 110, 13).

14. Martha Banta makes an interesting distinction in *Imaging American Women: Ideas and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1987), 449, while explaining why Newland is continually titillated by Ellen yet hesitates to press for sexual consummation. He does not go to Ellen even after May's death because then he "would have to love her, while putting aside the bittersweet pleasures of his desire."

15. *Edith Wharton*, 430; "Feminist Takeover," 11. Nina Baym explains in "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," rpt. in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 73, 72, how "although women are not the source of social power, they are experienced as such." Both women and men "experience social conventions and responsibilities and obligations first in the persons of women, since women are entrusted by society with the task of rearing young children."

16. Gilbert and Gubar's reading of Wharton as criticizing America's insistence on "a debilitating feminization" (126) is on this count similar to mine. They argue that "despite all [the] evidence that Edith Wharton was neither in theory nor in practice a feminist, her major fictions . . . constitute perhaps the most searching—and searing—

the plight of sensitive, oppressed males with alarming and uncritical haste. Wharton deserves more credit for using Newland, not projecting herself onto him, in this subtle and convoluted novel. In a moment of rebellion that is adolescent in its predictability and inefficacy, Newland articulates *what no female character in this novel could possibly say*: “‘Women ought to be free—as free as we are’” (42). The syntax indicates why only a man can speak it: men comprise the “we” who are, relatively, “free.” The non-freedom of the second sex is visible only indirectly, by contrast. That is precisely why Newland’s statement is so subversive: it “struck to the root of a problem it was agreed in his world to regard as non-existent.”¹⁷ The real conspiracy in this novel, not to control men but to declare women’s enslavement a non-issue, reveals the terrible power of silence. That the social construct of the “nice” woman rests on perpetuating silence about alternative behaviors Wharton makes clear by following Newland’s revelation with: “‘Nice’ women . . . would never claim the kind of freedom he meant” (44).

What kind of freedom does Newland mean? In this novel constructed out of contrasts, “freedom” means individual freedom from social labels, “strick[ing] out for [one’s] self,” to use Newland’s phrase (8). The antinomy resonates soundly in Wharton’s life. As a young woman she felt herself “a failure in Boston . . . because they thought I was too fashionable to be intelligent, and a failure in New York because they were afraid I was too intelligent to be fashionable” (*Backward*, 119). Although phrased to provoke laughter more than serious reflection, the implication is that the actual person, Edith Wharton, transcends the labels of small social worlds. A greater antinomy Wharton expressed, one that some of her critics have sought to canonize, is that of “male” versus “female” roles. The much-quoted designation of Wharton as a “self-made man” suggests less, it seems to me, her alliance with male values or distrust of women than her impatience with gender categories altogether.¹⁸ The contrast Wharton establishes between her two leading female characters in *The Age of Innocence* illustrates both the meaning of individual freedom and the price that society will extract for it. The narrator’s description of May’s face as “representative of a type rather than a person; as if she might have been chosen to pose for a Civic Virtue or a Greek goddess” (188) brings Ellen’s individuality into focus. Ellen refuses to act as part of the tribe; one cannot conceive of her posing as a statue for Civic

feminist analysis of the construction of ‘femininity’” (128). But Gilbert and Gubar are, like most critics, more sympathetic to Newland than I am. I would argue that the problem with Newland is not that he “realizes too late the hollowness” (151) of his life, but that he realizes it at the beginning of the novel and lacks the courage of his convictions. Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar’s criticisms of May do not sufficiently consider the extent to which her “feminization” makes her not only a product but a victim of the system. Looking at what individual characters can and cannot speak provides a mechanism for analyzing the power dynamics in the novel.

17. This articulation of supposedly nonexistent problems is at the heart of feminist challenges. As Rich remarks in *Of Woman Born*, 62, “women are beginning to ask certain questions which, as the feminist philosopher Mary Daly observes, patriarchal method has declared nonquestions.” That only a *man* in Wharton’s novel can ask the nonquestion illustrates the extent to which the women characters are bound and gagged.

