

Making the American Aristocracy:
Women, Cultural Capital, and High Society in New York City, 1870-1900

Emily Katherine Bibby

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
History

Dr. Kathleen W. Jones
Dr. E. Thomas Ewing
Dr. Sharon P. Johnson

June 10, 2009
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: High Society, New York City, Women, Cultural Capital, Space, Speech,
Posture, Dress, Culture of Aspiration, Culture of Consumption, Gilded Age

Copyright 2009, Emily Katherine Bibby

Making the American Aristocracy: Women, Cultural Capital, and High Society in New York City, 1870-1900

Emily Katherine Bibby

ABSTRACT

For over three decades, during the height of Gilded Age economic extravagance, the women of New York High Society maintained an elite social identity by possessing, displaying, and cultivating cultural capital. Particularly, High Society women sought to exclude the *Nouveaux Riches* who, after amassing vast fortunes in industry or trade, came to New York City in search of social position. High Society women distinguished themselves from these social climbers by obeying restrictive codes of speech, body language, and dress that were the manifestations of their cultural capital. However, in a country founded upon an ethos of egalitarianism, exclusivity could not be maintained for long. Mass-circulated media, visual artwork, and etiquette manuals celebrated the Society woman's cultural capital, but simultaneously popularized it, making it accessible to the upwardly mobile. By imitating the representations of High Society life that they saw in newspapers, magazines, and the sketches of Charles Dana Gibson, *Nouveau Riche* social climbers and even aspirant middle and working class women bridged many of the barriers that Society women sought to impose.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Kathleen Jones, for her tireless work, enthusiasm, knowledge, and commitment to this project. My first drafts were nothing more than jumbled ideas. Under Dr. Jones's direction, they metamorphosed into a focused, legible thesis. Because of her guidance, I have developed as a writer and historian.

I also want to thank my committee members, Dr. Thomas Ewing and Dr. Sharon Johnson, for sharing their expertise with me. Their constructive criticisms challenged me to think more broadly, to research more thoroughly, and to write more precisely. I want to thank Dr. Johnson, in particular, for her energy and zeal, which inspired me to strive for better than "good enough."

I must also acknowledge Dr. Amy Nelson, the faculty, and the staff of the Department of History for their continued support and commitment to me as a student. They were always "on the ball," even when I was not. I thank them for sharing their time and know-how with me and, most of all, for making my two years in the program a rewarding experience.

I thank the archivists at Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington, Delaware and at the New York Historical Society in New York, New York for graciously assisting me with my research.

I thank my husband, Joshua Mitchell, for enduring late nights, scattered books, and my impatience whenever a computer crashed or a file failed to save. I also thank him for accompanying me to Hagley and to the NYHS where he took hundreds of photographs of letters and other manuscripts. Without his help and his encouragement, I would not have been able to complete this thesis.

Finally, I thank my sister, Alexandra, for printing off multiple copies of newspaper articles for this project.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements
iii

Table of Contents
iv

Introduction
1

Chapter One
Permeable Boundaries of Exclusivity: (De)Regulation of New York City's Elite Spaces,
1870-1900
15

At Home...17
In the Public Ballroom and at the Opera House...28
Publicity...33
When on the Street...40
Conclusion...52

Chapter Two
Distinctly Dumb and Stiff: Using Speech and Body Language to Construct an Elite
Society, 1870-1900
53

Elite Speak...54
Regulating the Body...66
Conclusion...77

Chapter Three
Putting On Status: Dressing To Preserve Society's Exclusivity, 1870-1900
79

Regulations and Discipline...80
Popularizing High Society Fashion...87
The Dress Code...90
Because They Want To...98

Conclusion
103

Bibliography
111

Primary Sources...111
Secondary Source...114
Visual Sources...117

List of Figures

Figure 1: The Gibson Girl by Charles Dana Gibson from *Sketches and Cartoons*,
published by R. H. Russell and Son in 1898.....73

Introduction

After America's Civil War, hundreds of newly wealthy oil, railroad, and stockbroker barons stormed New York City with one purpose in mind: to become part of Society.¹ New York was the acknowledged "Great Good Place."² As historian, Greg King, writes, "the city represented the apex of society in America."³

In the 1870s, New York High Society consisted of a small set of families collectively referred to as the "Knickerbockers" after the knee-length trousers worn by early Dutch settlers.⁴ Many of the notable families, including the Rhinelanders, Van Rensselaers, and Roosevelts, were the progeny of Dutch settlers who, after immigrating to New York in the seventeenth century, had accumulated moderate fortunes in trade or through real estate investments.⁵ May King Van Rensselaer, a member of the prominent Van Rensselaer family, wrote that members of this old elite "knew the history of the families with which they associated for generations, and these histories were vital parts of the record of the city in which they lived. The segments of the social circle were held

¹ I capitalize the "S" here to denote the very highest stratum of society in the United States during the Gilded Age. There were many elite groups in the U.S. at this time—in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Charleston, and Washington D.C., for example—but etiquette manuals and the press usually celebrated New York City's High society as the most elite, frequently even comparing (or contrasting) them to London society.

² Gail MacColl and Carol McD. Wallace, *To Marry an English Lord* (New York: Workman Publishing, Co., 1989), 10.

³ Greg King, *A Season of Splendor: The Court of Mrs. Astor in Gilded Age New York* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2009), 115.

⁴ MacColl and Wallace, 7.

⁵ The Knickerbockers were not exclusively of Dutch lineage. Also part of Knickerbocker Society were the Welsh Joneses and Morrises and the Scotch Livingstons and Alexanders, as well as the Irish Emmets and Beresfords. In *The Urban Establishment*, historian Frederic Cople Jaher writes that "initially the upper class was mostly Dutch, but New York City quickly became a center of varied nationalities and this ethnic diversity permeated the upper stratum. French Huguenots (Delanceys, Jays, and Pintards), English and Scots (Fishes, Waltons, Smiths, Barclays, Delafields, and Clarksons), and Germans (Beekmans) gave the patriciate a heterogeneity lacking in Anglo-Saxon Boston," (165). Most of the Knickerbocker clans had established themselves in New York by 1700.

together by intimate ties, and this intimacy made the social organization a clan into which few might expect to force their way”⁶ According to journalists and authors of the day, these families comprised America’s “aristocracy.”⁷

The first wave of new-moneyed multimillionaires poured into New York City during the California Gold Rush, followed by a more prolonged wave during the Second Industrial Revolution, in which extraordinary wealth was accumulated through technological advancement, stocks, and commercialism. Before the Civil War, the number of millionaires in the United States was few; by 1900, there were four thousand.⁸ The holdings of New York banks increased from \$80 million in 1860 to \$224 million in 1865.⁹ The rise of wealth influenced both the character and layout of New York City. Dirt roads and empty lots gave way to a bustling metropolis, typified on the East Side by department stores, hotels, theaters, restaurants, and palatial mansions of the parvenus that outshone the modest brownstone homes of the Knickerbockers.¹⁰

America’s new money aimed to merge with old blood. Or at least new moneyed wives did. But although men of the Knickerbockery might do business with the new millionaires of the city, their wives refused to include *Nouveau Riche* women on their invitation lists. As historians Gail MacColl and Carol McD. Wallace, authors of *To Marry An English Lord, Or, How Anglomania Really Got Started*, write, “New York society was run by women, and they were implacable in their distaste for the new

⁶ May King Van Rensselaer and Frederic Van De Water, *The Social Ladder* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1924), 3.

⁷“American aristocracy” was a label applied to New York High Society by various journalists, reporters, writers, even authorities on etiquette. Eric Homberger uses and explores this label in the introduction to his more recent *Mrs. Astor’s New York*.

⁸ MacColl and Wallace, 74.

⁹ Eric Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York: Money and Social Power in a Gilded Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 181.

¹⁰ Lloyd R. Morris, *Incredible New York: High Life and Low Life of Last Hundred Years* (New York: Random House, 1975), 101-115.

people”¹¹ Mary Elizabeth Wilson Sherwood, one of the foremost authorities of etiquette in Gilded Age America, explained in her manual of 1899:

Women do all the social work, which in Europe is done not only by women, but by young bachelors and old ones, statesmen, princes, ambassadors, and *attachés*. Officials are connected with every Court whose business it is to visit, write and answer invitations, leave cards, call, and perform all the multifarious duties of the social world. In America, the lady of the house does all this.¹²

But it was no easy task to stave off the wives of some of the wealthiest men in America.

Van Rensselaer recalled that “all at once society was assailed from every side by persons who sought to climb boldly over the walls of social exclusiveness.”¹³ Historian Frederic

Cople Jaher posits that the social climbers “were encouraged by the American ethos, which preached if it did not guarantee equal opportunity in an open society.”¹⁴ Over

time, certain *Nouveau Riche* names like Vanderbilt, Stevens, and Leeds, crept into the roster of Society. However, once the matriarchs of these new families had become

members of Society, they often aligned with the Knickerbocker women against their former fellows.¹⁵ Some of the wealthiest families in Gilded Age New York, including

the Rockefellers, Carnegies, and for a long time, the Goulds, could not claim a place in Society. How did the women of New York High Society distinguish themselves from the

upwardly mobile in order to perpetuate exclusivity?

In this study, I argue that that for over three decades, during the height of Gilded Age economic extravagance, the women of New York High Society maintained an elite social identity by possessing, displaying, and cultivating, from one generation to the next,

¹¹ MacColl and Wallace, 12.

¹² Mary Elizabeth W. Sherwood, *Manners and Social Usages* (New York: Harper, 1897; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1975), 13. (Page citations are to the reprint edition).

¹³ Van Rensselaer, 9.

¹⁴ Frederic Cople Jaher, *The Urban Establishment: Upper Strata in Boston, New York, Charleston, Chicago, and Los Angeles* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 10.

¹⁵ MacColl and Wallace, 14.

cultural capital. Whereas nobility in England or France enjoyed legally endorsed social status, America's aristocracy possessed no officially acknowledged rank. Aristocracy abroad was what it *was*, America's "aristocracy" was what it *did*. As Philippe Perrot, author of *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, explains, the European aristocrat's "very being enabled him to uphold his exalted station."¹⁶ But the American aristocrat, as merely a bourgeois elite in a country that paid lip-service to a creed of democracy, maintained widely-recognized status by possessing cultural capital that could be restricted, restrictive and, though available to only a few, highly valued on a broader scale.

The sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, who first articulated the concept of cultural capital, defines it as cultural habits "that comprise a resource capable of generating 'profits'; they are potentially subject to *monopolization* by individuals and groups; and, under appropriate conditions, they can be *transmitted* from one generation to the next."¹⁷ Bourdieu argues that cultural capital exists in three forms, of which the first two, embodied and objectified cultural capital, apply to my argument.

The embodied form of cultural capital is concentrated in the individual as a competence or skill that he or she bears. Acquisition presupposes "work on oneself (self-improvement)...an investment, above all of time" and is also largely dependent upon an individual's domestic education (or the cultural inheritance from one's family): "the initial accumulation of every kind of useful cultural capital, starts at the outset, without

¹⁶ Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*. Trans. Richard Bievenu (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 5.

¹⁷ Elliot B. Weininger and Annette Lareau . "Cultural Capital." 11 July 2006.
<http://www.brockport.edu/sociology/faculty/Cultural_Capital.pdf>http://www.brockport.edu/sociology/faculty/Cultural_Capital.pdf> (30 April 2009).

delay, without wasted time, only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural capital.”¹⁸

According to Bourdieu, objects can be appropriated as forms of cultural capital as well, insofar as their consumption presupposes a certain amount of embodied cultural capital.¹⁹ He explains that “cultural goods can be appropriated both materially—which presupposes economic capital—and symbolically—which presupposes cultural capital.” For example, an individual can acquire a machine, for which he or she requires only economic capital (or money), but to use it in accordance with its specific purpose, they must have access to embodied cultural capital.²⁰

The New York High Society woman distinguished herself by obeying codes of speech, body language, and dress that were the expressions of her cultural capital. Her husband possessed economic capital, she possessed cultural capital. There were a few Society women who had inherited wealth from late fathers, husbands, or towards the turn-of-the-century, from divorce settlements. Mrs. Astor, for example, Society’s longtime leader and the wife of William Astor, one of the wealthiest men in the United States, actually possessed a small fortune in her own right, money inherited from her father.²¹ However, by and large, the women of New York High Society were financially dependent on their men folk.²²

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *The Sociology of Economic Life*, ed. Mark S. Granovetter and Richard Swedberg, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 99-100.

¹⁹ Elliot B. Weininger and Annette Lareau . “Cultural Capital.” 11 July 2006. <http://www.brockport.edu/sociology/faculty/Cultural_Capital.pdf> (30 April 2009).

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *The Sociology of Economic Life*, ed. Mark S. Granovetter and Richard Swedberg, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 101.

²¹ King, 29.

²² On January 31, 1901, *Town Topics: The Magazine of Society*, a magazine devoted to society gossip, reported that that Mrs. Stuyvestant Fish, one of the more prominent Society figures “has been placed on an allowance—so runs the story—by her liege lord.” The article explained that “several of New York’s multi-

The husbands of social climbing *Nouveau Riche* women also possessed economic capital—indeed, often much more economic capital than the Society man. Because *Nouveau Riche* husbands possessed economic capital, the Society woman’s cultural capital was the main point of difference and the major justification for exclusion. However, money and cultural capital were not mutually exclusive. Bourdieu explains that external wealth can be converted into embodied cultural capital *over time*: “the length of time for which a given individual can prolong his acquisition process depends on the length of time for which his family can provide him with free time for economic necessity, which is the precondition for the initial accumulation.”²³ The old moneyed women of Society brought to the table generations dedicated to cultivation. Society mothers passed down codes of speech, body language, and dress to their daughters and they, in turn, to their daughters. It was on this point that many of the newly rich women were deficient.

The letters, diaries, and memoirs of the women of New York High Society show that they derived a sense of superiority from their cultural capital. Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish, a prominent Society hostess, told a reporter: “There will necessarily be two classes—the aristocracy and the common people. We should not be too democratic, as it is dangerous, and people are not equal, anyway.”²⁴ Society women displayed their cultural capital in opposition to outsiders, particularly the *Nouveau Riche* social climbers. Historian Joan Scott explains that “meaning is constructed through differentiation...positive definitions

millionaires give their wives and daughters regular allowances, and I know of five who will not make up any deficiencies over the allowances, and who are deaf to all prayers and entreaties for the payment of bills beyond the amount allotted.”

²³ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *The Sociology of Economic Life*, ed. Mark S. Granovetter and Richard Swedberg, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 101.

²⁴ “Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish Talks in Pungent Style,” *The New York Times*, 26 September 1903, 1.

depend on negatives.”²⁵ Society women rebuffed the new people because many did not possess the cultural markers that were valued in Society. They considered the parvenus to be crude and uneducated.²⁶ Because a woman’s dress, speech, and body language signified her social position, a point as subtle as the length of a sleeve in the ballroom could signal that she was either “in” or not “in” Society. Messages of inclusion and exclusion might underscore the smallest article of clothing, word, or gesture.

However, the power conveyed by the possession of cultural capital came at a price; for the modes by which the Society woman distinguished herself simultaneously imposed limits on her language and body. The women of Society spent thousands of dollars on restrictive, uncomfortable clothing and hours upon hours assembling wardrobes to reflect their knowledge of the proprieties of dress. They censored their speech, avoiding or talking around topics like sex and pregnancy in conversation. They regulated their movements by wearing tight-fitting clothing and by participating in *Tableaux Vivants*.

Although Society men were expected to obey rules of dress and speech when around “the ladies” in the ballroom or opera house, they could excuse themselves from participating in social practices without compromising their identity or power. Their power was, after all, much more contingent on economic capital. They might leave social responsibilities in the hands of wives and mothers and go off to their jobs or yachting, gambling, and whoring.²⁷ Mrs. Astor’s husband, William, for example, had no taste for High Society and usually left his wife to her balls and operas while he spent time

²⁵ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 59.

²⁶ Homberger, 8.

²⁷ King, 87-102.

at the club or on his yacht with other women. There were, of course, men who took active roles in Society. Ward McAllister and Harry Lehr, who aided Mrs. Astor and other prominent Society hostesses with their party planning, are notable examples. However, by and large, the Society man enjoyed status sans many of the limitations that were part and parcel of strict codes for speech, movement, and dress.

New York High Society was the subject of much media hype in Gilded Age America. “Society pages” were a staple of the New York dailies by the mid-1880s. Newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The New York World* kept the general public abreast of the latest balls, dinner parties, and debuts. Even smalltime papers in rural America occasionally reported on New York’s elite, such as a Nebraska newspaper that provided a detailed account of the marriage of Florence Adele Sloane, a Vanderbilt granddaughter, in 1895.²⁸ William D’Alton Mann made a fortune by devoting his magazine, *Town Topics: The Journal of Society*, the most popular source for Society news in Gilded Age America, to society gossip.²⁹ The publicity made women like Mrs. Astor and Alva Vanderbilt America’s first celebrities in the modern sense of the word.

Newspapers, magazines, etiquette manuals (some of which were written by Society women), and visual art colluded with the women of Society to promote the idea that they were the bearers of cultural capital that set them apart. Fashion magazines like *Harper’s Bazaar* and newspapers like *The New York Times* looked to Society women as being leaders of fashion in America. John Singer Sargent, Charles Dana Gibson, and

²⁸ Florence Adele Sloane, *Maverick in Mauve: The Diary of a Romantic Age* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1983), Appendix.

²⁹ *Town Topics* did not restrict its gossip to New York High Society, but also reported on the societies of Boston, Philadelphia, and even London. However, New York High Society usually received the most page space and occupied the first page of “Saunterings,” the column dedicated to society news. The magazine was published in New York City.

other artists of the era who depicted scenes from High Society life, portrayed the Society woman as the epitome of physical grace and elegance in their artwork. Authorities on etiquette like Mary Elizabeth Wilson Sherwood, Constance Cary Harrison, and later Emily Post, women who enjoyed close personal ties to New York High Society, borrowed its cultural markers for their prescriptions for proper conduct. They directed their manuals primarily to a general readership within the middle class.³⁰

However, as the audience for the etiquette manuals suggests, there was a downside to the publicity for the women of Society. The very discourses that promoted the idea that the Society woman possessed cultural capital that set her above the general public simultaneously made her modes of distinction accessible to a broad audience. The upwardly mobile—not only *Nouveaux Riches*, but women of the middle and working classes—copied the fashions advertized in magazines like *Harper's Bazaar*. They imitated the figures portrayed in Gibson's popular sketches. They turned to the etiquette manuals for insight into how the women of Society conversed and behaved. Through replication they bridged barriers that Society women sought to impose. Modes of speech, body language, and dress were as much tools of egalitarianism as of exclusion. Thus, New York High Society women could not always maintain social exclusivity because media, art, and etiquette manuals provided models that women of other socioeconomic positions could copy in their quest for a more exalted social status. Indeed, the primary message of etiquette manuals was that *anybody*, including individuals of limited financial means, could improve their social worth by learning how to speak, move, and dress

³⁰ John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 54. Magazines like *Harper's Bazaar* and the New York dailies were also primarily directed at middle-class readers, though certainly other classes read them, including members of New York High Society.

properly.³¹ With the distribution of manuals, magazines, newspapers, and art, cultural capital became more widely available than economic capital in the United States towards the turn-of-the-century. Therefore, when Society women wrote etiquette manuals, posed for Singer Sargent portraits, or allowed reporters into their ballroom, they unintentionally made their modes of distinction accessible to those whom they desired to exclude.

There were times when economic capital trumped cultural capital. Increasingly, towards the turn-of-the-century, *Nouveau Riche* social climbers, like Alva Vanderbilt who gained membership in Society in 1883, employed their enormous wealth to entice or outshine the old elite of the city. They built palatial mansions and hosted elaborate balls far grander than anything that the Knickerbockers had ever before seen. They pooled funds together to build the magnificent Metropolitan Opera House when the old elites denied them access to boxes at the Academy of Music, New York City's premier opera house in the 1870s. Such opulence was much more visible, particularly as advertised by the media, than the proper grammar and good posture that were the manifestations of the Society woman's cultural capital. In such cases, the Knickerbockery had little choice but to bow to money lest they be overtaken by it.

I draw upon two categories of primary sources to examine the tension between social exclusivity and permeability in Gilded Age New York City. First, I use texts from within Society, including the letters, diaries, memoirs, and other writings of Society women. Second, I draw upon outside discourses, or newspapers, magazines, etiquette manuals, and visual art that portrayed the women of New York High Society. Seven collections or manuscripts form the core of the first category: the letters of Anna Foster Robinson, a member of the Knickerbocker elite, to her sister Pauline Foster Du Pont,

³¹ Kasson, 43.

written between 1874-1902; the letters and debutante yearbooks of Anna's daughter, Pauline Robinson, from 1900 to 1906; the receipts and letters of Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White, also of the Knickerbockery, written between 1873 and 1887 to her sister, Louise, and sister-in-law, Mary; the diary of Florence Adele Sloane, a member of the Vanderbilt family, written between 1893 and 1896; and the autobiographies of Edith Wharton, Huybertie Pruyn, Elizabeth Drexel Lehr and Consuelo Vanderbilt. I also draw upon the novels of Edith Wharton based on the Society into which she was born and grew up.³² The progeny of a prominent Knickerbocker family, Wharton witnessed first-hand the onslaught of the *Nouveaux Riches* on her Society in the last three decades of the nineteenth century and made it the subject of *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), and *New Years' Day* (1924). Many real-life people in Society—August Belmont and his mistress, Ward McAllister, Wharton's aunt Mary Mason Jones, Mrs. Paran Stevens, and even the famous Astor ballroom—inspired the characters of her fiction. Although her novels were not written as autobiographies per se, when read alongside her memoir, *A Backward Glance* (1934), and the autobiographies, letters, and diaries of other Society women, they, too, illustrate the values and practices of her Society.

³² These women are all interconnected in some way, which, I think, illustrates that even at its most expansive, New York High Society was a somewhat close-knit, exclusive grouping. Anna Foster Robinson was Pauline Robinson's mother. The Fosters (including Robinson's sister, Pauline Foster Du Pont) were close friends to the Jones family. Included in the incoming letters to Pauline Foster Du Pont, now located at Hagley Museum and Library in Delaware, are letters written by Lucretia Jones and her daughter, Edith Newbold Jones, or, Edith Wharton by marriage. Also close friends to the Jones family were the Stuyvesant-Rutherfords. Wharton refers to Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White and her sister, Louisa, a couple of times in her autobiography. In fact, after the Rutherford sisters had outgrown their governess, she was transferred to the Jones residence where she tutored young Edith. Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White married the diplomat Henry White. After her death, he remarried Emily Vanderbilt Sloane, Florence Adele Sloane's mother. Adele Sloane and Consuelo Vanderbilt were first cousins.

For the second category of primary sources, outside discourses, I utilize various newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *The Evening World*, *The New York Tribune*, and *The Sun*; magazines, including *Town Topics: The Journal of Society*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *The Ladies' Home Journal*;³³ etiquette manuals, written by some of the foremost experts of the day, including Mary Elizabeth Wilson Sherwood and Constance Cary Harrison;³⁴ and portraits and cartoons by John Singer Sargent and Charles Dana Gibson, amongst others.

My thesis builds on the work of Maureen Montgomery, Eric Homberger, and Greg King, who have written histories of High Society in Gilded Age New York City. Homberger and King trace the changes that Society underwent as *Nouveaux Riches* sought and found membership in its elite ranks. Montgomery's *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York* is the only study that focuses primarily on the women of New York High Society and the key role that they played in making it; she argues that Society women used mass-circulated media to construct a leisure-class identity. While the relationship between Society women and the media is a key emphasis of my study, I am most interested in the internalized methods by which High Society women of Gilded Age New York City constructed an elite social identity. Although these women typically possessed little economic capital of their own, they nevertheless wielded enormous social power by "cashing in" on their cultural capital to build an exclusive grouping, an aristocracy, in a country founded upon an ethos of

³³ Most of the articles in the newspapers and magazines were published after 1880. The American media did not fully capitalize on High Society until the mid-1880s when society pages became popular in the New York dailies. In the mid-1880s, William D'Alton Mann also changed the name of the magazine, *The American Queen*, to *Town Topics: The Journal of Society* and essentially turned it into a scandal sheet that kept readers abreast of the latest society gossip.

³⁴ Jerry E. Patterson. *The First Four Hundred: Mrs. Astor's New York in the Gilded Age* (New York: Rizzoli, 2000), 150.

egalitarianism. I emphasize that nuances, which we might tend to disregard as trivial, such as the length of a sleeve or the height at which a woman carries her shoulders, can be—and were in Gilded Age New York City—potent mechanisms for building social ties and “othering” unwelcome people.

In chapter one I argue that women used space, such as the home, the ballroom, and the opera house to maintain Society’s exclusivity. However, these spaces were permeable. *Nouveau Riche* social climbers and reporters found ways to access Society’s spaces, undermining exclusivity. Moreover, Society women went outside the boundaries of Society to shop and dine in public spaces that they shared with others, including poor workers and prostitutes. In these places, difference was not spatially demarcated and therefore, it was more difficult for the Society woman to distinguish herself from outsiders. Even worse, her presence on public turf might blur the line that differentiated her from the *demimonde*.

In chapter two I posit that Society women participated in restrictive modes of speech and body language to distinguish themselves from outsiders. They cultivated proper grammar and usage in opposition to speech they defined as vulgar. They used euphemistic and equivocal language to avoid the unpleasant and the taboo, including taboo people. Good posture and “graceful” body movements—also meticulously cultivated—signaled their high status.

In chapter three, I contend that women distinguished themselves from outsiders by obeying a restrictive code of dress. The subtleties and nuances of a woman’s clothing marked her as being a member of the ingroup or an outsider. However, mass-circulated

media, etiquette manuals, and the ready-made clothing industry produced descriptions, pictures, drawings, and cheap reproductions of the clothing worn by the women of Society, allowing women of all classes to imitate the Society woman's cultural capital as it manifested in her attire.

High Society women of Gilded Age New York City used cultural capital to establish an aristocracy in a supposedly classless society. However, the American ethos, which preached equal opportunity in an open society, ultimately made exclusivity impossible to uphold.

Chapter One

Permeable Boundaries of Exclusivity: (De)Regulation of New York City's Elite Spaces, 1870-1900

In her autobiographical, *King Lehr and the Gilded Age*, Elizabeth Drexel Lehr, a woman who gained prominence in New York High Society after her marriage to Henry “Harry” Lehr in 1901, described the devastating episode that occurred on her wedding night. Harry announced to her that he did not love her and had married her only for her money. He would act the part of devoted husband in public, but wanted to spend as little time with her as possible behind closed doors. To excuse himself, he announced: “I believe you will actually gain by marrying me. You will have a wonderful position in society. As my wife, all doors will be open to you.” Before their marriage, Harry had invited her to dine with him and four of the leading hostesses in Society, Caroline Astor, Mamie Fish, Alva Belmont (who had been Alva Vanderbilt before her divorce from Willie K. Vanderbilt), and Tessie Oelrichs. He now told her that he had wanted to be sure that these four women would approve of her: “as much as I wanted to marry you, nothing would induce me to forfeit my position in society to do so. But when I heard their decision to take you up I knew that you were going to be invited to all the most important houses in New York.”³⁵

Elizabeth Drexel Lehr's account speaks to the great power that Society women wielded as hostesses. They could grant a person access to Society and they could deny access—suggested by Harry Lehr's fear that the four hostesses would not approve of Elizabeth or that he might even risk his own position in Society if he married a woman whom they did not accept. They signaled acceptance by literally opening doors, allowing

³⁵ Elizabeth Drexel Lehr, *King Lehr and the Gilded Age* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1993), 46.

the individual into their homes, their ballrooms, even their opera boxes. These sites marked who was in Society and spatially separated or differentiated Society from others. At the same time, hostesses could grant outsiders—like Elizabeth Drexel Lehr—right of entry, thereby granting them social status.

In this chapter I argue that High Society in Gilded Age New York City used space to maintain Society's exclusivity and to distinguish themselves from outsiders, particularly the *Nouveau Riche* social climbers eager for entrée into Society. I use the terms “space,” “place,” “territory,” “turf,” and “boundaries” primarily to imply physical location. Boundaries can be both literal and symbolic in this chapter. However, my focus is on the physical boundaries by which Society women lived.

Despite Society women's efforts to maintain exclusivity, their control was not absolute; exclusivity could not always be upheld because Society's spaces—the home, the ballroom, and the opera house—were susceptible to the invasion of *Nouveau Riche* social climbers as well as the media. As the experience of Elizabeth Drexel Lehr illustrates, Society women sometimes played an active role in allowing *Nouveau Riche* social climbers into their homes and ballrooms, thus granting them access to Society. Conversely, social climbing women like Alva Vanderbilt used their own ballrooms to force their way into Society. The media also found ways to infiltrate even the most private of Society's spaces and, by publicizing the activities and sometimes the scandals of Society women, gave the general public vicarious access.

Finally, Society women periodically stepped beyond the boundaries of exclusivity and traversed “outside” spaces like the shops and restaurants along Ladies' Mile frequented by women of various socioeconomic standings. Towards the turn of the

century, some even crossed “disreputable” turf, or spaces associated with prostitution and other seedy amusements.

Society women used space to maintain social exclusivity, but they were not always successful at keeping outside forces spatially at bay. Here was the link between space and cultural capital. Space was a mechanism of exclusivity and yet it was ultimately permeable. As I will show in this thesis as a whole, boundaries—both literal and symbolic—were not static, but constantly evolving, constantly in flux. *Nouveaux Riches* and other outsiders, encouraged by the democratic ethos, acquired cultural capital and encroached upon Society’s spaces in their quest to improve their social standing. Thus Society women never could achieve the absolute exclusivity to which they aspired.

At Home

In 1870, New York High Society was a private, exclusive organization, comprised of families who entertained from their brownstone-front homes located on the then-fashionable Fourteenth Street and its neighboring thoroughfares.³⁶ The novelist Edith Wharton, born Edith Newbold Jones into a prominent Knickerbocker family, recalled in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, that her parents engaged in simple but frequent exchanges of hospitality with other members of their little set.³⁷ At her “mother’s big dinners,” whiskered gentlemen and ladies with bare, sloping shoulders “rising flower-like from voluminous skirts” gathered at the Jones’s large dinner table where they leisurely partook of the famous Newbold Madeira and the gastronomic feats of the Jones’s personal cooks.³⁸ At this time, the public ball that would be so popular a decade later had

³⁶ Van Rensselaer, 37.

³⁷ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 21.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

not yet caught on in Society. According to May King Van Rensselaer, also a member of a prominent Knickerbocker family who became a longtime member of the New York Historical Society, nobody entertained outside of the home until Archibald Gracie King rented out space at Delmonico's Restaurant for his daughter's debutante ball in the early 1870s—much to the initial shock of everybody else in Society.³⁹ Before this groundbreaking event, as historians Gail MacColl and Carol McD. Wallace note in their study of the trend of American heiresses marrying English lords in the Gilded Age, “dances meant rugs rolled back, furniture pushed to the wall, and a willing spinster pounding away on the piano.”⁴⁰

In this little home-based Society, women took a leading role in planning “private,” entertainments, or teas, dinners, and balls given at home. They continued in this role into the next two decades even as Society entertainments became increasingly extravagant, public, and publicized. The historian Greg King, in his history of New York High Society extravagance at the turn of the nineteenth century, writes that “these ladies...ran the great houses; they planned the extravagant dinners and balls that consumed society; they stood at the gates of their exclusive strongholds, welcoming those who met their stringent standards and barring those they deemed unacceptable.”⁴¹ In her novel, *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton provided a vivid representation of the type of preparation that went into a couple's first dinner party. The young Society man, Newland Archer, arrives home late from the office to find his wife, mother, and mother-in-law busily overseeing final details related to the guest list, décor, and menu. They had managed every element of the dinner, leaving him with no other responsibility but to go

³⁹ Van Rensselaer, 37.

⁴⁰ MacColl and Wallace, 10.

⁴¹ King, 67.

upstairs to dress.⁴² Huybertie Pruyn's recollections of her mother's dinners support Wharton's fictional account of women overseeing private entertainments. Mrs. Pruyn, a wealthy woman of Albany, New York, with close ties to New York City High Society, kept up the custom of giving dinners after her husband died. She put together the guest lists, the food and beverages to be served (between ten to twelve courses of fare like "sweet breads and peas," "quail and partridges and salad," and "roman punch"), and the decorations. Mrs. Pruyn would allow young Huybertie and her older sister, Hattie, to arrange the place cards on the table and "to place little bouquets or baskets of flowers at the place of each lady and boutonnieres for the men."⁴³ Similarly, in her memoir, *The Glitter and the Gold*, Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan, an heiress of the Vanderbilt dynasty who married the 9th Duke of Marlborough in 1895, depicted her mother, Alva, dominating the household and directing private entertainments, notably the fancy dress ball of April 1883 that helped to launch the Vanderbilts into Society.⁴⁴ Consuelo's father, Willie K., seems to have been conspicuously absent from the home, participating passively if at all.

Etiquette manuals of the era, some of which were written by women who had ties to New York High Society and explicitly drew upon its cultural markers, also placed the authority to plan private entertainments in the hands of women. They dictated that the "lady of the house" draw up guest lists and menus, receive callers, sit at the head of the table when entertaining, and even decide whether or not to allow the young men to light

⁴² Edith Wharton. *The Age of Innocence* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1995), 312-314; Original publication, 1920.

⁴³ Huybertie Pruyn, *An Albany Girlhood*. ed. Alice P. Kenney (Albany: Washington Park Press Ltd.,) 1990, 108-109.

⁴⁴ Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan. *The Glitter and the Gold* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1952), 6.

up a cigarette at the supper table.⁴⁵ And although etiquette prescribed that a dinner invitation should include the names of both host and hostess, an invitation to a private ball more often listed the name of only the hostess, reading along the lines of “Mrs. Astor at home, Monday January 12 at ten o’clock for a small dance” or “Mrs. Astor requests the pleasure of the company of...”⁴⁶

Because Society women planned private entertainments—particularly because they drew up the guest lists—they possessed the power to include and to exclude, and by extension to dictate who had access to Society. Some women were particularly adept at using their homes to shape the membership of Society, perhaps no one more so than Caroline Webster Shermerhorn Astor. Better known as just “Mrs. Astor,” she was Society’s widely acknowledged leader for nearly four decades. She came from a Knickerbocker family and had married William Astor, one of the richest men in America. Every winter season from about 1870 to 1905, Mrs. Astor provided numerous Society entertainments at her mansion, the most famous of which was her annual ball in late January or early February, celebrated by the press as early as 1872 as the “climax” of the season.⁴⁷ Mrs. Astor used her famous ballroom to include and to exclude, to bestow status and to deny it.⁴⁸ For three decades, the entryway to the Astor mansion at 350 Fifth Avenue and later at 842 Fifth Avenue physically and symbolically differentiated insiders from outsiders. According to Elizabeth Drexel Lehr, “life could hold no more bitter mortification” than to be left off Mrs. Astor’s guest list. Those not invited feigned illness

⁴⁵ Sherwood, 13.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 142.

⁴⁷ Patterson, 60.

⁴⁸ King writes of Mrs. Astor that “she quickly became the self-appointed arbiter of social acceptance: if one met her requirements, they were in; if not, one was condemned to social death.” She marked her acceptance by extending invitations. King, 36.

or came up with excuses to leave New York City to hide the fact that they were not of the chosen.⁴⁹

The chosen few who arrived at the Astor mansion for the annual ball proceeded through a row of flower-dressed corridors before reaching the art gallery that served as a ballroom.⁵⁰ In one of these corridors, Mrs. Astor, beautifully dressed and drenched in diamonds, received her company alone, in front of an imposing, life-sized portrait painted by Carolus Duran that pictured her in a Mary Stuart costume of purple velvet and gold.⁵¹ During the dancing, she presided over the ball from a divan that served as the focal point of the gallery-ballroom, supposedly referred to as “Mrs. Astor’s throne” or “The Throne.” Every season she would grant a place on her throne to those she wished to anoint with special status. According to Elizabeth Drexel Lehr, she chose the occupants in consideration of their social claims. Those not allotted a spot suffered “acute disappointment.” One night, Mrs. John Drexel sobbed loudly in front of the entire ballroom and announced “she has given me the most dreadful humiliation...oh I have never been so hurt in my life” because Mrs. Astor had denied her access to the elite circle of throne attendees.”⁵²

Mrs. Astor sent invitations discriminately and throughout the years, steadfastly denied some of the richest and most forceful social climbers access to her ballroom, thereby depriving them of the status they so desperately sought. One notable example was the wealthy retailer, A. T. Stewart, and his wife, who built a florid, Parisian-style

⁴⁹ Lehr, 87.

⁵⁰ Looking over *The New York Times* accounts of Mrs. Astor’s entertainments, her guest list for larger functions like her annual ball usually included around 300 names. However, as Homberger points out (and articles in *The New York Times* supports his claim), by the turn-of-the-century (after she had moved to her second mansion that adjoined that of her son, John Jacob), as many as 2,200 invitations might be sent out. By that time, 600 names were on her calling list. Homberger, 272.

⁵¹ Virginia Cowles. *The Astors* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 98.

⁵² Lehr, 88.

mansion right across the street from Mrs. Astor's big brick home with the hope of catching her attention. Perhaps Mrs. Astor turned her nose up at the Stewarts because they pulled down an old brownstone to erect their mansion, which the Knickerbockery considered "showy," or perhaps because he made his fortune in trade.⁵³ Whatever the reasons for her disapproval, Mrs. Astor made sure that the Stewarts never made their way into her ballroom. They might live a few yards away from her, but that would be as close as they would get to Society. As historian Eric Homberger writes in his history of social climbing in New York City from the eighteenth century through the turn of the nineteenth century, "during the years in which they were neighbors, Mrs. Astor acted as though Stewart and his wife did not exist...when such a highly visible check was administered, and to a man who was so rich and prominent, it represented a very public drawing between acceptable and unacceptable in Society."⁵⁴

With varying degrees of success, other women in Society throughout the years also attempted to maintain social exclusivity by inviting only those they deemed worthy to possess social status to their private entertainments. For example, the gossip magazine, *Town Topics: The Journal of Society*, reported in 1887 that Mrs. Robert Goelet, a woman who had been a *Nouveau Riche* social climber herself only a few years before, had asked only those she considered the "best people" to her home for a ball in an attempt to institute greater exclusivity within Society. However, her plan was not altogether successful because another Society hostess, Mrs. Worthington, gave a much more inclusive ball on that same night, inviting a number of young men that Mrs. Goelet

⁵³ Homberger, 260-262.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 264.

had not considered good enough to come to her home. Therefore, there was a shortage of men at Mrs. Goelet's ball and many of the ladies went without partners.⁵⁵

Mrs. Worthington's inclusiveness points to the fact that the Society hostess not only possessed the power to exclude, but also to include. Mrs. Astor could and did open her doors to newcomers over time, granting them social status. As a woman of the old Knickerbockery who had married one of the "new" people,⁵⁶ she represented the family-money dichotomy that characterized New York High Society after the 1870s. Perhaps it was for this reason that although she worked deliberately to maintain Society's exclusivity, she also "took up" newcomers that she deemed worthy to become members of Society. Ward McAllister, Society's self-styled arbiter and a friend to Mrs. Astor, wrote that she had "a good appreciation of the value of ancestry; always keeping it near her, and bringing it in, in all social matters, but also understanding the importance and power of the new element; recognizing it, and fairly generously awarding to it a prominent place."⁵⁷ As King explains, "Caroline determined that she would provide society with the leadership it lacked...she would preserve the traditions of her aristocratic background but she also would bow to the inevitable changes, shining a light on a new path forward over which she could boldly lead the remnants of the Knickerbockers into the future."⁵⁸

Over time, access to Mrs. Astor's ballroom became widely acknowledged as the sign that a social climber had truly arrived in Society. *The Evening World*, one of the

⁵⁵ "Saunterings," *Town Topics*, 15 December 1887.

⁵⁶ The Astors were not as "new" as the Vanderbilts and other *Nouveaux Riches* who gained a place in Society after the Civil War. In fact, the Astor's were accepted by Society before Caroline Shermerhorn married William Backhouse Astor, Jr. in 1853, primarily owing to the marriage of William's father, William Backhouse Astor, Sr., to Margaret Armstrong, a member of the prominent Livingston family. King, 26-28.

⁵⁷ Ward McAllister. *Society as I Have Found It*. (New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1890), 222.

⁵⁸ King, 33.

popular newspapers published daily in New York City, wrote on the day of her ball of 1905, “As every one knows, this is the greatest social event of the season. Only the elite of Society are present; or, better, those that receive invitations are the elite, for so great is Mrs. Astor’s social sway that she can create or destroy one’s social standing at will.”⁵⁹ It was for this reason that *Nouveau Riche* climbers like the A. T. Stewarts and the Vanderbilts sought out her invitations. Indeed, an analysis of her guest lists as reported in *The New York Times* from 1885 to 1905, shows all the big names and the old names—a group altogether representative, if not all-inclusive, of Society.⁶⁰ In fact, the “400,” the number of people that Ward McAllister told the press were really in Society, had, in part, been drawn from Mrs. Astor’s guest lists.⁶¹ As McAllister explained, “if you go outside that number [400] you strike people who are either not at ease in the ballroom or else make other people not at ease.”⁶² Although the number was erroneous (for when McAllister released a list of names, it included only about 319, including several ambiguous entries), what it symbolized—Society’s anointed—speaks to the fact that Mrs. Astor’s peers, as well as the press that publicized the number and the names, recognized the relationship between the Astor ballroom and social status.⁶³

Mrs. Astor used her ballroom more than once to aid an individual in either obtaining or maintaining status. For example, when several Society women, including Alva Vanderbilt, Mrs. Ogden Mills, and a couple of other members of the Vanderbilt

⁵⁹ “Leading Social Event of the Season Takes Place To-night at Fifth Ave. Mansions—Two Houses Thrown Into One,” *The Evening World*, 9 January 1905, 7.

⁶⁰ I have studied the reports in the *Times* of Mrs. Astor’s annual balls from the 1880s and 1890s, which always included a partial list of the guests. We find Knickerbockers like the Rhinelanders and Roosevelts, but also newcomers like the Vanderbilts (after 1884 when the Vanderbilts first received an invitation to Mrs. Astor’s ball).

⁶¹ Edward Rob Ellis and Jeanyee Wong, *The Epic of New York: A Narrative* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2004), 413.

⁶² “From Four Hundred to Forty Thousand,” *The New York Times*, 24 January 1925, 12.