18. On Wharton’s striving to move beyond the category of “feminine” in her writing, see Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 67 ff. Taking issue with the tendency of feminist criticism to locate women’s writing in a “separate sphere,” Kaplan finds Wharton’s writing “undermin[ing] those boundaries between feminine and masculine, private and public, home and business.”

Virtue or going to the “Ladies Room” *en masse*. Like her fashionable and intelligent author, Ellen cannot be contained by a label like “nice” or “representative” woman. That Ellen had been living in France before the novel begins points to *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), in which Wharton contrasts American and French women. The American “disappears from sight upon marriage and withers away” while the French woman remains a free individual.¹⁹

May once behaved like a free individual, not a part of the tribe, before her marriage. Since so much has been made of May’s power to enforce conventions, her “superhuman” and “unorthodox” (150) moment deserves emphasis. Beginning “Let us talk frankly,” May shatters the code of silence and steps outside the boundary of the “feminine” when she offers to free her fiancé from their engagement (148). Newland refuses, no more able to live with the implications of honest speech with May than with Ellen. May’s moment of independent thought and free speech is silenced by that “sacred tabo[o] of the prehistoric ritual,” her marriage (180). Once a tribal bride, May’s status as representative rather than individual woman is sealed and her husband gives up “trying to disengage her real self from the shape into which tradition and training had moulded her” (327). Maintaining the status quo means silencing the free woman, whether she flits through Newland’s stray musings or takes shape in Ellen’s behavior. “Nice” women behave like Mrs. Beaufort, “who always preferred to look beautiful and not have to talk” (117).

In the pivotal scene when Newland approaches Ellen as her legal counsel, the narrator shows his betrayal of the ideal of the free woman with his conversational style and silences. His speech is marked by the hesitations and the unfinished sentences characteristic of old New York; he cannot get more than the first four letters of the word “unpleasant” out of his mouth (110). He counsels Ellen against divorce on the grounds that it would open her up to “a lot of beastly talk,” which now strikes him as unendurable. Ellen significantly counters his tribal worries with, “But my freedom—is that nothing?” (111). Newland seems conveniently to have forgotten about the free woman. This conversation illustrates his decision to privilege tribal labels over Ellen’s self-assertion. No wonder that Newland speaks in “stock phrases . . . to cover over the ugly reality which her silence seemed to have laid bare” (112). Newland misinterprets Ellen’s silence as would the rest of old New York: rather than consider that she has nothing to say about her putative adultery because it never happened, Newland construes it as a confession.²⁰ As Lily Bart remarks in *The House of Mirth* (1905), “What is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it’s the story that’s easiest to believe.”²¹ Newland adopts the New York strategies of silence, surveillance, and evasion so completely that he reads Ellen’s innocent silence as an admission of guilt.

19. In “Fashion,” *International Quarterly* 10 (October 1904): 143, Georg Simmel associates female passivity, non-individuality, and maintenance of the status quo: “the weakness of [woman’s] social position . . . explains her strict regard for custom, for the generally accepted and approved forms of life, for all that is proper. A weak person steers clear of individualization; he [sic] avoids dependence upon self.”

20. It is surprising that so little has been said of Newland’s repeated nastiness to Ellen, for instance his insinuations that she is having an affair with Beaufort.

21. *The House of Mirth* (1905; New York: Signet, 1964), 233-34.

Despite Wharton's alliance of Ellen with "experience" throughout the novel, she is innocent of sin. Later conversations between the would-be lovers align Newland with an insidious silence and Ellen with honest speech. Many of her comments later in the novel shock the now-tribal husband. When Ellen says the word "secretary" Newland blushes, for "She had pronounced the word as if it had no more significance than any other in her vocabulary" (232). More shockingly to Newland, Ellen asks, "'Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress . . . ?'" That Newland is "startled" by "the crudeness of the question" (289) illustrates his retreat to the New York science of evasion. He is assuming a role like that of the van der Luydens' shocked guests. Unwilling to forego the titillation that is his prerogative as a male, Newland resorts to a romantically banal language which functions like New York's silences in its disingenuousness and evasion of reality. "I want," he stammers, "I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that—categories like that—won't exist" (290). Like many another male character in American literature, Newland opts to avoid social commitment and light out for new territory. But in the context of Wharton's socially dense novel, the idea is, as Ellen's response indicates, laughable. Knowing that silence has already begun to condemn her, the idea of avoiding labels by fleeing into silence strikes Ellen as absurd. Newland's utopian fantasy shows him still unwilling to accept responsibility for his contraband desires. In Wharton's terms, there is no freedom without responsibility. Appropriately, Newland soon "find[s] himself prisoner of this hackneyed vocabulary" (309), the bars made out of the words like "mistress" he had tried to avoid.