⁶³ Patterson, 8.

family, removed Ward McAllister from their guest lists after he published his arrogant, exaggerated, and indiscreet *Society As I Have Found It*, Mrs. Astor endorsed his social acceptability by, among other things, allowing him into her own ballroom for her annual ball of January 1891.⁶⁴ Perhaps she supported McAllister because, as Elizabeth Drexel Lehr wrote of her, “her friendship once given was not lightly withdrawn.” When Mrs. Astor’s daughter, Charlotte Augusta, filed for divorce from her husband, James Coleman Drayton, in 1894, Mrs. Astor attempted to preserve her daughter’s Social standing by giving an entertainment in her honor,⁶⁵ even though divorce usually rendered a woman, as Van Rensselaer asserted, a social “pariah”⁶⁶ and *Town Topics* and *The New York World* buzzed with rumors that, shockingly, Charlotte Augusta had engaged in an extramarital affair.⁶⁷ But perhaps most famously, Mrs. Astor opened the doors of her mansion in 1884 to invite Vanderbilts, the quintessential *Nouveau Riche* family that Society had long snubbed, to her annual ball.

The Vanderbilts’ method of entry into Society speaks to the fact that outsiders sometimes used space to negotiate status for themselves. Alva Vanderbilt cleverly used her own ballroom to force her way into the ranks of Society. By 1883 the Vanderbilts had already secured invitations to several Society entertainments, including the Patriarchs Ball, the most popular of the annual subscription balls. Nevertheless, for months, Mrs. Astor refused to acknowledge them. Indeed, for two generations the Vanderbilts had tried and failed to gain entrance into Society. People remembered the uncouth and unrefined manner of the Commodore, who had made the family’s enormous fortune

⁶⁴ “Guests of Mrs. Astor,” *New York Times*, 27 January 1891, 2.

⁶⁵ Homberger, 273.

⁶⁶ Van Rensselaer, 49.

⁶⁷ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics*, 3 December 1891.

earlier in the century, and it was partly for this reason that, according to King, “no member of the family was yet considered worthy of inclusion in Caroline’s famed four hundred.”⁶⁸ As one woman of the Knickerbockery had emphatically announced: “I will never write [an invitation to] any Vanderbilt.”⁶⁹

Like Mrs. Astor, Alva Vanderbilt was adept at utilizing her home to claim power and to establish identity. She commissioned the architect, William Morris Hunt, to build a magnificent Parisian-style chateau at 660 Fifth Avenue. Then she threw open its doors in late March 1883 for a costume ball so brilliant that nobody in Society—not even Mrs. Astor’s youngest daughter, Carrie—could resist.⁷⁰ Carrie Astor, as daughter of the leader of New York High Society, naturally assumed that she would receive an invitation to the Vanderbilts’ fancy dress ball. She even began to rehearse a star quadrille for the event. When Alva Vanderbilt learned of Carrie’s rehearsals, she let it be known to some of Mrs. Astor’s intimates that, although she would be more than happy to invite Miss Astor to her ball, it would be impossible to do so because she had never met the young lady or her mother—to send out invitations to people whom she had never met would, after all, be a breach of etiquette. According to Lloyd R. Morris in his history of New York City from 1850-1950, written nearly half a century ago, “faced with the alternative of disappointing her daughter or disavowing her disdain, Mrs. Astor called for her carriage and humiliatedly drove up Fifth Avenue. A footman in the Astor blue livery delivered her engraved calling card to a servant wearing a maroon livery to the Vanderbilts—thus admitting them to a lofty rank in the hierarchy.” Shortly thereafter the last of the

⁶⁸ King, 47.

⁶⁹ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, 1896, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library, Anna quoting Pauline.

⁷⁰ King, 60-61.

invitations to the Vanderbilt ball arrived at Mrs. Astor's door.⁷¹ The night of the ball, Mrs. Astor was dressed as a Venetian Princess in blue velvet, and her daughter, Carrie, led the star quadrille.⁷² Perhaps to reaffirm her social leadership, Mrs. Astor wore nearly all her diamonds, including a tiara, rows of necklaces, broaches, and a diamond stomacher.⁷³

Once on Alva Vanderbilt's guest list, Mrs. Astor reciprocally had to include Alva on hers. The fact that from 1884 onward the Vanderbilts enjoyed access to Mrs. Astor's ballroom cemented their place in Society.⁷⁴ It would not be long before Alva was throwing balls to launch others, like Nancy Leeds and her husband, William, the "Tinplate King," into Society.⁷⁵

Alva Vanderbilt was not the first social aspirant to utilize her home to advantage in her bid to gain social status. In the early 1870s, Marietta Stevens, the ambitious widow of New York Hotel magnate Paran Stevens who had built the Fifth Avenue Hotel, began hosting Sunday evening "musicales" at her home to lure Society to her. Although these musicales, featuring well-known singers of the day like Christine Nilsson, flew in the face of old Knickerbocker practice to dedicate Sundays to religion and quiet reflection, increasingly, Society began to slip, first the men and later the women, enticed by the exciting alternative Mrs. Paran Stevens' home offered to the usual boredom of Sunday nights. Thus began her rise to Social prominence.⁷⁶ In Mrs. Paran Stevens' case,

⁷¹ Morris, 154.

⁷² "All Society in Costume," *New York Times*, 27 March 1883, 1.

⁷³ King, 64.

⁷⁴ Morris, 154.

⁷⁵ King, 120.

⁷⁶ Morris, 142-143.

she not only used her home to negotiate Social identity, but to modify Social practice as well.

The Society woman's authority as hostess in the home was rooted in domestic ideology, expressed in etiquette manuals and magazines of the era, which dictated that the home was the "woman's realm." Here she would reign as the "Angel in the House,"⁷⁷ making the home a happy and peaceful refuge for her husband and children.⁷⁸ Women like Mrs. Astor and Alva Vanderbilt, however, were hardly run-of-the-mill housewives. The principal purpose of their homes was to establish Society's exclusivity. They used their authority over the home to further their authority over Society, to extend or deny access to others who desired a position in Society. When public balls became popular, Society women likewise used the restaurant space that catered these entertainments to promote exclusivity.

In the Public Ballroom and at the Opera House

By 1880, subscription balls like the New Year's Ball, the Assemblies, the Charity Ball, and the most famous of all, the Patriarchs Ball, had become a mainstay of each social season. These entertainments were almost always held at fashionable restaurants like Delmonico's and Sherry's or later at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel.⁷⁹ The popularity of the subscription balls reflected the fact that Society was growing as hostesses invited new people into the social fold. Few homes could accommodate its increased size and therefore the subscription balls, held in large restaurant halls, played an important role in

⁷⁷ From the title of a poem by the British poet, Coventry Patmore.

⁷⁸ Catherine Lavender "The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood," *Women in New York City, 1890-1940*, 10 September 2003, <<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/386/truwoman.html>> (19 May 2009).

⁷⁹ Individual Society hostesses also rented out space at fashionable restaurants for their "private" balls, including coming out balls for their debutante daughters.

maintaining the cohesion of Society during a time of expansion. Nevertheless, historian Maureen Montgomery, who argues that New York High Society women used mass-circulated media to shape a leisure-class identity, explains that the subscription ball “constituted a highly formalized form of entertainment, the organization of which was carefully controlled, such control denoting an attempt to impose exclusivity and a rigid demarcation of social boundaries.”⁸⁰ Society women used the public ballroom, as they did the private ballroom, to include and exclude. However, the public setting presented new threats to exclusivity; a strict line to demarcate the insiders from the outsiders could not be drawn.

The subscription balls were organized by committees. The members of a committee planned the menu and décor, and paid a fee in exchange for which they received a set of invitations to distribute to those they wished to invite. The Patriarchs’ Ball, the most famous of the subscriptions and a forerunner to most of the others, was, as the name suggests, actually planned by a panel of men. Society’s self-styled arbiter, Ward McAllister, had conceived of the Patriarchs in 1872. Twenty-five men sat on a committee and each sent out nine invitations to the annual (eventually twice a year) ball. McAllister’s express purpose in creating the Patriarchs was to maintain Society’s exclusivity. As he wrote in *Society As I Have Found It*, “the whole secret of success in these Patriarch balls lay in making them select...in making it extremely difficult to obtain an invitation to them.” Nevertheless, from the onset, the Patriarch Balls opened the door to social climbers. The committee could invite as many as fifty distinguished new

⁸⁰ Maureen E. Montgomery. *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York*. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 30.

people. Thus the Patriarchs' Ball functioned as a point of access, as, in McAllister's words, a "stepping stone" to Society.⁸¹

Although men sat on the committee of the Patriarchs' Ball, at least one woman, Mrs. Astor, exerted influence. As McAllister acknowledged:

With such a friend [Mrs. Astor] we felt that the Patriarchs would have an additional social strength that would give them the solidity and lasting powers which they have shown they possess. Whenever we required advice and assistance on or about them, we went to her, and always found ourselves rewarded in so doing by receiving suggestions that were invaluable. Quick to criticize any defect of lighting or ornamentation, or arrangement, she was not backward in chiding the management for it, and in this way made the balls what they were in the past, what they are in the present, and what we hope they may be in the future.⁸²

In fact, Mrs. Astor may very well have helped McAllister conceive of the Patriarchs' Balls. She certainly worked with him to choose men who would serve on the committee and she may even have influenced who was invited.⁸³ Greg King asserts that McAllister always deferred to Mrs. Astor's judgment.⁸⁴

If Mrs. Astor was only one woman in a group of men who planned the Patriarchs' Ball, women took the lead role in planning the other subscription balls. They sat on the planning committees and they sent out invitations. They determined who to include and who to exclude. The Patriarchs' ball was select, but, according to *Town Topics*, less select than its counterpart, the Assembly or "Matriarchs'" Ball, that a committee of women directed: "These balls have always been more brilliant than the Patriarchs', for it stands to reason that when women invite, finer social distinctions are displayed...the fifty ladies send out individually their invitations, and to such people as may be on their

⁸¹ McAllister, 215.

⁸² Ibid, 223-224.

⁸³ Patterson, 80.

⁸⁴ King, 34.

visiting list, and as most of the patronesses exchange visits, *whomever they invite are supposed to be entirely eligible.*”⁸⁵

The public setting of the subscription balls, however, posed a unique threat to exclusivity. A hostess could control access to her private ballroom at all times, but in a rented restaurant hall, she could maintain exclusivity only for the duration of the ball. The subscriptions were, as one etiquette manual described, “semi-public” in nature because although the invitation list was carefully regulated, the venues that housed the balls catered to anybody who could afford the fare, including social climbing *Nouveaux Riches*.⁸⁶ Before a ball could commence at a restaurant, other patrons had to be removed from the space to allow for setup. Because restaurant management could hardly ask paying customers to leave, lingering diners occasionally delayed the start of the party. *Town Topics* reported in December 1890 that at the Patriarchs’ Ball, “supper was served very late, which is always a fault at Delmonico’s, and must invariably be so, as it is quite impossible to get the restaurant emptied of its ordinary customers in time to give the ball-goers their supper at a reasonable hour.”⁸⁷

At Delmonico’s or the Waldorf-Astoria, there was not a clear boundary that differentiated the members of Society from outsiders, as with private entertainments. If the *Nouveaux Riches* could access Society’s places then could not they theoretically access social status as well? Certainly, by traversing the site of the ball, perhaps the ritual

⁸⁵“Saunterings,” *Town Topics*, 11 December 1890. Italics my emphasis.

⁸⁶ Margaret Watts Livingston and others, *Correct Social Usage: A Course of Instruction in Good Form, Style, and Deportment by Eighteen Distinguished Authors*, Eighth Revised Edition (New York: New York Society of Self-Culture, 1907), 459

⁸⁷ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics*, 11 December 1890.

most essential to reifying Social identity because it brought members of Society together en masse, they came a step closer to claiming a place in Society.

The opera house, another popular site of entertainment for the women of Society, presented the same threat to exclusivity as the public ballroom. In fact, the opera house was more public in nature than the public ballroom because any number of people, both members of Society and outsiders attended an opera at the same time. However, one feature of the opera house, the opera box, functioned to stratify the audience, to differentiate the ingroup from outsiders. The opera box was a physical representation, or more aptly, a perpetuator, of the elevated status of its occupants. In the 1870s, Society controlled access to the eighteen boxes at the Academy of Music, the premiere opera house of New York City. The spatial design of the Academy kept social climbers at bay. According to Edith Wharton, “conservatives cherished it for being small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the ‘new people’ whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to.”⁸⁸ *Nouveau Riche* social climbers might attend the opera on Monday or Friday, the fashionable nights, but they would have to sit in the orchestra stalls below the boxes.

Occupation of one of the eighteen boxes at the Academy bestowed distinction and advertised one’s social affiliation.⁸⁹ Elizabeth Drexel remembered that her mother, who cared little for music, “regarded the Opera purely as a social function and never failed to occupy her box on Monday evenings, like everybody else with any claim to being fashionable.”⁹⁰ The significance of the spatial demarcation was not lost upon the *Nouveaux Riches* who could not access the boxes. Many of the new families, including

⁸⁸ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 3.

⁸⁹ Montgomery, 31.

⁹⁰ Lehr, 20-21.

the Goulds, Rockefellers, and Morgans, had offered big money for a box and had been denied.⁹¹ Even William Henry Vanderbilt's offer of \$30,000 could not buy him a place of distinction.⁹²

However, the exclusivity of the Academy of Music could not be maintained forever. In the early 1880s, a group of *Nouveaux Riches*, including J. P. Morgan and Alva Vanderbilt (who at that time of the conception of the new opera house had not yet gained a place in Society), tired of being kept from the boxes at the Academy, pooled together funds to build the larger Metropolitan Opera House with thirty-six boxes, enough to accommodate Society and newcomers. Opulently bedecked with gold trimming, glittering chandeliers, and plush red velvet, the Metropolitan was intended to challenge the more subdued Academy and the exclusivity of the old elite for which it stood.⁹³ Although the Metropolitan had terrible acoustics and no warm-up room for singers, its grandeur nevertheless attracted the Knickerbockery, including Mrs. Astor, and thus opened the door for a broadening of Society. Opening night of the new opera house on October 22, 1883 found *Nouveau Riches* like the Goulds and the Rockefellers elevated to the level of the old elite. The construction of the Metropolitan Opera House is also another example of Alva Vanderbilt's use of space—in this case public space—to vie for Social status.

Publicity

⁹¹ A board of directors, headed in 1878 by August Belmont and including representatives from the Barclay, Barlow, Beekman, Livingston, and Schuyler families (all of the Knickerbockery), ultimately decided who could rent the boxes at the Academy of Music each season. When the Metropolitan Opera House was erected, stockholders and directors participated in a draw for the boxes. Homberger, 230.

⁹² King, 47.

⁹³ Ibid, 47-48.

The *Nouveau Riche* social climbers were not the only forces invading Society's spaces. Concurrent to the *Nouveau Riche* invasion, the media was becoming increasingly intrusive into the lives of the people—particularly the women—of Society. Newspaper circulation increased by 700 percent between 1870 and 1900, with large metropolitan newspapers multiplying from 971 in 1870 to 2,226 by 1900.⁹⁴ By the early 1880s, the New York dailies such as *The New York Times*, *The New York Tribune*, *The Evening World*, *The New York World*, and *The Sun*, had begun to feature the “society page,” a section devoted to High Society. The usual news items to appear on the society page were announcements of engagements and weddings, balls, opera appearances, and the clothing worn by the women of Society at various entertainments. However, not all publicity presented Society in a positive light. The media also exposed Society's scandals, including extramarital affairs, lesbian relationships, alcoholism, suicide, and divorce. Scandal was typically kept off the society page, placed instead on the front page. As a general rule, the society page appeared a few pages in, ranging anywhere from a column to a whole page.⁹⁵

On one hand, the society page functioned to perpetuate the elite status of the women of Society by holding them up as leaders of fashion, beauty, and taste in the United States. On the other hand, it represented the opening up of Society's spaces to outside forces; Journalists infiltrated or were given access to even the most private spaces. By extension, readers of the society page enjoyed, if vicariously, entrée into Society's spaces. The society page offered a privileged view of what the women of Society looked like, what they wore, and their modes of behavior in the home, ballroom,

⁹⁴ Joel Shrock, *The Gilded Age* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 180.

⁹⁵ Montgomery, 144.

and opera house. Upwardly mobile readers would replicate the fashions and practices that the media advertised, thereby undermining Society's exclusivity by narrowing the field difference between themselves and Society women—a point that I will explore in chapters two and three.

Acquisition of even the most commonplace news item required some level of infiltration on the part of reporters. Take the following account from *The New York Times* of a dinner hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Bradley-Martin, a favorite feature of the society page, in 1899. It typifies the kind of information featured in the society pages of the New York dailies:

Mr. and Mrs. Bradley-Martin gave a dinner of eighty-six covers in the Astor Gallery, at the Waldorf-Astoria, last evening. The invitations[...]were informally worded and stated that the affair was an au revoir to Mr. and Mrs. Bradley-Martin's friends in New York[...]the dinner was served on a table ten feet wide and fifty feet long, and which extended nearly the length of the gallery. It was covered with a white damask cloth. The color scheme of the decoration was pink and white, the table being decorated with pink sweet peas and white lilac. About thirty tray-like baskets filled to overflowing with the fragrant rose-colored blossoms were placed at intervals along each side of the table. Alternatively with these were twenty similar baskets heaped with snowy lilacs.⁹⁶

The subsequent paragraphs of the article describe more decorations, the dress of the female guests, and to provide a copy of the menu, which included fare like "Clear green turtle soup," "Mignons of Spring lamb, Cardinalice," and "Moet & Chandon, Cuvee 36, Vintage 1889."

An article from *The Sun*, similarly covered Mrs. Astor's cotillion of February 1885:

Mrs. Astor's cotillion on Thursday was the only dance of the week, and was the more enjoyed for that reason. It was a small affair for Mrs. Astor's house, the german being only one row deep. That row, however, encircled the picture gallery like a girdle, leaving ample space in the middle[...]ball dresses, like their owners, are beginning to show signs of wear. They have lost their freshness, and

⁹⁶ "Bradley-Martin Banquet," *The New York Times*, 17 May 1899, 6.

even at Mrs. Astor's there were only two that were especially noticeable. One was Miss Langdon's, which was a study, in pale blue and yellow, rather a bold combination for a brunette, but artistic in itself and very becoming. Miss Turnure, whose costumes have always the stamp of originality, wore light blue, covered with mother of pearl sequins, which were not unlike the Breton buttons worn on walking dresses a few years since.⁹⁷

The level of detail in these two articles and the many others like them that appeared in the dailies indicates that the authors enjoyed insider knowledge. In fact, many reporters did have insider knowledge. Some hostesses actually invited reporters to their dinners and balls, thus allowing them personally to access the site of the entertainment. Some Society women kept a press agent or social secretary charged with the task of feeding information to the media. Mrs. Astor, for example, kept a secretary for several years, Maria de Barill, who had become something of a celebrity in her own right because of her showy taste in dress.⁹⁸ Mrs. Bradley-Martin also kept a press agent who made sure that the papers got all the details on her famous costume ball at the Waldorf-Astoria of 1897, an event that provoked much ire from the general public for its costliness during an economic depression.⁹⁹

When Society women allowed reporters into their ballrooms or sent information about their activities to the media, they were aiding and abetting the infiltration. Cooperation was an attempt to control what was printed and also an act of self-promotion.¹⁰⁰ Favorable reporting celebrated the Society woman's taste in dress and décor, her aptitude for dancing, archery, and equestrianism, and her physical beauty. Mrs. John Jacob Astor, née, Ava Lowle Willing, Mrs. Astor's daughter-in-law, for

⁹⁷ "What is Going On In Society," *The Sun*, 8 February 1885, 4.

⁹⁸ Homberger, 221.

⁹⁹ Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.

¹⁰⁰ Montgomery, 151.

example, received much flattering publicity in the dailies. The *New York Times* described her as “one of the blonde beauties with delicate features and blue eyes,”¹⁰¹ “an expert horse woman and a very fine golf player,”¹⁰² and at one dance “the handsomest dressed lady on the floor,” wearing “a beautiful Nile green satin gown, cut décolletée, with a crimson belt.”¹⁰³ At another ball, according to *The New York Tribune*, “Mrs. John Jacob Astor looked extremely beautiful in a gown of a soft shade of pink satin, the front of the corsage being ornamented with a chain of diamonds, and red roses. The butterfly sleeves of white chiffon added a fairy effect to the costume. Mrs. Astor’s coiffure was adorned with a diamond crown.”¹⁰⁴ *The Sun*, when announcing Ava’s engagement to John Jacob Astor IV in 1891, wrote that she came from an old and wealthy family of Philadelphia and that “for three generations the women of the family have been noted for their beauty[...]the present Miss Willing is no exception to the rule.”¹⁰⁵

Besides such favorable written descriptions of Society women like Mrs. John Jacob Astor, society pages often featured “portrait galleries,” or illustrations and, by the 1890s, half-tone reproductions of photographs of Society women that portrayed them as icons of elegance, loveliness, and style—although, as Montgomery argues, some of the depictions may have been intended to appeal to male sexual desires.¹⁰⁶ Certainly, the long-neck, bare shoulders, and dimpled back of Mrs. John Jacob Astor in one sketch from *The Evening World* might interest male readers as much as female readers.¹⁰⁷ Despite the potential sexual objectification of the body, by and large, the portrait galleries in the

¹⁰¹ “Society At the Opera,” *New York Times*, 25 November 1894, 19.

¹⁰² “Daughter Born To Mrs. John Jacob Astor,” *The New York Times*, 8 July 1902, 1.

¹⁰³ “Dancing At Bar Harbor,” *The New York Times*, 30 July 1895, 4.

¹⁰⁴ “The Week in Society,” *The New York Daily Tribune*, 10 January 1897, 4.

¹⁰⁵ “The Astor-Willing Wedding,” *The Sun*, 31 January 1891, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Montgomery, 157.

¹⁰⁷ “Mrs. John Jacob Astor Turns Society’s Hair from Various Hues to White and Powdered Locks,” *The Evening World*, 8 February 1908, Magazine and Story Section.

dailies, like written descriptions, presented the Society woman in a positive, even romanticized light. Drawings and photographs showed gracefully posed, beautifully dressed Society women with dainty features and perfectly coiffed hair. Society women, themselves, made sure that the portrait galleries depicted them favorably by offering to pose for cameras or by sending commissioned photographs to newspapers and magazines.¹⁰⁸

Although Society women might court publicity, they could not control everything the media printed. Undesired photography and scandal are two such examples. By the turn-of-the-century, photography had evolved enough to where reporters could take candid pictures of Society women—illicitly obtained, even unflattering photographs.¹⁰⁹ Huybertie Pruyn remembered that although her mother had refused to send pictures of her to the newspapers on the occasion of her engagement, *The New York Herald* published two unrecognizable pictures of her. She and her mother never could figure out where *The Herald* found them.¹¹⁰

Worse than illicitly obtained, unflattering photographs published in the dailies, media infiltration could result in exposure of Society's scandals. *Town Topics: The Journal of Society* was a weekly magazine devoted to gossip. Published by Colonel William D'Alton Mann, it provided commentary on trends in art, music, and dress, but featured a column titled "Saunterings" that kept readers abreast of the foibles, embarrassments, offenses, and disgraces of the people in Society. Although the "Saunterer" rarely named names and employed, as Eric Homeberger describes it, an "elaborate and coded way to hint at topics without stooping to spell matters out for the

¹⁰⁸ Montgomery, 156.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 133.

¹¹⁰ Pruyn, 317.

entire country.” The magazine was very popular, claiming a subscription list of 140,000 at its peak in 1900.¹¹¹ Most of the readers of *Town Topics* could never access the people and places of Society physically. But “Saunterings” allowed them to “share the pleasure of coming so close to embarrassments in High places.”¹¹² *Town Topics* might also expose the scandals of member of Society to their peers. People in Society certainly read the magazine. Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish, one of Society’s foremost hostesses, admitted that the magazine was her favorite reading.¹¹³

Through the mid-1880s into the new century, the Saunterer exposed the scandals of the women of New York High Society. There was “Madame X,” a leader of fashion, who “selected at the finest shop in town two or three imported gowns, which were brought to one of the fitting-rooms of the establishment that she might try them on. The young woman in attendance[...]assisted Mrs. X— in removing her street dress, and then stood utterly aghast at the duskiess and dreadful disorder of Madame’s skin and *lingerie*.”¹¹⁴ There was the new bride who was heartily sick of her matrimonial bargain and did not attempt to disguise the fact: “her indifference to her husband is evinced by her ceaseless endeavor to flirt desperately with every man that comes near her, and she has embarrassed the poor fellow immensely on a number of occasions by openly advising her friends not to marry, as there was nothing in the experience.” The Saunterer predicted a divorce for the couple within two years.¹¹⁵ A third example tells of an heiress

¹¹¹ Homberger, 207.

¹¹² Ibid, 209.

¹¹³ King, 82.

¹¹⁴ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics*, 7 July 1887.

¹¹⁵ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics*, 10 December 1892.

who had thoughts of breaking her engagement to a British lord a day before the wedding, until her ambitious mother stepped in and forced her to sign the marriage license.¹¹⁶

The methods that Mann employed to obtain such gossip highlight just how permeable Society's spaces were. Mann kept numerous "insider" informants on the payroll, including Society men in need of cash, servants, and even a telegraph operator. As one Society man recalled, "Nobody could be sure that the butler or the personal maid wasn't a spy, that the charming but penniless young cousin wasn't selling his rich relatives down the river."¹¹⁷

When on the Street

If Society's spaces were susceptible to the invasion of *Nouveau Riches* and reporters, Society women were themselves stepping outside of the boundaries of Society. They did not limit their movements to the home, the public ballroom, and the opera house, but traversed city streets, shops, restaurants, and hotels—public spaces where people of different socioeconomic positions crossed paths. On the street, there was no physical boundary separating or differentiating the Society woman from outsiders. Here, her social status was not spatially demarcated. However, Society women did take measures to reinforce social differences. Many drove in private carriages, as Montgomery writes, "to keep their distance from the public."¹¹⁸ Not only did the carriage function to separate and distinguish the Society woman from pedestrians, but presented her another opportunity to advertise her social status. Between four and five in the afternoon, the women of Society put on stylish clothing and drove in carriages along

¹¹⁶ "Saunterings," *Town Topics*, 4 December 1890.

¹¹⁷ Richmond Barrett, *Good Old Summer Days* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1941), 121. Quoted in King.

¹¹⁸ Montgomery, 101.

Fifth Avenue, sometimes stopping in Central Park for a walk. Edith Wharton remembered in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, that the “carriages, horses, harnesses and grooms were all of the latest and most irreproachable cut[...]the dress of the young ladies perched on the precarious height of a dog-cart or phaeton was no less elegant than that of the dowagers.”¹¹⁹ In her autobiography, May King Van Rensselaer recounted driving up Fifth Avenue with a restive team of ponies. In addition, she had to manage a “fiendish contraption,” a combination whip and parasol. The driver was supposed to keep the parasol always above her head, which presented obvious difficulties when she had to whip the ponies. Van Rensselaer scoffed when a woman whose ancestors had gained recognition in New York just three generation before, claimed that her grandmother was the first woman in New York City to own a carriage. “That honor,” Van Rensselaer wrote, “belongs to[...]Mrs. Jack Spratt, one of the leaders of leaders in the Society of old Nieuw Amsterdam in the 1600s.”¹²⁰

Another method of differentiation when on public turf—particularly when abroad—was to ride first class. Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White, also of the Knickerbockery, wrote to her sister-in-law, Mary Pierrepont Stuyvesant, from Paris in 1873 that one evening she, her sister, and her father could not find a first class carriage to transport them back to their hotel, so they had to drive on the top of the train “where all the common people go”¹²¹

Worse than mixing with “common people,” however, was the possibility that a Society woman would be marked “disreputable” or mistaken for a prostitute when in

¹¹⁹ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 84.

¹²⁰ Van Rensselaer, 42.

¹²¹ Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White to Mary Pierrepont Stuyvesant, August 1873, Stuyvesant-Rutherford Papers, 1647-1917, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

public. Van Rensselaer recalled accompanying her father on his way to work as a young New York debutante of the 1870s: “if the weather was fine, [I] accompanied him part way on his walk down town to business. I should have been glad to go the entire distance with him, but in that time it was unthinkable that a young girl should venture into the business district and return home therefrom unescorted.”¹²² She would walk with her father as far as Canal Street, as she described it, an “insurmountable social barrier,” and then, after bidding her father goodbye, would stroll back uptown to their home on East Nineteenth Street, sometimes stopping en route at the Social Library. Van Rensselaer did not clarify why Canal Street presented an insurmountable barrier for a young girl unescorted, but it may have had something to do with the fact that in the 1870s, one-fifth of prostitution in New York City was located south of that thoroughfare.¹²³

American society and culture of the Gilded Age categorized city space as respectable or disreputable, and defined women according to the spaces they occupied as “pure” or “fallen.”¹²⁴ The woman who traversed disreputable space left herself vulnerable to harassment from men who mistook her as a prostitute or, at any rate, cheap. The terms “streetwalker” and “woman of the streets” became popular euphemisms for prostitution, illustrating this relationship between place and a woman’s reputation.¹²⁵ As Sharon E. Wood points out in her study of working women and prostitutes who lived in close proximity in Gilded Age Davenport, Iowa, even the legal construction of

¹²² Van Rensselaer, 45.

¹²³ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920*. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994), 218.

¹²⁴ A number of historians who have written about women’s access to public space have shown that this dynamic existed in U. S. cities, including Sarah Deutsch, Sharon Wood, Kathy Peiss, and Nan Enstad. We even see this dynamic in London, documented in Judith R. Walkowitz’s *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

¹²⁵ Deutsch, 12.

prostitution in late nineteenth century America focused “not on specific actions but on reputation and *physical location*.”¹²⁶

Any woman of New York City in the Gilded Age, no matter her socioeconomic position, potentially faced disrepute and loss of social acceptability (in their respective circles) if she ventured onto disreputable territory. The Society woman was no exception to this rule; she risked losing her position in Society—if her female peers found out that she had visited a disreputable place. Edith Wharton highlighted the link between place, reputation, and social position in her novella, *New Years' Day*. The heroine of the novella, the young Society woman, Lizzie Hazeldean's, peers cut her from Society after they observed her exiting the Fifth Avenue Hotel during a fire on New Years' Day in the 1870s. They associated the Fifth Avenue Hotel with prostitution because men went there to meet the *demimondaine* for rendezvous. Society women did not go there.¹²⁷ Lizzie's presence at the hotel classes her with the *demimondes* who are the regular occupants. It signaled to her peers that she was engaging in an illicit affair. For this reason, they regarded her as unworthy to mix with the other, respectable women of Society and so they ostracized her.¹²⁸

Society men, however, could travel wherever they wanted in the city, little risking negative categorization or loss of social status. According to King, “New York also offered a multitude of less respectable and reputable establishments, including dance halls, brothels, and gambling clubs. Here a gentleman could disappear from censorious eyes (though often in the company of his illustrious and upright friends) to drink, wage

¹²⁶ Sharon E. Wood. *The Freedom of the Streets* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 17.

Italics my own emphasis.

¹²⁷ Edith Wharton. *Old New York* (New York: Pocket Books, 2002), 226.

¹²⁸ Wharton. *Old New York*, 227-229.

sums, and seduce wide-eyed chorus girls eager to enrich their own purses.”¹²⁹ At Cranford’s, one of the city’s most popular dens of iniquity for fashionable men about town, located at 5 East and 44th Street, Reginald Vanderbilt, the youngest son of Cornelius, the patriarch of the Vanderbilt family at the turn-of-the-century, once lost \$70,000 in a single night, equivalent to about \$1.6 million dollars today.¹³⁰

Although the women of Society were aware that their men frequented such seedy places, they largely chose to turn a blind eye. Van Rensselaer reported that “the most outrageous conduct by husbands and fathers was accorded no further publicity than the whisper of gossip[...], though many women of social distinction were fully aware that their husbands were running two establishments, none permitted their grief to go further than the walls of their own room”¹³¹ As one Society mother in Wharton’s *New Year’s Day* concedes to her son: “a young man may go where he pleases”—though she directs him not to talk about his travels in front of his sisters.

There were “respectable” thoroughfares in New York City that the Society woman could traverse without being marked “disreputable.” “Ladies’ Mile,” which intersected Broadway, Fifth Avenue, and 23rd Street and featured fashionable shops, restaurants, and hotels like Sherry’s, Tiffany and Co., and Lord and Taylor, was one notable example. Society women came here frequently to shop for, among other things, dry goods, home décor, and jewelry, and to dine in groups. Huybertie Pruyn and her mother shopped along Ladies’ Mile on their frequent visits to New York City. Just before her debut at the Patriarchs’ Ball in 1891, Pruyn and her mother went shopping for some clothes. They bought a “coming out” ball dress of white chiffon over white satin

¹²⁹ King, 93.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 94.

¹³¹ Van Rensselaer, 50.

from Kate Reilly's shop on Fifth Avenue. To match the dress, they bought plain white satin slippers with seed pearl bows at Slater's on Broadway.¹³² Whenever the Pruyn women visited the city, they stayed at various fashionable hotels like the Brevoort on Fifth Avenue between Eighth and Ninth Streets and the newer Holland House on Fifth Avenue and Thirtieth Street. One warm April morning at Holland House, Mrs. Pruyn ordered ice water for herself and a friend who had come to visit, using a "Teleseme," or a device that allowed guests to call up services and fare from their rooms. But instead of sending ice water, the hotel staff delivered a bottle of champagne. Not used to the Teleseme, a "modern invention," Mrs. Pruyn had, as her daughter wrote, "made the mistake of ordering champagne for two respectable Victorian ladies at eleven in the morning!"¹³³

Anna Foster Robinson, a woman of the Knickerbockery who patronized New York City dressmakers and other local businesses, regularly went out to shop or dine on Fifth Avenue and Broadway, as she mentioned in the many letters she sent to her sister, Pauline Foster Du Pont, between 1873 and 1900. She shopped for clothing at Arnold Constable on the southwest corner of 19th Street and Broadway and at A. T. Stewart's department store on Broadway between East 9th and 10th Streets, and for tapestries at Drehler's Upholstery on Sixth Avenue and 26th Street.¹³⁴

The boundaries separating "respectable" and "disreputable" city spaces were not static in Gilded Age New York. Sharon E. Wood, author of *The Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship, and Sexuality in a Gilded Age City*, writes, "Yet the spaces set apart

¹³² Pruyn, 213.

¹³³ Ibid, 288.

¹³⁴ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, November 1877, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy HML.

for “fallen” women were rarely empty of others. Brothels had neighbors, and on the sidewalks prostitutes [and other “riffraff”] strolled alongside other women.”¹³⁵ Anna Foster Robinson noted, for example, that one day while walking along Broadway at 34th Street, she had come across a “dirty little urchin” who was sprawled on a car track, in danger of being run over.¹³⁶

Between 1870 and 1900, consumer culture transformed the layout of New York City. The commercial entertainments that popped up across the city both forced and coincided with a northward movement of fashion to upper Fifth Avenue. Commercialism not only meant an increase in seedy saloons and the naissance of dance halls where unmarried working girls mingled unchaperoned with men, but also the expansion of the sex trade. Such disreputable establishments edged against respectable turf. After the erection of the Metropolitan Opera House, for example, bordellos populated the blocks surrounding the structure and opera-goers actually complained about prostitutes trying to pick up male opera-goers.¹³⁷ This state-of-affairs meant that the ultra-fashionable, ultra-respectable Mrs. Astor might find herself a mere few feet away from a prostitute on the prowl as she exited or entered her carriage on opera night. By 1900, sex districts had actually overlapped the spaces of fashion, overtaking Fifth Avenue from Washington square to Fourteenth Street. Fourteenth Street had been the favored address of the Knickerbockery, as well as the location of Delmonico’s and the Academy of Music in the 1870s. But by the 1880s, prostitutes openly solicited men after nightfall in this vicinity.

¹³⁵ Wood, 16.

¹³⁶ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster Du Pont, November 1876, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy HML.

¹³⁷ Gilfoyle, 211.

Residents complained that it was becoming “disreputable” and “not fit for a lady to pass.”¹³⁸

Even on respectable turf, the Society woman had to take precautions lest she be mistaken for a *demimondaine*. Elaborately dressed *demimonde* shopped and dined along Ladies’ Mile, alongside Society women, making it more difficult to distinguish between the two classes of women.¹³⁹ Many even drove in expensive carriages. Edith Wharton remembered that as a young child she caught a glimpse of a smart, canary-yellow brougham that belonged to financier August Belmont’s mistress driving up Fifth Avenue.¹⁴⁰ Her mother, Lucretia, was embarrassed when young Edith pointed it out and directed her daughter to look away whenever their dark blue carriage passed the yellow one.¹⁴¹

Etiquette manuals prescribed various methods by which a woman could safeguard her reputation when on the street, shopping, or dining in public. Daphne Dale, the author of *Our Manners and Social Customs: A Practical Guide to Deportment, Easy Manners, and Social Etiquette*, written in 1892, directed that:

Ladies of really good breeding will not go upon the streets, either on a shopping expedition or for other purposes, in flashy attire. On the contrary, they will dress soberly, if elegantly, and their deportment will be such as to attract the least notice. They will walk quietly, seeing and hearing nothing that they ought not see or hear[...]whether young or old, they will form no acquaintances on the streets, and their conduct will be marked by a modest reserve, which will keep impertinence at a distance, and disarm criticism.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Ibid, 213-215

¹³⁹ Maureen Montgomery describes the *demimondaines* who mingled with respectable women in fashionable places as “passing,” Montgomery, 118.

¹⁴⁰ This woman would be reincarnated as Fanny Ring, the mistress of the Jewish Banker, Julius Beaufort, in Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*.

¹⁴¹ Shari Benstock, “No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton,” *University of Texas*. 28 April 2009. <<http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/excerpts/exbennop.html>> (30 April 2009).

¹⁴² Daphne Dale. *Our Manners and Social Customs: A Practical Guide to Deportment, Easy Manners, and Social Etiquette* (Chicago: Elliott and Beezley, 1892), 139.

Florence Hartley, author of *The Ladies' Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness* from 1882, similarly asserted that “one rule you must lay down with regard to walking dress[:] It must never be conspicuous. Every detail may be scrupulously attended to, but let the whole effect be quiet and modest.” She also directed that women “wear no jewelry in the street excepting [their] watch and broach.” A lady was not supposed to raise her skirts above the ankle or to stop and talk with a gentleman in the street. Loud talking and laughing in the street were “extremely vulgar” and exposed a lady “to the *most severe misconstruction*.”¹⁴³

Even the Society woman who took such precautions to preserve her reputation in public might find that the line differentiating her from prostitutes was blurred rhetorically. The media—perhaps because it put considerable emphasis on the Society woman’s appearance—played with the definitions of the two categories, juxtaposing and merging them. One of the more sexualized descriptions of Society women came from a *Town Topics* article of December 1891 titled “‘In Skirts and Out’: An Innocent Youth is Overcome by the Limb Feminine.” The author of this article, who signed it “The Youth,” took the tone of a moral arbiter, critically observing the supposedly immodest dress of the Society women who traveled Ladies’ Mile. As he wrote:

The eternal feminine limb no longer simpers along Broadway. If you are an observer—and I think you are sure to be enough of an observer to have noticed this—you have discerned a startling change in the style with which the well-dressed women, those that form the Saturday afternoon parade on Broadway, contrive to express the interesting merits of their extremities. They are, I should say, much more confidential with their curves at this time than ever before. They are generous enough to allow even passing strangers to catch veiled glimpses of angles hitherto wholly obscured.

¹⁴³ Florence Hartley. *The Ladies' Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness* (Boston: DeWolfe, Fiske, and Company, 1882), 109-133; italics my own emphasis.

The author assured his readers that never had he been “of that vulgar masculine lot that regards women as anatomical exhibits.” Nevertheless, he described at length the shocking exposures of the female body that so offended his sensibilities, the “rhythmic and aggressive limbs fairly shining through the tight and scant materials of their gowns,” and the “big, long, unconfined female legs.”

He ventured into Delmonico’s where the skirts grew increasingly diaphanous until many of them seemed “utterly and terribly transparent.” A number of the women he recognized as “thoroughly respectable and modest daughters and wives,” and he marveled that fathers and husbands should bring them before his eyes “in such a throbbing, gleaming state of undress.” He described one girl of nineteen who entered the dining room, “with shining hair, drooping eyes and a red, delicious mouth. She moved like a goddess across the floor. I clutched wildly at the table; my brain seemed splitting. She was—heavens—she was wholly—no—no—there was a suspicion of a skirt, a mere mist, and the girl herself nestling pinkly within it.” At the conclusion of the article, the author described that he inexplicably found himself in a strange room, where bottles were on the table and the gaslight was turned low. He looked up to see a woman gazing at him, as he hinted, a prostitute. She seemed like the women he had seen on Broadway and at Delmonico’s: “yes, very like them—only, if I remember rightly, they were not so unspeakably bold as this one...my God, thought I, women *have* gone the full limit at last.”¹⁴⁴

The article presented two parallels between the Society woman and the prostitute. First, the descriptive likeness is direct and obvious; the prostitute the author encounters at the end of the article looks like the bare-limbed Society women he saw on Broadway and

¹⁴⁴ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics*, 10 December 1891.

at Delmonico's. Second, the main intent of the article seems to have been to tantalize and attract readers, albeit under the guise of censorship, with descriptions of half-naked limbs, or, in other words, to use the Society woman's sexuality to sell magazines.

Society women themselves obscured the demarcation between Society woman and prostitute by venturing onto turf associated with disreputable women. Around the turn of the century, as Montgomery writes, "society women 'played with their identity' in new ways, exploring the boundaries of bourgeois respectability in places where they might be mistaken for prostitutes."¹⁴⁵ New sites of amusements that sprang up in the city after the Civil War—cafés, amusement parks, dance halls—proffered the Society woman opportunity to challenge the traditional categorizations of city space and her access to it. However, the gaze of the press followed her to these places as well, exposing and censoring.

Town Topics, which, as I have shown, rhetorically intermingled the categories of Society woman and prostitute, took a critical tone towards Society women who themselves blurred the line of difference by occupying disreputable spaces. In July 1894, "Saunterings" reported that, an unnamed Society woman who had stayed in town longer than usual instead of going to Newport for the summer had organized several little parties to the Coney Island hotels "not only...to enjoy the cool breezes and dinner there, but to have the added pleasure of surprising other little parties of her [male] friends, not always made up with particular scrupulousness as to the morals of their female elements." The men whom this "society detective," as the Saunterer sarcastically named her, came across had been embarrassed and annoyed by her presence and the arch looks she gave them, particularly as they supposed her to be at least one hundred miles away from New York

¹⁴⁵ Montgomery, 34.