The irony of *The Age of Innocence* is that Ellen is labelled his mistress. Notably, there is no corresponding term for a sexually delinquent male. Even the women characters believe that when, as they euphemistically put it, "'such things happened,'" the unspeakable act marks the man merely "foolish" but the woman "criminal" (97). According to the sexual double standard, in other words, only a woman can break the law. This only makes sense if we concede that Wharton is writing about a world in which men wield the power. That Ellen is expelled while Newland is reclaimed into the tribe illustrates the double standard at the heart of patriarchy.

The preservation of society—at the expense of a woman silently charged with a crime but not permitted to speak in her defense—suggests that adultery is a social, not a moral issue. As R. W. B. Lewis has shown, Wharton agonized over her own adulterous affair with Morton Fullerton, fearing the violation "not [of] some abstract morality but rather [of] the civilized order of life."²² In *The Age of Innocence* Wharton criticizes the double standard that holds women responsible for maintaining the civilized order, then stands prepared to condemn them when anything goes awry. The "traitor in the citadel" is "generally," Wharton dryly remarks, thought to be a woman (259). Nice women uphold the status quo. A conservative statement published in 1879 on "The Woman Question" unintention-

22. Edith Wharton, 221.

tionally illustrates what Wharton exposes in 1870s sexual politics. According to historian Francis Parkman:

Nations less barbarous have tried to secure the object [of "the integrity of the family and the truth of succession"] by constant watching and restriction, sometimes amounting to actual slavery. European civilization uses better and more effective means. It establishes a standard of honor, and trusts women to conform to it.

What May so zealously guards, after all, is her woman's honor and, behind that, the integrity of the patriarchal family. The remarkably effective "standard of honor" that Parkman refers to is nineteenth-century woman's "slavery."²³ As Wharton puts it, "she was the subject creature, and versed in the arts of the enslaved" (*Age*, 305). Perversely, woman's slavery then becomes the grounds for holding her accountable for all sexual transgressions: "A woman's standard of truthfulness was tacitly held to be lower" (305), a conclusion that follows from the premise of women's inferiority. For that reason, a Lawrence Lefferts can conveniently divert attention from his own liaisons by spreading rumors about Ellen (55-56). His lies are valued far more highly than her silence. Newland comes to realize that the social construction of female honor rests on his own "precautions and prevarication, concealments and compliances" (305). Women's honor is a matter of lies and silences, spoken and withheld by men.²⁴

The expulsion of Ellen so that Archer can remain one of the tribe provides an exaggerated illustration of the fact that women must sacrifice themselves to maintain the social order. Nancy Cott's description of the expected role for women in the early nineteenth century clearly persists in Wharton's old New York: "constant orientation toward the needs of others, especially men."²⁵ Behind the differences between Ellen and May that Wharton so painstakingly articulates is their fundamental similarity: both resort to self-sacrifice at moments of crisis. As Ellen tells Newland, "'You showed me . . . how one must sacrifice one's self to preserve the dignity of marriage . . . I did what you told me . . . I've made no secret of having done it for you!'" (169). May, similarly, after her unorthodox moment of promising to free her fiancé (not herself), reverts to type, "and he understood that her courage and initiative were all for others, and that she had none for herself" (150-51). The capacity for self-erasure that Ellen and May both exhibit shows old New York's triumph in silencing the free woman.