City. These men would be happy to know that her little parties had come to an abrupt end, for on her latest trip to Manhattan Beach, “she had come upon a party composed of her husband, one of his and her best men friends, and two women of unmistakable appearance.” The woman had always supposed her husband to be a model of virtue and therefore, the discovery was unpleasant and embarrassing for everybody involved. From the beginning of the article, the Saunterer established that the woman was not supposed to be at the Coney Island hotel, but instead should have been out of town for the summer. Indeed, she had no business going to Coney Island at all, by that time a favorite resort of the working poor and, evidently, a common meeting place for Society men and their mistresses.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, the implication seems to have been that the Society woman had nobody but herself to blame for her unhappy discovery; she had ventured onto territory designated for her male counterparts and their *demimonde*.¹⁴⁷

Even as late as 1915, the Saunterer thought it newsworthy that Tessie Oelrichs, one of the more prominent women in New York High Society, had dined noisily with another woman and two potentially lower class men at a “bohemian” café in Greenwich village. Even worse, the incident occurred after Sunday service during the season of Lent.¹⁴⁸

The Society woman who ventured onto turf where she might be mistaken for a prostitute potentially faced censorship and loss of social distinction. However, in exchange, she became more mobile and enjoyed greater freedom of movement. Wharton attributed the push for enhanced access to space to a desire for greater social liberty. She described the Society women who navigated disreputable territory as “bored with a

¹⁴⁶ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics*, 5 July 5, 1894.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Montgomery, 33-34.

monotonous prosperity, and yearning for such unlawful joys as cigarettes, plain speaking, and a drive home in the small hours with the young man of the moment.”¹⁴⁹ Evidently, for some Society women, the potential loss of social distinction was a worthwhile tradeoff for a bit of autonomy.

Conclusion

High Society women utilized their homes, public ballrooms, and the opera house (or more specifically, the opera box) to promote social exclusivity—to grant access to those they deemed worthy and to deny it to those whom they deemed unworthy to be in Society. In an open American society, however, anybody, including those whom the women of Society particularly wanted to exclude, had access to elite places like Delmonico’s restaurant if they could afford the fare. They could build grand mansions and opera houses, essentially to buy their way into Society. Society women, therefore, resorted to subtler methods of exclusion, to forms of cultural capital that could not be so easily bought, as I will show in chapters two and three. However, like spatial boundaries, cultural capital was, to an extent, susceptible to replication. Mass-circulated media, visual art, and the ready-made clothing industry advertised the Society woman’s cultural capital, making it increasingly available, to be acquired or imitated by outsiders, including *Nouveau Riche* women and those of the middle and working classes. Eventually, cultural capital would function as a mechanism of social inclusiveness just as it functioned as a tool to maintain exclusivity—perhaps to an even greater degree than space.

¹⁴⁹Wharton, *Old New York*, 286.

Chapter Two

Distinctly Dumb and Stiff: Using Speech and Body Language to Construct an Elite Society, 1870-1900

In Edith Wharton's novel, *The Custom of the Country*, the *Nouveau Riche* social climber Undine Spragg encounters a woman at an art gallery who has the "'look' which signified social consecration." The woman, conversely, takes no notice of Undine, but instead stands quietly examining the art, gracefully moving a tortoise-shell eye-glass with her wrist and superciliously lifting her head. So transfixed is Undine by this sight that she fails to watch her own step and clumsily bumps into the woman's husband. *He* acknowledges her and they exchange a few words, but his wife continues to ignore her; she will not speak or even look Undine's way.¹⁵⁰

The marks of distinction, though subtle, were clearly identifiable to the nineteenth-century reader. The woman's turn of wrist, upturned head, and refusal to speak signal snobbishness and, more significantly, superiority. However, despite Undine's clumsiness, which marks her inferiority, she is much freer in her body movements than her superior who asserts her higher status by her rigid posture.

In this chapter I argue that High Society women of Gilded Age New York City performed restrictive modes of speech and body language to assert the supremacy of New York High Society as a group and their individual superiority as members of the ingroup. The Society woman's possession of cultural capital was displayed in her manner of speech, posture, and corporal movements.

Inherent in restrictive speech and movements was the force of evasion (most obviously in the use of euphemism and "the cut"). Evasion was a particularly potent

¹⁵⁰ Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 31.

method of exclusion because it allowed the Society woman to avoid the taboo, the unpleasant, and, most importantly, the outsider. For example, she employed “the cut” to render the outsider a non-person symbolically. There was perhaps not a more effective tactic to debar a social climber or outcast than to refuse to acknowledge her very existence. Thus the Society woman’s speech and body language functioned to distinguish her, to uphold Society’s exclusivity, and to exclude others.

Elite Speak

The novelist Edith Wharton, who was born Edith Newbold Jones in 1862 into a prominent Knickerbocker family,¹⁵¹ acknowledged in her autobiography that she was indebted to her parents, George and Lucretia Jones, for teaching her “a reverence for the English language as spoken according to the best usage.”¹⁵² According to Wharton, her parents “spoke their mother tongue with scrupulous perfection, and insisted that their children should do the same.”¹⁵³ Lucretia Jones, as the “lady of the house” and therefore responsible for overseeing the education of her daughter, derided young Edith whenever she used incorrect words or phrases. She also did not allow her to read the popular children’s books of the day because “the children spoke bad English *without the authors knowing it*!” But, according to Wharton, linguistic competence was not unique to the Jones family. She described the talk of her “little set” as “always easy,” “sometimes witty,” and “pleasantly sophisticated.”¹⁵⁴ Wharton contrasts the scrupulous perfection of

¹⁵¹ The phrase, “keeping up with the Joneses,” is commonly thought originally to have been a reference to George and Lucretia Jones, specifically to Lucretia’s renowned dinner parties.

¹⁵² Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 48.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

the speech of her people to the slovenly speech of the *Nouveaux Riches*. Her parents abhorred the:

Habitual slovenliness of those who picked up the slang of the year without having any idea that they were not speaking in the purist tradition. But above all, abhorrent to ears piously attuned to all the inflexion and shade of meaning in our rich speech were such mean substitutes as “back of” for behind, “dirt” for earth, “any place” for anywhere, and slovenly phrases like “a great ways,” soon, alas, to be followed by the still more inexcusable “a *barracks*,” “a *woods*,” and even “a *strata*,” “a *phenomena*,” which, as I grew up, *a new class of the uneducated rich were rapidly introducing*.

Wharton clarified that such “half educated pedantry...never embarrassed *our* speech.”¹⁵⁵

Wharton’s autobiography and novels suggest that linguistic capital was one form of embodied cultural capital that distinguished her New York High Society from outsiders. Here I draw upon Bourdieu’s definition of linguistic capital, as “class-linked traits of speech differentially valued in a specific field or market.” In their linguistic capital, “one group [in this case, Society women] possesses what the system expects and is able to appropriate what the system offers, in the forms it expects, whereas the other lacks what the system expects and is less able to appropriate what it offers”¹⁵⁶ For the women of High Society New York City, linguistic capital could involve both the style and content of language. They displayed their cultural capital not only by using correct grammar and pronunciation, but also by avoiding or camouflaging taboo words and topics in conversation.

Bourdieu explains that linguistic excellence is defined in terms of deviation from the “common,” “ordinary,” and “vulgar” usages. This opposition between linguistic excellence and vulgarity is, as Bourdieu writes, the “*re-translation*” of a system of social

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 50-51. Italics my emphasis.

¹⁵⁶ James Collins, “Determination and Contradiction: An Appreciation and Critique of the Work of Pierre Bourdieu on Language and Education,” in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 118.

differences. In the area of pronunciation, diction, and grammar, there exists “a whole set of differences significantly associated with social differences.”¹⁵⁷ In Wharton’s novels, linguistic differences also reflect social differences. She attributes deficiency of speech to *Nouveau Riche* characters to signify their commonness, their vulgarity, and, most importantly, their low social status. Undine Spragg, for example, the antagonist heroine of *The Custom of the Country* and the quintessential social climber of Wharton’s fiction, throws around slang terms like “swell” and sloppy construction like “you’d think I’d” and “I haven’t got.”¹⁵⁸ In one conversation with a Society woman at a dinner party, she mispronounces the French title of a play.¹⁵⁹ Towards the beginning of the novel, Ralph Marvell, the young Knickerbocker who later marries Undine (after she has learned to mimic the speech of his people)¹⁶⁰ muses that “he had early mingled with the Invaders...but most of those he had met had already been modified by contact with the indigenous: they spoke the same language as his...But Mrs. Spragg [Undine’s mother] still used the dialect of her people.”¹⁶¹ This “dialect,” full of bad grammar and mispronunciation, compares poorly to the precision and even elegance of the speech of Wharton’s characters that are in Society like Ralph Marvell and Mrs. Peter Van Degen in *The Custom of the Country* and Newland Archer and May Welland in *The Age of Innocence*.

¹⁵⁷Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson. Trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 54.

¹⁵⁸ Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 20, 29.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁶⁰ Undine Spragg quickly learns to imitate the language of the ingroup. And yet, as literary critic Elsa Nettels, author of *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton, and Cather*, posits, “she never acquires the language of the Spears’ and Marvell’s world in the sense of sharing, or even understanding the feelings, traditions and values that lie behind the words.” Nettels, 107.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

Much in the same vein as Wharton, Matilda Amelia Barreda, a young Society woman who had moved to San Francisco with her parents around 1878, cited the poor grammar and mispronunciations of a group of *Nouveaux Riches* living in that city as proof of their vulgarity and ignorance. She complained in a letter to her friend, Louisa Morris Rutherford,¹⁶² that “society is not yet organized here.” San Francisco society was, Barreda claimed, comprised of poor easterners trying to retrieve their fortunes and the “native bonanzas,” as she called the city’s *Nouveau Riche*, who had for the most part once been servants and did not understand entertaining. Barreda related that “one of the riches[t] lady bonanzas,” was forever buying the handsomest jewelry and never wore it. When asked why she never wore her jewelry, the woman replied—as Barreda quoted her, with emphasis on the heavy accent—“I keep them fur when I git poor agin.” Barreda went on to cite the speech that another “bonanza” had made at the celebration for his silver wedding anniversary—again, with emphasis on the mispronunciation and bad grammar:

“Thank ye kindly, our friends, for helpin’ out to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of our weddin’ day with Bidy and me. I were not always surrounded by flashy hangins’[...]when first Bidy and I arrived at Sacramento City, we lived in a one room shanty that nather kep’ out wind nor water, and many a time we had to git up at night and cover our bed with pans, kitchen pots, and kittles to catch the rain as it came pouring down ‘pon us through the roof.”

“This,” Barreda wrote, “will give you an idea of the crème de la crème of San Francisco native society. Would you believe that this man is considered one of the *least vulgar* of the native bonanzas!”¹⁶³ Unlike Wharton, Barreda did not specifically contrast her own

¹⁶² Louisa Morris Rutherford was the daughter of the prominent New Yorker and Astronomer, Lewis Morris Rutherford,, and sister to Margaret Stuyvesant-Rutherford White.

¹⁶³ Matilda Amelia Barreda to Louisa Rutherford, September 1879, Stuyvesant-Rutherford Papers, 1647-1917, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

speech to that of the bonanzas. Nevertheless, her emphasis on their errors of grammar and pronunciation implies that she derived a sense of distinction in opposition to them, based on linguistic differences.

The linguistic competence that differentiated women like Barreda and Wharton from “vulgar” or “uneducated” *Nouveau Riches* had to be carefully cultivated. Evidence suggests that this competence was an inheritance that female relatives and primarily female teachers passed down to the Society girl. Cultivation required investments of both time and the expense of private tutors, governesses, and elite schools.

As noted, Lucretia Jones ensured that young Edith spoke good English by deriding her when she used incorrect words or phrases and by restricting the books that she was allowed to read. That a young Margaret Stuyvesant-Rutherford White, a member of one of the most prominent families in New York and later the wife of the American diplomat, Henry White, felt it necessary to apologize to her closest female relatives for “poor writing,” “blunders,” and “mistakes” in her letters suggests that they may have expected certain standards of usage from her.¹⁶⁴ Wharton speculated that her own mother’s “reverence for the best tradition of spoken English,” was owing, in part, to her English tutors and governesses.¹⁶⁵ Huybertie Pruyn remembered that her female teacher at her fashionable day school in Albany, “St. Agnes,” drilled the young pupils on proper usage, such as the meaning of “née” vs. “via”: “this last was most important. Once an old girl wrote a letter to Bishop Doane and signed it, ‘Mary Jones via Smith.’ This was terrible, and we could not be sufficiently warned against making such a

¹⁶⁴ Matilda Amelia Barreda to Louisa Rutherford, July 1873, Stuyvesant-Rutherford Papers, 1647-1917, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

¹⁶⁵ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 49.

mistake.”¹⁶⁶ The hypercorrectness of speech extended to penmanship. Margaret Stuyvesant-Rutherford White wrote to her sister-in-law, Mary Pierrepont Stuyvesant, from “Ashcliff,” a small and highly regarded boarding school that catered to “well born” girls on the Isle of Wight, that the proprietor of the school, Miss Ellen, meticulously monitored her formal writing, giving her a mark for each wrong stroke.¹⁶⁷ She judged that her own progress was slow, but noted that her Aunt E. (who was abroad on an extended vacation in Europe) had promised to give her a lesson every day during the Easter holiday when all the other girls had gone home to help her to catch up.¹⁶⁸

Correct style of speech was only one element of language that the Society woman employed in her effort to distinguish herself from outsiders. The content of one’s speech functioned to differentiate as well. Particularly in the 1870s, according to Wharton, Society was “a little set with its own catch-words.”¹⁶⁹ As Elsa Nettels explains in her study of language and gender in Wharton’s fiction, this “secret language” functioned both to create bonds among the initiated and to alienate and exclude outsiders.¹⁷⁰ This specialized lexicon consisted of inside jokes that one could only recognize and enjoy as a member of the ingroup. In the memoirs and letters of Society women like Wharton, Van Rensselaer, and Anna Foster Robinson, we find a few catchwords and phrases that appear to have been shared only by members of Society or even just by the women of Society. Many of these terms were derogatory nicknames assigned to individuals. They both

¹⁶⁶ Pruyn, 122.

¹⁶⁷ Sarah Cutts Frerichs, “Sewell as an Educator—An Assessment,” *The Victorian Web: Literature, History, and Culture in the Age of Victoria*. 8 April 2008. <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/sewell/6c.html>> (19 May 2009).

¹⁶⁸ Margaret Stuyvesant-Rutherford White to Mary Pierrepont Stuyvesant, 1873, Stuyvesant-Rutherford Papers, 1647-1917, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society

¹⁶⁹ *A Backward Glance*, 79.

¹⁷⁰ Elsa Nettels, *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton, and Cather* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 99.

excluded and derided the “other”—the social climber. For example, Anna Foster Robinson mentions in one of her letters to her sister, Pauline Foster Du Pont, from 1877 that a man known as “Murderer Phelps” was engaged to a girl called “Masculine Pell.” Why Robinson and her friends attached these handles to Phelps and Pell, Robinson does not explain, except to say that Pell wore high-necked black silk at the winter balls—an odd choice for a debutante. But evidently her group shared these disparaging inside jokes.¹⁷¹ Similarly, Van Rensselaer wrote of an ambitious social climber, who because of her acute strategical sense for social elevation, earned the “half-derisive” nickname of “The King Maker” from the socially elect of the period.¹⁷²

More famously, Society denigrated whole groups of *Nouveau Riche* social climbers by labeling them collectively with terms like “arrivistas,” “shoddees,” “silver-gilts,” “bouncers” (for their “fast and erratic behavior”),¹⁷³ and “rodents” (because they multiplied so quickly).¹⁷⁴ By derogatorily labeling the *Nouveaux Riches*, Society women established that they were outsiders, or others. Terms like “shoddees” and “rodents” socially devalued wealthy climbers, allowing the members of Society to assert their own worth in opposition to them. The very usage of such labels, shared only by members of Society, functioned to differentiate Society from the *Nouveaux Riches*, to show that those who applied the terms to others were in and those to whom the terms were applied were not in.

¹⁷¹ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, November 1877, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.

¹⁷² Van Rensselaer, 203. Van Rensselaer may have been referring to Melissa Wilson who, together her husband, Richard Thornton, were referred to as “the marrying Wilson’s” for their almost unbelievable matrimonial luck. King, 120.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 54.

¹⁷⁴ Clare Preston, *Edith Wharton’s Social Register* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 2000), 99.

Society women, however, most effectively excluded outsiders, the unpleasant, and the taboo, by using euphemism in their speech. Euphemism allowed for, in Bourdieu's words, a "doubling of profits": 1) the profit of saying and 2) the profit of denying what is said by the way of saying it.¹⁷⁵ Ultimately, euphemism did not evade the outsider or the taboo altogether, for he or she received recognition, though in veiled form. But euphemism functioned as a camouflage—to render people and meanings "though recognizable in theory, misrecognized in practice."¹⁷⁶

In the United States, euphemistic speech perhaps originated in nineteenth-century codes for propriety that forbade women to talk openly about sexuality.¹⁷⁷ Certain words or topics of conversation, particularly those related to sex, like "mistress," "bastard," and "adulterer," were considered too unseemly to be spoken of in fashionable drawing rooms—by women and men. However, whereas a man could leave such convention behind when he left the presence of ladies, respectable women, particularly unmarried women, were supposed to avoid the taboo in their talk, to at least feign ignorance of it at all times.¹⁷⁸ Thus, for example, although William Astor spent much of his time sailing with prostitutes to Florida on his yacht that he aptly named the *Nourmahal*, or "Light of the Harem," his wife never spoke of his escapades.¹⁷⁹ According to Elizabeth Drexel Lehr, when asked about William's yacht trips, Mrs. Astor would simply say: "oh, he is having a delightful cruise. The sea air is so good for him. It is a great pity I am such a bad sailor, for I should so much enjoy accompanying him. As it is, I have never even set

¹⁷⁵ Bourdieu, 143.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 142.

¹⁷⁷ Nettels, 89.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 90.

¹⁷⁹ King, 30.

foot on the yacht; dreadful confession for a wife, is it not?”¹⁸⁰ It was an obvious evasion from a woman who sailed across the Atlantic at least once a year and who had many times gone sailing off the coast of Newport in heavy winds.¹⁸¹

Euphemism, however, enabled the Society woman to discuss forbidden subjects without compromising propriety. By verbalizing opaque, “camouflaged” references to the taboo, she could sidestep restrictions of the social system without overstepping its bounds. Euphemism paradoxically allowed her to speak of the taboo—or taboo people, for that matter—and yet to evade it by, going back to Bourdieu’s words, “misrecognizing it in practice.” It was a doubling of profits, *to say* and *to deny* what was being said *by the way of saying it*.

In her insightful *Edith Wharton’s Social Register*, Clare Preston draws upon an excerpt from an early draft of Wharton’s biography in which young Edith discovered that babies come from people and, when she approached her mother with the news, was told that such subjects are “not nice” for little girls. Preston observes that “not-niceness” is an odd litotes “in which the opposite of a thing is formulated merely as its own cancellation.”¹⁸² “Not nice” was merely one formulation, alongside “not at home,” “not done,” “not the thing,” and of course, “not in,” of the “not-x” category employed by Society women that succeeded in, as Wharton puts it, rendering “other standards non-existent by ignoring them.”¹⁸³ It fails to define or even to name what “not”-x is except to clarify that it is the absence of “x.” It is, in Preston’s words, “to become, in essence,

¹⁸⁰ Lehr, 73.

¹⁸¹ King, 31.

¹⁸² Preston, 2.

¹⁸³ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Berkley Books, 1981), 49.

unknown, invisible, non-existent; ‘not-x’ is merely nothing at all.”¹⁸⁴ Thus “not nice” or “not in” people, things, and practices, are rendered invisible, almost non-entities.

The force of evasion in the Society woman’s speech did not always take the “not-x” form. Subtlety and substitution of words likewise functioned to render the outsider, the taboo, and the unpleasant almost non-existent rhetorically and socially. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton related that she had an uncle, “George Alfred,” whom she “had never seen, and could never hope to see, because years before he had—vanished. Vanished, that is, out of society, out of respectability, out of the safe daylight world of ‘nice people’ and reputable doings.”¹⁸⁵ Before even uttering the man’s name, Wharton’s mother would lower her voice and, as soon as she had spoken it, would dart away from the name. One time, as an adult, Wharton asked her mother “but what did he do?” “Some woman” was all Lucretia Jones would mutter. Wharton never could learn anything more from her mother; George Alfred and his “some woman” were a “shadowy Paola and Francesca,¹⁸⁶ circling together on the ‘accursed air,’ somewhere outside the safe boundaries of our old New York.”¹⁸⁷ “Some woman,” substituted for the name of the woman in question and the details of her transgression, evaded the person and the deed. When Lucretia Jones used the words, she essentially dismissed George Alfred’s “some woman” as being unworthy of acknowledgment. At the same time, by reverting to

¹⁸⁴ Preston, 5.

¹⁸⁵ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 25.

¹⁸⁶ In Dante’s *Inferno*, he describes seeing the souls of Paola and Francesca in the second circle of hell for the lustful. Francesca da Rimini had been a young Florentine woman married to a proud and deformed husband, Gianciotto da Verrucchio. She fell in love with his handsome younger brother, Paola. An illicit affair ensued. When Gianciotto learned of their love, he came upon them and stabbed them to death, damning their souls.

¹⁸⁷ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 24.

oblique references to mention the unmentionable, Mrs. Jones could recognize this taboo woman without explicitly naming her.¹⁸⁸

Other women likewise utilized euphemism as a means to discuss topics forbidden to them without compromising their respectability. For example, Adele Sloane, a Vanderbilt granddaughter, related in her diary that her mother strongly objected to the idea of her marrying an older bachelor, Mr. Beach, and even refused to take her to any place where she might meet him. We find from the historian and novelist, Louis Auchincloss, who married Adele's granddaughter and provides commentary on Adele's diary, that Mrs. Sloane disapproved of Mr. Beach because he had been living openly with a woman in Paris. Nevertheless, Mrs. Sloane kept this reason for her objection from her daughter.¹⁸⁹ When Adele finally learned the truth about Mr. Beach during a trip to Paris in 1894, she likewise evaded a clear description of the fact—in her private diary! Nevertheless, indirectness allowed her to acknowledge scandalous goings on of which, particularly as an unmarried woman, she was supposed to be (or feign) ignorant. Her entry for May 4 reads only: “he is leading openly a *bad life* here in Paris. That means so much. It is only these last two years that I have realized what one side of life looked like, such a horrible, fascinating side of life.”¹⁹⁰

Even—as Wharton's interaction with her mother regarding where babies come from suggests—pregnancy seems to have been a taboo topic for conversation among Society women, perhaps because of its relationship to sexual intercourse. To relate details of her second pregnancy to her sister, Pauline, Anna Foster Robinson reverted to

¹⁸⁸ Wharton's Uncle, George Alfred Jones, had defrauded several Society families in 1872, including the Chadwicks and Costers to support his mistress. For this reason he and his wife were ignored by their family and Society.

¹⁸⁹ Sloane, 137.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 151.

euphemism. She wrote in 1877, “I have not breathed a word to anyone about a *certain matter* that particularly interests myself, but I am afraid that I was so tired on Tuesday evening that I probably showed it.”¹⁹¹ She wanted Pauline, as her sister and closest confidant, to be the first to hear the news—and yet even to *her* she could not speak frankly.¹⁹² Several letters later, Anna explained that she accepted a dinner invitation because her husband, Beverly, so much wanted to go. She hoped that she would be able to “*costume the ‘seas’* a little longer without being noticed.”¹⁹³ Twenty years later in 1895, Adele Sloane wrote with slightly more candor to her cousin, Edith Shepard Fabbri, that “yours truly expects to come into possession of a small infant next May!!!!” Although Adele’s meaning is more lucid than Robinson’s, she likewise avoided the word “pregnant” and ultimately sidestepped the theme of pregnancy, focusing instead on the baby after its birth. As she went on to describe how surprised she was to find herself pregnant, she referred to the pregnancy merely as “it.”¹⁹⁴

Although Society women used speech as a mechanism of distinction and exclusion it conversely could be a tool used by the upwardly mobile in their quest for social status. Certainly, newspapers, magazines, and etiquette manuals of the era promoted the conception that anybody could improve their linguistic competency and that in so doing, they would improve their social standing.¹⁹⁵ For example, an article of 1896 in *The Ladies’ Home Journal* titled, “To Be A Social Success,” advised a reader

¹⁹¹ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, November 1877, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.

¹⁹² Ruth Lord, *Henry Du Pont and Winterthur: A Daughter’s Portrait* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 26.

¹⁹³ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, February 16, 1878, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library. Italics my emphasis.

¹⁹⁴ Florence Adele Sloane to Edith Shepard Fabbri, October 1895, The Papers of Edith Shepard Fabbri, 1842-1898, Courtesy of The New York Historical Society.

¹⁹⁵ Kasson, 43.

that if she wanted to achieve social recognition, she must know how to converse: “to be a social success, you must govern your voice, and usage is the only thing that will make that possible. Do not be afraid to speak of simple things.”¹⁹⁶ Moreover, nearly every etiquette manual of the day provided pointers on the art of conversation. Sherwood, for example, directed readers to avoid talk of scandal,¹⁹⁷ Dale advised them to avoid topics like religion and politics,¹⁹⁸ and Hartley counseled wives not to refer to their husbands by their Christian names when conversing with friends.¹⁹⁹ Although etiquette manuals were primarily written for a middle-class audience, King speculates that *Nouveau Riche* social climbers turned to conduct books in their quest to become members of Society.²⁰⁰ Although these texts did not necessarily advocate that an individual could gain entry into New York High Society by possessing linguistic capital, evidently at least some social climbers in New York City supposed—or at least hoped—that language was the key to access. *The New York Times* reported in 1891 that an enterprising woman had actually succeeded in charging social climbers for lessons in conversation.²⁰¹

Regulating the Body

There were more visual means of communicating social superiority than through speech. The body, or body language, was used to convey status even in the absence of words. As David Yosifon and Peter N. Stearns explain in their study of posture in American history, proper posture was thought to convey gentility, character, and

¹⁹⁶ Rush Ashmore, “To Be a Social Success,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, August 1896, 16.

¹⁹⁷ Sherwood, 325.

¹⁹⁸ Dale, 301.

¹⁹⁹ Hartley, 14.

²⁰⁰ King, 116.

²⁰¹ “The Art of Conversation,” *New York Times*, 13 February 1891, 3.

eventually it became an important aesthetic measurement, particularly in discussions of female appearance in nineteenth century America.²⁰² Society women sought to epitomize cultural ideals of the female body as a means to assert their social distinction. They treated the female body as, drawing upon a phrase used by gender historian, Kathleen Canning, “an object of regulation and tutelage.”²⁰³ They trained and transformed it by subjecting it to weekly dance classes, restrictive clothing (which I will discuss in chapter three), *Tableaux Vivants*, and in at least one case, a posture device. By so doing, they also inspired standards for comportment and movement reflected in or even promoted by some of the most popular artwork of the day.

I categorize posture, physical movement, and “the cut” as “body language.” Movement and posture more implicitly functioned to distinguish members of the ingroup from outsiders, whereas Society women employed “the cut” to send a blunt message of differentiation to those who were not in Society.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the discourse of etiquette promoted the notion that individuals—particularly women—would be judged by their posture. Sherwood, for example, announced in *Manners and Social Usages* that a lady could be identified by the way she sat down: “a woman is allowed much less freedom of posture than a man. He may change his position as he likes, and loll or lounge, cross his legs, or even nurse his foot if he pleases; but a woman must have grace and dignity; in every gesture she must be ‘ladylike’.”²⁰⁴ Other etiquette manuals of the period “coached young women to move gracefully and without haste, to keep their torsos erect when standing or

²⁰² David Yosifon and Peter N. Stearns, “The Rise and Fall of American Posture,” *The American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 1059.

²⁰³ Kathleen Canning, *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class, and Citizenship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 168.

²⁰⁴ Sherwood, 170.

sitting, and to make small arcs with their hands or arms when gesturing.”²⁰⁵ The graceful posture of the “lady” contrasted starkly to representations of the hunched stance of the failed businessman, the crooked bones of non-European races, bent workers, and lounging frontiersmen. A novel of 1854 even “identified a woman’s fraudulent claim to respectability when she sat on an upholstered seat and ‘let her head drop’!”²⁰⁶ In Wharton’s fiction, the movements and posture of a character’s body likewise mark her social standing. The debutante May Welland in *The Age of Innocence* blushes, drops her eyes to a bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley that rests on her lap, and gently touches her white-gloved fingertips to the flower petals in response to her fiancé’s gaze.²⁰⁷ In contrast, Wharton depicts the social-climbing *Nouveau Riche* Undine Spragg, “twitching at her draperies...her incessant movements were not the result of shyness: she thought it the correct thing to be animated in society, and noise and restlessness were her only notion of vivacity.”²⁰⁸ Indeed, Undine is the very emblem of the “bouncer” with her “fast” and “erratic” movements.

The self-proclaimed New York High Society arbiter, Ward McAllister, decreed in his *Society As I Have Found It* that roughness of manner rendered a person “unfit” to go into Society.²⁰⁹ Evidence suggests that Society women worked hard to exemplify cultural standards of posture and movement so that they would be “fit” to go into Society and, just as importantly, to advertise their social “fitness.”

From a young age until their debut, or their formal entrance into Society, Society girls attended weekly dancing classes. The authority on etiquette, Constance Carrie

²⁰⁵ Annette Stott, “Floral Femininity: A Pictorial Definition,” *American Art* 6 (1992), 69-70.

²⁰⁶ Yosifon and Stearns, 1059-1062.

²⁰⁷ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 6.

²⁰⁸ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 15.

²⁰⁹ McAllister, 20.

Harrison, described the *modus operandi* of the dancing class for readers of *The Ladies' Home Journal*:

The Dancing Class, controlled by a bevy of matrons who carefully select the names sent out upon invitations to belong to it, is the society girl's training ground for polite society. At these classes, meeting in the afternoon or evening once a week, the mothers sit around the halls while the boys and girls go through the exact forms to be observed in the ball-room of the future.²¹⁰

These classes did not merely teach the Society girl the various dances or the exact forms that she would eventually practice in the ballroom, but just as importantly, through dances and forms, taught her discipline of the body—correctness and elegance of stance, walk, and movements of the limb and feet.²¹¹ As Yosifon and Stearns write, “dancing lessons, and the increasing interest in highly regulated dances such as the waltz” promoted standards of carriage and limb movement.²¹² Standards for dance often called for microscopic control of the body. One etiquette manual, for example, directed that the female should step with minute neatness, her feet shifting lightly and close to the floor, and movements should occur in as small a compass as possible.²¹³

Other forms of regulation and tutelage besides dancing classes, implemented by mothers and female teachers, functioned to improve the body, to achieve standards of posture and movement. Consuelo Vanderbilt remembered how her mother would pester her, even as a very young child, to sit up straight during carriage rides. When Consuelo's legs began to twitch, she was admonished for what her mother dubbed the “Vanderbilt fidgets.”²¹⁴ Huybertie Pruyn recalled that before every holiday, her teacher at St. Agnes would say: “Children, remember that no lady crosses her knees. She may cross her

²¹⁰ Constance Cary Harrison, “The New York Society Girl,” *The Ladies' Home Journal*, October 1892, 7.

²¹¹ Homberger, 123.

²¹² Yosifon and Stearns, 1060.

²¹³ Homberger, 124.

²¹⁴ Balsan, 13.

ankles, but never her limbs.”²¹⁵ Related to Pruyn’s account, Margaret Stuyvesant-Rutherford White complained in a letter to her sister-in-law, Mary, from 1873 of the “vulgar” “Schenks” sisters whom she had met in England. One of the sisters, she wrote, “crossed her legs and stuck her fingers in her nose and was altogether undignified.”²¹⁶

Alva Vanderbilt took an extreme measure of regulation to ensure that her daughter’s body conformed to standards for posture and movement. Because, as Consuelo Vanderbilt confirms, “sitting up straight was one of the crucial tests of ladylike behavior,” her mother devised a “horrible instrument” that she forced Consuelo to wear when doing her lessons. Consuelo described it as “a steel rod which ran down my spine and was strapped at my waist and over my shoulders—another strap went around my forehead to the rod.” She remembered how she had to keep her head high while reading and found it nearly impossible to write in so “uncomfortable” a position. Nevertheless, Consuelo acknowledged in her memoirs that “I probably owe my straight back to those many hours of discomfort.”²¹⁷

Discipline of the body, however, was not merely imposed upon Society daughters. Adult women of New York High Society also eagerly participated in pursuits that required a stylized, regulated “look” for the body. The popular *Tableaux Vivants* or “living pictures,” for example, afforded the Society woman the opportunity to flaunt her body and the control she possessed over it. At these events, Society women posed as the heroines in the artwork of the great masters, typically on a stage, behind a curtain that would lift momentarily for an audience to see. Because this art form allowed for thin,

²¹⁵ Pruyn, 121.

²¹⁶ Margaret Stuyvesant-Rutherford White to Mary Pierrepont Stuyvesant, July 1873, Stuyvesant-Rutherford Papers, 1647-1917, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

²¹⁷ Balsan, 13.

simple dress that hugged the shape of the body, models practiced hard to achieve the correct stance, from the line of the leg to the curve of the finger. A *New York Times* article of 1908 described the dress rehearsals for Mrs. Waldorf Astor's *Tableau* to raise money for the poor of Albermarle County, Virginia, going late into the evening on a Saturday. For this *Tableau*, Mrs. Waldorf Astor's sister-in-law, Mrs. John Jacob Astor, posed as Lady Hamilton as Thais after Romney in a slashed gown, triumphantly holding the scepter of Alexander the Great, Mrs. James B. Eustis modeled Salammbo in the moonlight in a gauzy robe, her arms outstretched to the moonlight, while Miss Cornelia Bryce posed as an imprisoned Burne-Jones' Hope in turquoise and blue drapery with her arm outstretched.²¹⁸ Similarly, Wharton's depiction of Lily Bart, the heroine of *The House of Mirth*, posed as Joshua Reynolds's "Mrs. Lloyd" in a *Tableau Vivant* illustrates the emphasis that these productions put on bodily stylization. She wrote of Lily's "long dryad-like curves that swept upward from her poised look to her lifted arm. The noble buoyancy of her attitude, its suggestion of soaring grace, revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty."²¹⁹

Visual art of the day, like the floral-female genre, the portraits by John Singer Sargent and Charles Émile Carolus Duran, and the famous Gibson Girl drawings, endorsed a very stylized standard for movement of the female body. All drew inspiration from the women of New York Society.²²⁰ In the works of masters of floral-female art like Charles Courtney Curran and Robert Reid, the line blurred between the

²¹⁸ "Stage Hands Cheer as Society Poses," *New York Times*, 24 February 1908, 7.

²¹⁹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 136.

²²⁰ According to art historian Annette Stott, floral-female art was an American genre that "placed one woman or more in a flower garden setting and manipulated composition, color, texture, and form to make the women look as much like flowers as possible." Floral-female art almost always depicted young women of the leisure class. Stott, 61.

delicate elegance of flower-petals depicted and the contour of the female subjects' forms. For example, Curran's *Lotus Lilies* of 1888 portrays two well-dressed women rowing across a lily-pad covered pond. The young woman in a white dress and flowery hat on the right reaches over the side of the boat to touch a flower. Her back remains straight as one arm extends gracefully to the petals while the other lies arched over her knee, reminiscent of the tall, straight-stemmed lily stalks that bow at their tops.

Although the floral-female paintings represented unnamed women of American high society, Singer Sargent and Duran painted portraits of specific New York Society women like Mrs. Astor, Elizabeth Rutherfurd White, Eleanor O'Donnell Iselin, and Consuelo Vanderbilt after her marriage to the 9th Duke of Marlborough. Their art, too, depicted erect backs and arched, posed arms. Duran's portrait of Mrs. Astor from 1890 (that hung in the hallway in which she received her guests for her annual ball) shows her wearing a royal purple velvet Mary Stuart costume. Her torso to her head is a straight line with arms arched together, crossing gently at the finger-tips. The figure gives the impression of regality, I think intentionally so. Another portrait from 1883, by Singer Sargent, depicts Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherfurd White in a voluminous, silky gown of ivory and light blue. Although only one half of her body faces the viewer, like Mrs. Astor in Duran's painting, White's torso is erect, with the neck, back, and shoulders held. Her fingers curve exquisitely around the handle of a fan in one hand and what looks to be an opera glass in the other. Singer Sargent's portrait of Consuelo Vanderbilt, her husband and two sons from 1905 presents Vanderbilt with a long, straight neck and back, her shoulders arched back, and arms rounded and resting against her oldest son's chest.

Probably the most famous representation of the New York High Society woman was Charles Dana Gibson's "Gibson Girl." As the author and illustrator, Henry C. Pitz writes in the introduction of *The Gibson Girl and Her America*, the Gibson Girl "moved



Figure 1: The Gibson Girl from *Sketches and Cartoons* by Charles Dana Gibson (New York: R. H. Russell and Son, 1898).

through a world that did not seem too demanding. Courteous, secure and serene, she had an Anglo-Saxon attractiveness which seemed to conquer all possible problems. She wore her fashionable clothes with unselfconscious distinction; her gestures were patrician.”²²¹ Stearns and Yosifin point out that the Gibson's art “typically put both men and women in relaxed positions, leaning on an arm amid the grass of a park or against a bench or wall.”²²² However, even when reclining,

the Gibson Girl usually kept her back straight, her shoulders erect, her long

neck high, and her hands elegantly posed. Her body was always very stylized. Gibson emphasized this stylization in one of his later sketches for *Life Magazine*, ironically titled, “Thirty Years of Progress,” that contrasted the image of the Gibson Girl to his caricature of a new woman debutante of the mid-1920s. This cartoon potentially conveys

²²¹ Henry C. Pitz, introduction to *The Gibson Girl and Her America* by Charles Dana Gibson and Edmund Vincent Gillon (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1969), xi.

²²² Yosifin and Stearns, 1065.

several messages, including a critique of modernism, ridicule of the evolutionary process, and the devolution of female sex appeal. However, at the most basic, visual level, it celebrates the Gibson Girl's erect and poised form in opposition to the careless, hunched-over figure that represents the new woman.²²³

The Gibson Girl obviously was a representation of the women of New York High Society.²²⁴ She enjoyed access to ballrooms, the opera house, and the finest dining rooms. She sang, danced, and even read of her engagement in the gossip columns. And indeed, Gibson had close ties to New York High Society. He regularly attended Society entertainments²²⁵ and married Irene Langhorne of Richmond, Virginia, the sister of Nancy Astor (a niece by marriage to Mrs. Astor), in 1895. Scholars agree that Irene was the original inspiration for the Gibson Girl.²²⁶

The art of Gibson (and his many imitators), Singer Sargent, Duran, and the female-flower genre provided a model for women of other socio-economic positions to follow. They represented an ideal to which scores of Americans aspired. As Pitz writes of Gibson's drawings, "his pictures carried a message of hope, a tantalizing reach for a superior life." Millions of women followed that dream; they styled their gestures, clothing, and hair on the Gibson specifications.²²⁷ Indeed, by portraying the Society woman's body as an ideal type, these forms of art actually encouraged upwardly mobile women to copy the Society woman's posture and movements. Moreover, they provided

²²³ Kathleen Pyne. "On Women and Ambivalence in the Evolutionary Topos," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture*. 19 May 2009. <Erreur ! Référence de lien hypertexte non valide.> (19 May 2009).

²²⁴ Montgomery, 155.

²²⁵ Numerous articles in the *New York Times* from the last decade of the nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth cite Gibson and his wife as guests at various Society entertainments.

²²⁶ "Charles Dana Gibson," *The National Museum of American Illustration*, 6 May 2009 <<http://www.americanillustration.org/html/cg/bio.html>> (19 May 2009).

²²⁷ Henry C. Pitz, introduction to *The Gibson Girl and Her America* by Charles Dana Gibson and Edmund Vincent Gillon (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1969), xi.

images—in the case of Gibson’s sketches, mass-circulated images—that the socially ambitious could emulate in their quest for higher social standing. These genres undercut Society’s exclusivity by making the Society woman’s modes of distinction accessible to outsiders. As a case in point, although Gibson’s High Society wife was the first Gibson girl, she was not the only one. Gibson also drew inspiration from models like the exquisitely beautiful Evelyn Nesbit, a young woman of humble origin.²²⁸

When outsiders began to resemble insiders, however, there was one form of body language that reinforced the difference: “the cut.” Historians Gail MacColl and Carol McD. Wallace define “the cut” as “a social technique designed to express disapproval, reinforce superiority, demonstrate exclusivity; a very public snubbing.”²²⁹ Traditionally, only women enacted “the cut,”²³⁰ directing it against either “unsavory social climbers or former insiders who had let down the side.”²³¹ To perform “the cut,” the Society woman used her body to rebuff the target.

Wharton describes “the cut” in her novella, *New Year’s Day*. At the beginning of this novella, a group of Society women spot one of their own coming out of the Fifth Avenue Hotel, a location associated with prostitution, on New Year’s Day during a fire. That evening, the offender, Lizzie Hazeldean, comes face to face with a friend, Mrs. Wesson, one of the women who had seen her exiting the hotel. Lizzie begins to speak to her friend, but when she looks up, Mrs. Wesson has turned away from her: “Mrs. Wesson, who, two seconds earlier, appeared in all her hard handsomeness to be bearing

²²⁸ King, 117. Evelyn Nesbit would later become infamous for her involvement in the Thaw-White murder trial of 1907, billed “the trial of the century” by the media at the time.

²²⁹ MacColl and McD. Wallace, 10.

²³⁰ David Poole, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist: The Facts of Daily Life in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 55.

²³¹ MacColl and McD. Wallace, 10.

straight down on Mrs. Hazeldean, with a scant yard of clear *parquet* between them—Mrs. Wesson, as her animated back and her active red fan now called on all the company to notice, had never been there at all, had never seen Mrs. Hazeldean.”²³² This incident immediately marks Lizzie “not in” Society, and until her death she lives outside the circle of Society, visited only by a few young men from time to time, but shunned by the women. In *The Social Ladder*, Van Rensselaer recounted that a woman well known in Society was cut after her husband divorced her: “Notice was served upon her that he had divorced her. From that day on, she was regarded as an outcast, a fallen woman, by all her former intimates. Society ignored her entirely.” The fact that this woman had been “deeply wronged by her rascally husband” made no difference to Society. As Van Ransselaer wrote, “she was a divorced woman and hence socially dead.”²³³

As Van Rensselaer and Wharton’s narratives illustrate, “the cut” was the ultimate form of exclusion. It symbolized that a person was, for all practical purposes, non-existent, a non-person, barred from the “safe daylight world of ‘nice people’ and reputable doings.” “The cut” also reinforced difference, for nobody from within Society actually forgot the ousted individual, but instead, as Lucretia Jones’ oblique references to George Alfred and his “some woman” suggest, used the person’s example to emphasize “this is what we are not; we are better than this.” This point becomes doubly clear in *New Year’s Day* when twenty years after Lizzie Hazeldean’s exile, two Society matriarchs recall: “She was *bad*...always. They used to meet at the Fifth Avenue Hotel.”²³⁴

²³² Wharton, *Old New York*, 254-255.