One of the things Newland confronts in the final chapter of *The Age of*

23. Parkman, "The Woman Question," *North American Review* 129.275 (October 1879): 308, 307. As Nancy Cott says in *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), 22-23: "In its strictly economic aspect the traditional marriage contract resembled an indenture between master and servant . . . This economic skeleton of marriage supported a broader cultural body of meaning."

24. On the relationship between women's honor and silence see Adrienne Rich's "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," rpt. in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979), 186: "Women's honor, something altogether else: virginity, chastity, fidelity to a husband. Honesty in women has not been considered important. We have been depicted as generically whimsical, deceitful, subtle, vacillating. And we have been rewarded for lying" and "Lying is done with words, and also with silence."

25. *Bonds*, 22.

Innocence is his “inarticulate lifetime.” As his son Dallas characterizes the Archer marriage, “‘You never told each other anything. You just sat and watched . . . and guessed . . . A deaf-and-dumb asylum, in fact’” (356). That Wharton valued communication can be inferred not only from her prolific writing career; it has been confirmed by her biographers and critics. Wolff, for instance, emphasizes Wharton’s “striving for communication” from childhood. As an adult, argues Wolff, “Wharton was obsessed by the need to be able to talk to sympathetic and understanding friends . . . Nothing is worse than to be ‘mute.’” It is difficult to reconcile this view of Wharton, valuing “the open and spontaneous expression of emotion,” claiming her mother’s reticence “did more than anything else to falsify and misdirect my whole life,”²⁶ with Wharton’s nostalgia for the deaf-and-dumb asylum.

But we need not resort to general biographical speculations. The first chapter of *A Backward Glance* concludes with a scene that provides the model for Wharton’s treatment of silences in *The Age of Innocence*. Recalling a mysterious cousin from her father’s side of the family, George Alfred, Wharton says he “vanished . . . out of society, out of respectability” after allegedly breaking old New York’s sexual code. Although Wharton’s family, like Ellen’s, effectively silences the transgressor by “ceas[ing] even to be aware of his existence,” Wharton’s mother Lucretia occasionally evoked him, always with an altered expression and in a lowered voice appropriate to the offense. Wharton attributes her mother’s calling up the pariah to “malice” and in a courageous moment “drove her [mother] to the wall” by demanding to know, “‘But, Mamma, *what did he do?*’” Wharton’s request that the unpleasant be stated, taken out of the closet and faced, reduces her mother to mutterings. At first glance what stands out from this scene is that a woman presides over the reputation of George Alfred. Lucretia’s silences and strategic breaches of silence illustrate her control: she makes the cousin vanish and appear at will, presumably embarrasses her husband, and certainly trains her daughter to fear the results of sexual license. Edith’s portrayal of George Alfred, however, paints a more complex portrait than can be reduced to the scenario of rampant matriarchal power. By retelling the story herself, Wharton shows she hears and understands the unspeakable. She fashions her youthful musings about a recalcitrant cousin into a general principle: “in those simple days it was always a case of ‘the woman tempted me.’”

The same principle, that the woman is always at fault, clearly operates in *The Age of Innocence*. George Alfred remains individual enough to retain his name while his companion in crime is reduced, like both May and Ellen, to type: “some woman,” a “siren.” Wharton closes the memory with evocations of “regions perilous . . . outside the world of copy-book axioms, and the old obediences that were in my blood; and the hint was useful—for a novelist” (25). The copybook suggests doing things by rote—being, as Wharton says, “obedien[t]” to hereditary rules—but the novelist takes a different “hint” from the once subversive, now silent, cousin. Asking questions, probing silences, not telling stories by rote,

26. *Feast*, 14, 24–25; *Female Intruder*, 16; Wharton quoted in Lewis, *Edith Wharton*, 54.

Wharton exposes old New York. She probably considered George Alfred's story important enough for the first chapter of her autobiography because her relatives responded to her writing as they did to his adultery:

None of my relations ever spoke to me of my books, either to praise or blame—they simply ignored them, and among the immense tribe of my New York cousins . . . the subject was avoided as though it were a kind of family disgrace. (*Backward*, 144)

In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton speaks out against New York silence.