²³³ Van Rensselaer, 50.

²³⁴ Wharton, *Old New York*, 223.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the ways in which Society women used speech and body language to assert their social status and to exclude outsiders. As I have shown, these modes of distinction required careful, long-term cultivation. Nevertheless, artwork, including the popular Gibson Girl sketches, and etiquette manuals that celebrated the Society woman's styles of speech and corporeal movement, simultaneously made these forms of cultural capital available to social climbers.

However, given that the Society woman's modes of speech and body language required years of development, an outsider, particularly an outsider who lacked family connections and wealth, would have found it difficult, if impossible, to imitate perfectly the speech and corporeal movements of the women of Society. Conversely, the Society woman's dress was more susceptible to replication. Clothing could be quickly and cheaply acquired, unlike speech and posture. As I will discuss in chapter three, mass-circulated media overflowed with information regarding what the women of Society were wearing. Descriptions and illustrations of dress figured more prominently in the gossip columns of newspapers and magazines than any other marker of the Society woman's status. Simultaneously, the burgeoning ready-made clothing industry produced inexpensive replicas of High Society fashions that even the poorest factory girl might afford.

Without minimizing the themes of distinction and exclusion, I put greater emphasis on transmission and access in chapter three. Although the women of New York High Society used dress, as they used speech and body language, to exclude others, ultimately, *Nouveaux Riches*, middle, and working class women, encouraged by an ethos

of egalitarianism and with the help of media outlets and the ready-made clothing industry, found ways to emulate High Society fashions. By so doing, they bridged barriers that Society women sought to impose.

Chapter Three

Putting On Status: Dressing To Preserve Society's Exclusivity, 1870-1900

A straight back, good grammar, an invitation to Mrs. Astor's ball—these were the marks of distinction; however, the most visible signifier of social standing was one's dress. Even before a Society woman spoke or gestured, her clothing denoted her status. As historian Greg King writes in *A Season of Splendor*, “wardrobes were transcendent, offering opportunities to prove one's wealth and taste, to reveal through dignified dress that one belonged to the highest and most refined circles.”²³⁵ However, “putting on” status was not a leisurely pursuit. Assembling a proper wardrobe required time, money, and knowledge of the proprieties of dress. In addition, the clothing that denoted status was tight-fitting and heavy.

Gender theorist R. W. Connell posits that women submit to regulations, discipline, and arbitrary rules of fashion “because they want to, because it delivers pleasures, and because the regulation and discipline are bound up in the identity they are seeking.”²³⁶ The letters, diaries, and autobiographies of Society women suggest that they actively, even *enthusiastically* submitted to the regulations, discipline, and rules of dress that were the trappings of social position. In this third chapter, I argue that High Society women of Gilded Age New York City showed that they belonged to the highest and most refined circles by submitting, often enthusiastically, to a restrictive code of dress. High Society fashion was mass-produced and imitated by upwardly mobile women of various socioeconomic positions. No mode of distinction was more widely publicized or copied. Newspapers and magazines provided descriptions, illustrations, and photographs of High

²³⁵ King, 209.

²³⁶ R. W. Connell, *Gender* (Malden: Polity Press, 2002), 59.

Society fashion on a weekly, even daily, basis. Etiquette manuals offered insight into *how* the women of Society wore their clothing. The burgeoning ready-made clothing industry mass-produced replicas of the Society woman's dress that were sold in department stores and by street-side vendors at low cost. By the turn of the century, even impoverished factory girls could acquire cheap reproductions of garments worn by New York City's elite.

Regulations and Discipline

Regulation and discipline were bound up in the distinction that the High Society women of New York City sought. First, clothing functioned to mold the body into the ideal form, taking over where dance classes and posture devices left off to regulate and stylize her movements and posture. King writes that the Society woman's clothing lent stateliness to her carriage, a "slow, flowing sweep of movement that, at its best, emphasized refinement and poise."²³⁷ The heavy hat forced the Society woman to hold her head high against its weight, the voluminous skirt made rapid movement impossible, French heels induced her to step carefully, and tight sleeves elegantly positioned her arms. The nineteenth-century sociologist Thorstein Veblen theorized that the very restrictiveness of clothing worn by women of the leisure class²³⁸ symbolized their social worth by demonstrating that they could afford to abstain from all productive labor, unlike the "lower," working classes.²³⁹

²³⁷ King, 212.

²³⁸ As Veblen used the term, "leisure class," it could encompass both the members of Society and wealthy social climbers who could afford a life of leisure and luxury.

²³⁹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 113. Veblen theorized that a person's social standing was largely dependent upon ability to demonstrate that they did not have to engage in productive labor, but could afford a life of leisure. He argued that productive labor was, in American society at that time, considered "vulgar."

The stiffness of the Society woman's apparel, its volume and weight, caused its wearer discomfort. Consuelo Vanderbilt recorded in her memoirs:

Even our clothes prevented the relaxed comfort we now take for granted. When I was seventeen my skirts almost touched the ground; it was considered immodest to wear them shorter. My dresses had high, tight whalebone collars. A corset laced my waist to the eighteen inches fashion decreed. An enormous hat adorned with flowers, feathers and ribbons was fastened to my hair with long steel pins, and a veil covered my face. Tight gloves pinched my hands and I carried a parasol. Thus attired I went to Bailey's beach for a morning bathe.²⁴⁰

Huybertie Pruyn echoed Vanderbilt's assertion in her autobiography: "In these days of comfortable sports clothes, it is hard to understand the difficulties that presented themselves as to what to wear and how to get it[...]when I look at the pictures[...]I marvel that we survived with our almost-long skirts, our high collars, ruffled shirt waists, and pointed shoes."²⁴¹ Pruyn detailed for her readers, "we all wore far too many clothes, and they were hot and cumbersome to run about in. Our white petticoats were stiff with starch, and the Hamburg edgings [on the drawers] had sharp points which were particularly scratchy."²⁴²

The corset, for example, which has become an icon of female social constriction in the Victorian era, flattened the stomach and lifted the bust and back, giving the body the desired "good" posture. The staple undergarment for the ball gown of the Gilded Age, the heavily boned and tightly laced S-curve corset—now most closely associated

²⁴⁰ Balsan, 26.

²⁴¹ Pruyn, 115.

²⁴² Ibid, 20.

with the hourglass Gibson Girl look²⁴³—cinched the waist to sometimes waif-like proportion, pushed the bust and buttocks out, and curved the backside upward.²⁴⁴

Dress did not merely restrict the body, but also consumed much of the Society woman's time. As French historian Philippe Perrot writes in his study of Bourgeoisie fashions in nineteenth-century France, dress was “a veritable science to which she devoted a third of her day.”²⁴⁵ With so many pieces of clothing, dressing could be a time-consuming and exhausting ordeal, requiring the aid of a ladies' maid. Stockings had to be gently pulled onto the leg and attached to garters, layers of petticoats eased onto the hips, corsets tightly laced, blouses and jackets fitted and buttoned, and accessories dispersed.²⁴⁶ Even the hair had to be meticulously arranged into heavy curls or tight knots in preparation for the elaborate and heavy hats or headdresses pinned to the head. Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White wrote to her sister-in-law, Mary Pierrepont Stuyvesant, from Paris in 1874, that her hair had fallen out because of illness. However, as the upside to her hair loss, she announced “you have no idea how quickly I am dressed since I have no hair. Twenty minutes is ample time for the most elaborate toilet.”²⁴⁷ Even for the young girl, getting dressed was a tedious process. Huybertie Pruyn remembered:

²⁴³ Jill Fields, “‘Fighting the Corsetless Evil’: Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930,” *Journal of Social History*. 33 (1999): 358. Fields writes that “The S-curve blunted the mobility and athleticism of the Gibson Girl, and the obvious manipulation of the body necessary to create the S-curve silhouette was an easy target for the anti-corset agitation which defended the ‘natural’ body.”

²⁴⁴ King, 213.

²⁴⁵ Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*. Trans. Richard Bievenu (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 92. Perrot's study focuses upon the ways in which French aristocrats used clothing to differentiate themselves from a new-moneyed merchant class. My own research suggests that New York High Society women employed many of the modes of differentiation through dress as Perrot's aristocrats across the Atlantic.

²⁴⁶ King, 213.

²⁴⁷ Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White to Mary Pierrepont Stuyvesant, July 28 1874, Stuyvesant-Rutherford Family Papers, 1647-1917, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

First we put on our shirts. They had heavy cotton waists which buttoned in the back and were stitched in groups of rows to give them strength. Drawers and petticoats were buttoned onto the waist behind, before, and on both sides. Also, the side garters buttoned on[...]. All this made quite a weight hanging from the waist and not from the shoulders. It gave a clumsy waist line, as the skirts were gathered onto the bands.

When Pruyn was particularly little, some of her skirts had tops that also had to be buttoned in the back.²⁴⁸

This ordeal of dressing was repeated several times a day; the Society woman might change her attire as many as six times within a twelve-hour span. And each change required a more elaborate ensemble. For mornings at home, the woman wore a long-sleeved, collared and relatively plain day dress of silk, satin, taffeta, or even cotton. Luncheon required yet another change, into a gown ever so slightly more formal. After luncheon, she changed into a puffed-sleeved dress trimmed with lace or embroidery at the neckline to receive guests. To leave the house, either to visit friends or to shop, she donned a slightly plainer dress of silk or velvet with some adornment. Upon her return home, she changed into a fancy, bright-colored tea gown. The formal dinner or opera required an evening gown of luxurious fabric and design. And the queen of all dresses was the ball gown, which typically came from one of the great couturiers of Paris. These gowns were nothing short of works of art with full skirts, trains, embroidered bodices, and adorned with precious stones.²⁴⁹

Assembling a detailed and diverse wardrobe also required great investments of time. The Society woman had to make an appointment with a dressmaker to look over patterns and fabric, and to agree on a price for each article of clothing. Then came measuring and fitting, which could span several days. Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford

²⁴⁸ Pruyn, 20.

²⁴⁹ King, 217-219.

White complained that she had spent the better part of a week being fitted by the dressmakers. “What a bore clothes are!” she announced, “and how I wish one might find them readymade to fit.”²⁵⁰ Society women who were fitted by the most popular couturier of the era, the Englishman Charles Frederick Worth at his Paris shop on rue de la Paix, had to put up with his infamous arrogance on top of the other aggravations related to assembling a wardrobe. According to Perrot, Worth “treated even the wealthiest woman with an incredible condescension.” He received a client only if she had been properly introduced and then kept her waiting for hours to meet with him. But “to revolt against his insolence or protest against his tyranny meant excommunication, and a formal invitation to leave the profaned sanctuary. To be dressed by Worth the haughtiest women swallowed insults and concealed their anger.”²⁵¹

The expense of Worth’s garments or that of the designs of any other top couturier could be enormous. Historians Gail MacColl and Carol McD. Wallace estimate that a woman might spend \$20,000 for an entire season’s wardrobe.²⁵² Nancy Leeds, the wife of the wealthy “Tinplate King,” William Leeds, found it difficult to stay within her allotted annual clothing budget of \$40,000.²⁵³ These figures are big even by today’s standards, but they were enormous in an age in which America’s poorest workers lived on approximately \$380 a year.²⁵⁴ These figures do not even reflect travel and duty fees that most Society women paid to acquire the Parisian fashions that constituted a core component of their wardrobes. Indeed, Parisian style heavily influenced the Society

²⁵⁰ Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White to Mary Pierpont Stuyvesant, January 2, 1881. Stuyvesant-Rutherford Family Papers, 1647-1917, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

²⁵¹ Perrot, 185.

²⁵² MacColl and McD. Wallace, 71.

²⁵³ King, 220.

²⁵⁴ “Gilded Age,” *American Experience*. 19 May 2009.

<<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/carnegie/gildedage.html>> (19 May 2009).

woman's dress, both in terms of what she wore and how she wore it. As Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White wrote from Paris in 1872 to her sister-in-law, Mary, "we went to order our hats which are of black felt trimmed with black velvet and ribbon, and a peacock green feather. We wear them on the back of our heads which is all the fashion now in Paris."²⁵⁵

Wharton's mother, Lucretia Jones, was one of the first Society women to order her clothing from Paris. On a trip to Europe in the 1840s as a young married woman, Lucretia Jones—who as a girl had suffered the "humiliation" of wearing a homemade gown of white tarlatan and her mother's old slippers at her debut—invested extravagantly in Parisian fashion. Every year thereafter, the annual trunk from Paris arrived at the Jones residence. In her autobiography, Wharton recalled: "the enchantment of seeing one resplendent dress after another shaken out of its tissue-paper."²⁵⁶ By the early 1870s, it had become something of a tradition for the women of Society to purchase at least a few items of clothing from Parisian dressmakers. Hundreds of trunks arrived from Paris year-round, filled with richly embroidered velvets and silks, feathered hats, and lacey undergarments from Worth or other popular couturiers like Pacquet, Doucet, Redfern, Pingat, and Callot.²⁵⁷ Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White wrote from Paris in 1883 that her mother had gone to Worth's to "see sister's dresses which are to be sent out today...they were being packed when Mama was there. She said they are beautiful."²⁵⁸

And in 1896, Anna Foster Robinson wrote from Paris to her sister, Pauline, "I'm sure you

²⁵⁵ Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White to Mary Pierpont Stuyvesant, November 10, 1872, Stuyvesant-Rutherford Family Papers, 1647-1917, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

²⁵⁶ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 20.

²⁵⁷ King, 213.

²⁵⁸ Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White to Mary Pierpont Stuyvesant, October 20, 1872, Stuyvesant-Rutherford Family Papers, 1647-1917, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

would think I had gone out of my senses if you knew how many clothes I ordered.”²⁵⁹

During this trip to Paris, Anna bought chemises for both herself and for Pauline from the famous couturier, L. Rouff, for 204 francs²⁶⁰ and a skirt and jacket for herself from Redfern.²⁶¹

Jewelry, much of which also came from Paris, posed an even greater expense than clothing. New York Society women invested in diamond necklaces and tiaras, pearl earrings, ruby bracelets, and other costly ornaments from craftsmen like Cartier, Chaumet, Bouchron, Falize, E. Wolff & Co., Tiffany’s, Garrard of London, Fabergé and even the French crown jewels acquired from the famous auction of France’s crown jewels in 1887.²⁶² Alva Vanderbilt, for example, owned a magnificent pearl necklace once owned by the Empress Eugenie valued at \$200,000. Mrs. Bradley-Martin owned a necklace of diamond and ruby clusters that had supposedly belonged to Marie Antoinette. Another prominent Society woman, Mrs. Ogden Mills, owned a single-strand necklace of precious gems that her father had presented her as a wedding present worth \$35,000. A detective who once attended Mrs. Astor’s annual ball, estimated that there was nearly five million dollars in jewelry in the ballroom.²⁶³

Most likely, Society women of more modest means like Anna Foster Robinson did not spend \$40,000 or even \$20,000 annually on their wardrobes or six figures on a single item of jewelry. In her letters, Anna expressed great conscientiousness about

²⁵⁹ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, May 21, 1896, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.

²⁶⁰ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, 1897, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.

²⁶¹ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, May 8, 1896, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.

²⁶² King, 224.

²⁶³ Foster Coates, “Jewel Caskets of Fashionable Women,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, November 1890, 11.

finances, particularly on the fees she paid for dress. But, as the letters of the Rutherford sisters suggest, a well-made but simple day dress could not be bought for less than 500 francs in the early 1870s. The receipts of Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White from her European excursion of 1888 perhaps give us a good idea of typical expenses incurred for clothing in Paris in the middle of the Gilded Age: 600 francs for robes at Mson. Boussard Soeurs, 90 francs for corsets at Mme. Léoty, 139.50 francs at L. Rouff for miscellaneous items, 730 francs at Maison Legrand—just to list a handful of her purchases. That same year, she spent \$430.00 at Tiffany’s and Co. for a broach and \$54.50 for earrings from Howard and Co. in New York City.²⁶⁴

Popularizing High Society Fashion

The media fixated on the dress of Society women, probably more than any other aspect, holding the women of Society up as leaders of fashion in America. The descriptions of attire were abundant. The *New York Times* usually provided details on roughly thirty of the best dressed women at a given Society entertainment. A typical article of 1901 listed the notable costumes at Mrs. Astor’s annual ball:

Mrs. John Jacob Astor wore a gown of delicate blue satin, spangled in gold, and her diamonds. Miss Rosamond Smith was in pale green satin, embroidered in silver and trimmed with tulle. Miss May Gallatin wore a charming white frock touched with gold, a sash of gold brocade, and golden wheat ears on the left shoulder and in her coiffure. Miss Florence Twombly was in a white satin veiled with tulle. Miss Kathleen Neilson also wore a white gown[...]²⁶⁵

On occasion, the *New York Times* even presented a detailed account of fashion *trends* of Society women. An article of 1888 explained:

²⁶⁴ Margaret Rutherford White, Accounts, Bills, Receipts, 1888, Stuyvesant-Rutherford Family Papers, 1647-1917, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

²⁶⁵ “Mrs. Astor’s Annual Ball,” *The New York Times*, 8 January 1901.

Paris, May 12—Greens continue to thrive and flowers continue to blossom on the hats. Higher and higher we grow from the crown upward...the crowns are low, almost flat in fact, but the trimmings make up for this in their clambering masses. The newest Spring quirk is a revival of the authentic Directoire redingote. Over a plain changeable silk, with pinked ruching around the edge, or striped moiré or changeable silk with hand-embroidered insertions running up and down, is worn either cashmere or cloth or some sort of wool redingote, the lappets either faced with changeable silk or dark velvet.

A lace jabot fell from the neck of the redingote and it had large buttons in the back.²⁶⁶

Beginning in 1867, each volume of the popular fashion magazine, *Harper's Bazaar*, included an article titled "New York Fashions" in each volume, beginning in 1867, that described the "new and beautiful garments fashioned by our leading modistes."²⁶⁷ These articles provided information on items of clothing from bonnets to corsets, to crinolines, to trimmings and jewelry. A report of 1876 notified readers that "among Worth's latest importations are dresses with the graceful overskirt called La Boiteuse. One model is of scabieuse silk, of the dark rich color of the flower of that name, with facings of peach-blow silk."²⁶⁸ Another of 1884 announced that "fur of various kinds and feathers massed in borders are seen on the bonnets destined to be worn throughout the winter...the short, thick fleeces are most suitable, such as natural beaver, the black Persian lamb, or curled Astrakhan, and the gray krimmer...are seen on important round hats of felt." Yet another of 1893 publicized that all the young women, debutantes, older sisters, young matrons, and even mothers introducing daughters favored "exceedingly delicate tints" of pink and white.²⁶⁹

Media also provided photographs and drawings of clothing worn by Society women, particularly their lavish ball gowns. Pauline Foster Robinson, Anna Foster

²⁶⁶ "French Fashion Notes," *The New York Times*, 13 May 1888.

²⁶⁷ "New York Fashions," *Harper's Bazaar*, 2 November 1867, 3.

²⁶⁸ "New York Fashions," *Harper's Bazaar*, 20 December 1884, 811.

²⁶⁹ "New York Fashions," *Harper's Bazaar*, 30 December 1893, 1071.

Robinson's daughter, pasted about six beautiful photographs of the guests at "Mr. James Hayden Hyde's Ball, February 1905" from *The New York World* into one of her debutante yearbooks.²⁷⁰ These pictures exhibit the elaborate costumes of notable Society figures like Mrs. Arthur Iselin dressed as Little Bo-peep and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt dressed as a French aristocrat.²⁷¹ *Harper's Bazaar* frequently published drawings of the high fashion worn by Society women,²⁷² such as one sketch from 1894 of an evening gown from Worth that included a detailed description:

This superb gown is of very light *elie*-blue satin bordered with black fur. It is further enriched with bead embroidery in iris designs. The pointed waist is draped across the busts, and has a jabot falling between branches of embroidery done on the satin. Fur shoulder-straps complete the square décolleté.

The article described that "short puffed sleeves of dotted mousseline soie are under a ruffle of beaded satin."²⁷³

Even U.S. retailers publicized the fashions of New York Society to sell merchandise. It was not uncommon to find shop windows that staged representation of Society entertainments such as dinners and dances, complete with dummies made to look like stylishly dressed Society women.²⁷⁴ By publicizing High Society fashion, retailers and the media simultaneously popularized it, making the Society woman's style accessible to a wide audience—not only to *Nouveau Riche* social climbers but also to upwardly mobile middle- and working-class women. According to historian William Leach, author of *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*, one intent of these forms of fashion merchandising was to make women "feel

²⁷⁰ *The New York World* Illicitly obtained and published photographs of the Hyde Ball.

²⁷¹ Pauline Lentilhon Robinson, Debutante Yearbook, 1905, Robinson Family Papers, 1822-1966, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

²⁷² *Harper's Bazaar* even included patterns of high fashion garments.

²⁷³ "Evening Gown from Worth," *Harper's Bazaar*, 17 March 1894.

²⁷⁴ Montgomery, 123.

special, to give them opportunities for playacting, and to lift them into a world of luxury or pseudo-luxury, beyond work, drudgery, bills, and the humdrum everyday.”²⁷⁵

Publicity coincided with a burgeoning ready-made clothing industry that mass-produced cheap imitations of the high fashion worn by Society women. U.S. retailers like A. T. Stewart and Marshall Field opened offices in Paris and London or sent fashion promoters overseas to copy the styles of the great couturiers, down to the smallest detail, and produced them at about one-third the original cost for middle-class American consumers.²⁷⁶ By the 1880s, even pushcarts that crowded the lower East Side provided inexpensive French heels, flowered hats, or swatches of fabric with which female factory workers could sew fancy skirts or silk undergarments that in the past had been available to only the “high born.”²⁷⁷ As Leach writes, “the upper-class French trade, in other words, became an American mass-market.”²⁷⁸

The Dress Code

The *Nouveau Riche* social climbers, however, posed the greatest threat to New York Society’s exclusivity because they did not have to wear cheaply-made reproductions, but could afford to buy the custom-made Parisian fashions that they read about in the *New York Times* and *Harper’s Bazaar* or saw first-hand during their trips to Europe. How could the Society woman distinguish herself from the *Nouveau Riche* woman who acquired her attire from the same couturiers as she did? How could she

²⁷⁵ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 91.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

²⁷⁷ Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 65.

²⁷⁸ Leach, 95.

devalue clothing was every bit as valuable (perhaps even more so) than her own in terms of design, material, and cost?

Her tactic was to turn up her nose at *Nouveaux Riches* for their supposedly uncultivated, indiscriminate, and ostentatious accumulation of goods. Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer complained of the “glitter and show and ostentation” of the newly wealthy.²⁷⁹ While stationed in San Francisco in the late 1870s, Matilda Amelia Barreda disparaged the “oriental palaces” of the “bonanzas” of that city in a letter to her friend, Louisa (she attributed their extravagance to ignorance and lack of brains).²⁸⁰ Even the term, “*Nouveau Riche*,” was used as an adjective to connote tasteless decadence. Anna Foster Robinson disdainfully remarked in a letter to her sister, Pauline, that the new house of a Knickerbocker family, the Lorillards, “looked very *nouveau riche* style.”²⁸¹

Outside discourses perpetuated a similarly negative view of America’s *Nouveau Riche*. As early as 1869, Junius Henri Browne, the author of *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New York*, a “social study” of New York City, wrote: The new rich “outdress and outshine the old families, the cultivatedly comfortable, the inheritors of fortunes, and everybody else, in whatever money can purchase and bad taste can suggest.”²⁸² In 1882, a cartoonist poked fun at these alleged qualities of new moneyed Americans with a drawing in *Harper’s Bazaar* titled “The Nouveau Riche,” that showed an ugly Venus sitting on a barrel, while an even uglier nurse cut her hair. The caption read: “Here you have the American Capitalist just returned from ‘Parex,’ where he bought the very

²⁷⁹ Van Rensselaer, 58.

²⁸⁰ Matilda Amelia Barreda to Louisa Rutherford, September 1879, Stuyvesant-Rutherford Family Papers, 1647-1917, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

²⁸¹ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, December 1877, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.

²⁸² Junius Henri Browne, *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New York* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1869; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1975), 35. Page citations are from reprint edition.

biggest painting that could be had for the money. It is titled ‘The Toilette of Venus.’”²⁸³

The author and critic, Harry Thurston Peck, explained to readers of *The Cosmopolitan: A Monthly Illustrated Magazine* in 1898: “the *Nouveau Riche*[...]was so conscious of his wealth; he was so anxious to spend it in an impressive way, to do something princely, magnificent, and really ‘big,’ and he was so hopelessly and pitifully ignorant of how to do it.”²⁸⁴

As Julius Henri Browne’s description indicates, flamboyant, showy dress was supposedly one mark of the *Nouveau Riche* social climber’s “bad taste.” Edith Wharton promoted this idea in her fiction when she created the parvenu, Undine Spragg. In *The Custom of the Country*, Undine Spragg goes about the city, to dinner parties and art galleries, terminally overdressed. Undine is surprised to see that some prominent women in Society wear “dowdy black,” “antiquated ornaments,” and what she spots as being “a last year’s model.”²⁸⁵ Indeed, evidence suggests that to be dressed *a la mode* by fashion industry standards did not necessarily equate to *a la mode* by New York High Society standards. According to Wharton, Society women of the 1870s waited a season before wearing their latest purchases from Paris.²⁸⁶ Certainly, Anna Foster Robinson recycled certain pieces of clothing from one season to the next. In 1887, she wrote to her sister, Pauline, that she had worn a black dress to a dinner that she had owned for five years: “Beverly thought it very effective—it shows that when a thing is good in the beginning,

²⁸³ “The Nouveau Riche,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, 18 November 1882, 736.

²⁸⁴ “The New American Aristocracy,” *The Cosmopolitan: A Monthly Illustrated Magazine*, October 1898, 701.

²⁸⁵ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 22.

²⁸⁶ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*.

five years don't make any difference. I have not had it touched except to have it taken out a little."²⁸⁷

King writes that "appearing in something too flashy, adventuresome, or inappropriate immediately branded the wearer as an outsider."²⁸⁸ But in fact, as photographs and newspaper descriptions show, the wealthiest women of Society sported dress—or at least jewelry—that itself might be described as "flashy." The Saunterer in *Town Topics* for example, wrote that "Mrs. Astor fairly blazed with diamonds,"²⁸⁹ that "Mrs. Martin [Bradley-Martin] totters under a crown of jewels that would turn the blood of Victoria into green paint should that queen's jealous eye light upon it,"²⁹⁰ and that Mrs. Seward Webb (a Vanderbilt daughter) "bore the most striking decoration in the shape of a tiara of very large diamonds, which out-Martined the Martins. The stones were so large and so closely and heavily set as to make it appear that the wearer was weighted down by a burden."²⁹¹ Even Anna Foster Robinson once described Mrs. Astor as "a mass of lace and diamonds" at a reception.²⁹²

Evidently, it was a fine line that differentiated ostentatious display and cultivated display, and only Society women presumed to understand where the line was drawn. Society women justified their own decadence of dress by observing a code, a list of proprieties that both identified them as being "in" Society and was supposed to distinguish their attire, if ever so subtly, from that of the *Nouveaux Riches*. As Perrot writes, "for women, an elegant garment was more than tailored fabric, however beautiful;

²⁸⁷ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, December 1877, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.

²⁸⁸ King, 209.

²⁸⁹ "Saunterings," *Town Topics*, 1 January 1899.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, 4 February 1892.

²⁹¹ Ibid, 18 December 1890.

²⁹² Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, January 1878, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.

it was a technique, a comportment, and an appropriate education in the niceties, which permitted no false moves.²⁹³ One had to master “the arcane of vestimentary propriety and its exhaustible nuances.”²⁹⁴ Indeed, the significance of the Society woman’s dress was not the material object, but, to borrow a term from, Thorstein Veblen, the “immaterial goods” or, more specifically, knowledge of the *proprieties of dress* that manifested in the material display.²⁹⁵ Her clothing reflected “a refinement of methods, a resort to subtler contrivance, and a spiritualization of the scheme of symbolism in dress.”²⁹⁶

Society’s code of dress dictated any number of gradations, from the type of dress appropriate for each occasion to the proper pairings of color and cut. Mrs. Astor could acceptably “blaze” with diamonds at the opera or in the ballroom, but decadent display of jewelry at an afternoon tea was considered “vulgar.” As one authority warned, “a woman who wears diamonds in the middle of the day looks like a parvenu a mile off.”²⁹⁷ By restraining her attire at select times and places, the Society woman sought to differentiate herself from the purportedly ostentatious *Nouveau Riche* women. Conversely, there were certain evening entertainments at which a Society woman was expected to don a lavish costume. Consuelo Vanderbilt recalled that one night the safe that contained her mother’s jewels could not be opened. Alva was going to a big dinner “at which it would almost have been considered an offense for her to wear no jewels.” Such panic ensued that a young Consuelo ran to her room to pray “fervently that a miracle would open the

²⁹³ Perrot, 85.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 82.

²⁹⁵ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 34.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 123.

²⁹⁷ Comtesse de Bassanville, *La Science du monde: politesse, usages, bien-être*. Paris, 1959; Cited in Perrot, 99.

safe.” To everybody’s relief, the safe was eventually opened, allowing Alva to don the required pearls.²⁹⁸

Similarly, *mousquetaires* of satin or kid were the correct accessories for formal occasions, while day dress called for simpler multi-button doeskin, chamois, or suede gloves. Wharton’s *Nouveau Riche* Undine Spragg, for example, betrays her lack of education in the proprieties when she puts on her handsomest furs to visit a public art gallery in the afternoon.²⁹⁹ The code also dictated that décolleté was inappropriate in day wear and that young debutantes should wear white or pastel pinks, yellows, or greens in the ballroom.³⁰⁰

The code, with all its subtlety and nuance, was like a secret language that only members of the ingroup spoke fluently—at least in theory. Two women might dress alike to the undiscerning eye, but a small difference, perhaps the color of a glove, the positioning of the hat, or the length of a sleeve, signaled to the initiated who was the imitator and who the real thing.³⁰¹ The proprieties of dress rested on the smallest detail. Anna Foster Robinson, in a letter to her sister, Pauline, from 1877, thought it noteworthy that an unknown woman at a ball had worn “no sleeves and long white ‘mits.’”³⁰² In another letter, Anna wrote that a girl whom everybody called “Masculine Pell” “went to all the balls last winter in high-necked black silk[...]. I saw her myself!” Fiction and real-life conflate when a Society matron in Edith Wharton’s novel, *The Age of Innocence*,

²⁹⁸ Balsan, 12.

²⁹⁹ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 22.

³⁰⁰ King, 219.

³⁰¹ Perrot, 89.

³⁰² Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, 1877, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.

says of an outsider: “What can you expect of a girl who was allowed to wear black satin at her coming-out ball?”³⁰³

An excerpt from one of Anna Foster Robinson’s letters of 1896 suggests just how important it was for the Society woman to obey the dress code. When Anna’s sister, Pauline, who had moved away from New York years before to marry Colonel Henry Du Pont and live with him at Winterthur in Delaware, planned to bring her daughter, Louise, to New York for her debut, Anna urged her:

I should think you could wear your blue satin perhaps to the philharmonic if it is not too old fashioned—you *must* get some dresses for yourself. It is most important. Don’t waste the time ordering dresses either for yourself or Louise in Phil[adelphia][...]you really have nothing for yourself to wear and it is absurd for of course both you and Louise will be remarked at first just because you are somewhat strangers—I only wish you had a velvet dress.

“At any rate,” Anna continued, “you must have some clothes and Louise must have a good costume. Her brown dress will only do for every day [wear] with a darker front put in—I saw that clearly when she was here.”³⁰⁴

However, even this nuanced code of dress was not impervious to imitation. Etiquette manuals of the time provided detailed rules for clothing that in some cases appear to have been modeled on the dress code of New York’s elite. Although the etiquette manual did not necessarily constitute a comprehensive guide to Society’s dress code, it nevertheless introduced the social climber to the proprieties of dress. It was, as King writes, “designed to explain society’s intricacies.”³⁰⁵ The social climber could turn to newspapers and magazines to find out what the women of Society were wearing, but it was the manual that explained when, where, and how they were wearing it.

³⁰³ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 38.

³⁰⁴ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, 1896, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.

³⁰⁵ King, 116.

The authority on etiquette, Mary Elizabeth Wilson Sherwood, for example,³⁰⁶ advertised that “every one can avoid vulgarity and slovenliness; and in these days, when the fashions travel by telegraph, one can be *à la mode*.”³⁰⁷ Her manual, *Manners and Social Usages*, included dictates like “a woman who puts on diamonds, real lace, and velvets in the morning at a summer watering-place is decidedly incongruous” and “for afternoon tea in this country the hostess generally wears a handsome high-necked gown, often a combination of stamped or brocaded velvet, satin, and silk.”³⁰⁸

Another popular manual of 1879 published in New York City, titled *Decorum: A Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society*, provided detailed instruction on the appropriate dress for *every* occasion: “morning-dress for home,” “morning-dress for visitor,” “morning-dress for street,” “dress for the promenade,” the “walking suit,” “carriage-dress,” “dress of guest at a dinner party,” “ordinary evening dress,” “dress for an evening call,” “dress for an evening party,” “dress for the soiree and ball,” “dress for Church,” “dress for the theatre,” “dress for the lecture and concert,” “dress for the opera,” “croquet and skating costumes,” “costumes for country and seaside,” the “bathing costume,” “costumes for traveling,” “special dress adaptations for traveling in Europe,” the “wedding-dress, “dress of bridesmaids,” “traveling-dress of the bride,” the “dress of the guests at the wedding receptions”—just to name a handful. Readers were advised, for example, that the soiree and ball “call for the richest dress...the richest velvets, the brightest and most delicate tints in silks, the most expensive laces, low neck and short sleeves, elaborate head-dress, the greatest display of gems, flowers[...]white kid gloves and white satin boots belong to these costumes unless

³⁰⁶ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics*, 11 December 1890.

³⁰⁷ Sherwood, 167.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 171.

the over-dress is of black lace, when black satin boots or slippers are required.”³⁰⁹ The morning dress for the street, on the other hand, “should be plain in color and make, and of serviceable material[...]. White skirts are out of place[...]. Jewelry is out of place in any of the errands which take a lady from her home in the morning.”³¹⁰

These etiquette manuals could be a valuable tool for the *Nouveau Riche* social climber who was not merely interested in improving her social worth, but in becoming a member of Society. It seems that if she could learn how to dress like the women of Society, she was more likely to gain access. Some of the successful social climbers used dress in their quest for membership. The social climber Nancy Leeds won Society over when she appeared at a ball beautifully dressed in a white satin gown richly adorned with diamonds. Elizabeth Drexel Lehr, who witnessed Nancy’s rise to social eminence, reported that “her charm was far more potent than her husband’s millions.”³¹¹ And it was no mistake that Alva Vanderbilt gave a costume ball to launch her and her family into the ranks of High Society. Her daughter, Consuelo, remembered that “my parents, gorgeous in medieval costumes, received the elite of what then was New York society.”³¹² The costume ball allowed her to show off her style, to the acclaim of the New York dailies like *The New York Times*.

Because They Want To

If the double-edged sword for the Society woman was that the sources that held her up as being a leader of fashion in America simultaneously made her code of dress

³⁰⁹ *Decorum: A Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society*, 299.

³¹⁰ *Ibid*, 293.

³¹¹ Lehr, 122.

³¹² Balsan, 6.

accessible to social climbers, the double-edged sword for the social climber was that imitation required her to accept the regulations that were part and parcel of the Society woman's code of dress. Moreover, the fact that there was a market for etiquette manuals,³¹³ the society pages, and the replications of French couture in U.S. department stores, suggests that some social climbing women also were willing to put up with limitation if it meant higher social standing—or at least the dream of status.

Certainly, New York High Society women dressed with enthusiasm, despite the restrictiveness of their clothing. Take, for example, young Edith Wharton's feeling of "enchantment" at seeing her mother's latest purchases from Paris. Huybertie Pruyn recalled how excited she was to receive her wedding dress from Paris. Even though one of the maids told her that it would be bad luck to wear the dress before her wedding day, she could not wait to try it on. She described the dress as "beautiful...of the finest satin, embroidered gracefully with pearls in love knots, with some brilliants scattered in. The sleeves were long and tight and covered with thin tulle ending in a puff at the shoulder."³¹⁴

It seems that the pleasures of dress were directly tied to its power to distinguish; the Society woman derived pleasure from clothing, in part, because it identified her as being a member of High Society. At age nine, Huybertie Pruyn was overjoyed to the point of tears when her mother presented her with a red dress and turban. As she recorded in her memoirs, "I had never thought I would have a red dress like all the other girls in Newport [Society's favorite summer vacation spot][...]oh to be like Sallie Gertrude, and all the rest. After several months of having to wear mourning black and

³¹³ According to King, the consumption of etiquette manuals between 1870 and 1970 greatly exceeded any earlier period.

³¹⁴ Pruyn, 315.

gray, the colorful new clothing seemed “a dream come true.” Pruyn tried the dress and hat on and went from room to room looking in the mirrors. When she went to bed, she had the maid hang the dress where she could see it the moment she woke up. It was a “tragedy” for Pruyn when several months later her mother sent the treasured red dress to be dyed black for a year of mourning after the death of a relative.

Anna Foster Robinson made special note in her letters to her sister, Pauline, when clothing she had worn received approbation from her peers in Society. In one letter from 1876, she noted that she had worn her wedding gown with black lace and roses in her hair to a ball: “The black lace really looked beautifully and I also wore the flowers you sent me...you remember the Roses?” They [the other women at the ball] all said the dress was very *successful*—and I had a very good time.³¹⁵ In another letter, she bragged that several friends had remarked upon a bonnet she had worn.³¹⁶ Anna’s daughter, Pauline Robinson, took an enthusiastic tone when she described the outfit she had donned to visit Mrs. McKinley at the White House in 1899: “I have a great deal to be thankful for, as I never looked better[...]my whole costume was most successful. This is what I wore: my pink shirtwaist (the pale pink one), my white satin stocking with white tulle bow, white satin belt, and white silk skirt. I also wore my pink hat and white gloves.”³¹⁷

Such positive references to dress far outweigh negative references in the letters, diaries, and memoirs of New York High Society women that I have read. Huybertie Pruyn and Consuelo Vanderbilt, who in their memoirs made note of the discomforts of

³¹⁵ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, 1876, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.

³¹⁶ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, November 1877, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.

³¹⁷ Pauline Lentilhon Robinson to Anna Foster Robinson, May 8, 1899, Robinson Family Papers, 1822-1966, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

the clothing they had worn as young Society women, also recorded positive encounters with dress. The evidence suggests that for at least some of the women of Society, pleasures and the sense of distinction that they derived from dress offset the discomforts, the time consumption, and the expense.

Perhaps also, when discussing the encounters, or experiences, of the women of New York High Society, particularly those recorded years after the fact, the gender historian, Kathleen Canning's assertion that "the meanings of experience are not fixed; instead they are closely connected to understandings of time and perception" provides important insight.³¹⁸ One must consider that accounts of dress in the letters, diaries, and particularly the memoirs of Society women comprise a dual-context—the context in which the experience was lived and that in which the experience was documented. When analyzing Pruyn and Vanderbilt's descriptions of the discomforts of their clothing, one must consider that both wrote over fifty years after the time of the experience. I think it is particularly telling that both began their description by comparing what they wore "back then" to the comparatively more comfortable clothing worn "now." The comparison indicates that the passage of time had influenced their interpretations of these experiences. This is not to say that their bodies did not suffer sensations of discomfort, but I do think we need to consider that their later interpretations did not perfectly correlate to the meaning they attributed to these experiences as they were happening. Perhaps Pruyn and Vanderbilt did not initially interpret heavy clothes, high collars, and corsets as being "restrictive," as they would fifty years later. Certainly, when Adele Sloane wrote in her diary in 1893, she did not feel restricted by the clothing she wore: "I

³¹⁸ Canning, 118.

have never worn anything tight or in the least squeezed myself.”³¹⁹ And yet, as a contemporary of both Vanderbilt and Pruyn (Sloane was, after all, Vanderbilt’s first cousin), Sloane would have worn the same style of clothing as they. Perhaps it was only after women’s suffrage and the relative freedoms of the 1920s that Pruyn and Vanderbilt began to perceive and to label the fashions they had worn in their youth as “restrictive”—at least in the term’s contemporary connotation of social restrictiveness.

³¹⁹ Sloane, 98.

Conclusion

For eighteen years, under the tutelage of her mother, governesses, and teachers, the Society girl learned the proprieties of dress, to use proper grammar in her speech, and to move elegantly. Then came her debut, or “coming out,” during which she would cash in on those many years of cultivation and claim her birthright to become a member of America’s aristocracy. Before this ritual, she was not a full-fledged member of the elite grouping. Now it was her turn to join her mother and the other women of Society to perpetuate Society’s exclusiveness by displaying her cultural capital. Indeed, the debut ritual was central to upholding exclusivity because only the daughters of Society women could participate.

The debut marked a girl’s entrance into Society. Before this ritual occurred, she did not attend balls, dinners, or go to the opera. She was nearly invisible to the people of Society, perhaps lingering in the background with her governess or in the nursery while her mother entertained. Constance Cary Harrison wrote of the debutante: “Until the age of eighteen she is brought up in comparative seclusion from the world in which her mother takes a conspicuous part; she is trained by experts in every detail of the accomplishments specified. One is often ignorant of the existence of young girls in the houses of one’s friends until by chance they are revealed...” Almost overnight, the Society girl went from near invisibility to conspicuous visibility. At the reception or the ball that marked the final step of her debut, she was the very center of attention. Harrison

described, “here she is queen of the feast, and amid flowers and lights and music and kind words, no wonder the vista of Society seems to her like a fairy land.”³²⁰

Charles Dana Gibson poked fun at the sudden visibility of the debutante in a sketch titled, “The Trials of a Bud.” This drawing depicts a young woman—the debutante—standing in the middle of a ballroom, pulling gracefully at her glove, while everybody around her watches her. Yet they do not merely watch her, they *study* her—one woman through spectacles, a group of men with their hands on their chins, and others leaned forward to get a better look.³²¹ As Gibson’s drawing suggests, the debutante was an object of scrutiny. Her first season in Society was so crucial because those around her analyzed her dress, her corporeal movements, and her speech, and she had to show that she was fluent in the codes. Consuelo Vanderbilt remembered that just before her coming out ball (which was somewhat unique for a New York Society girl because it took place in Paris), her mother took her to meet Lady Paget, née, Minnie Stevens, the daughter of Mrs. Paran Stevens, who like so many American heiresses of the Gilded Age (including Consuelo Vanderbilt), had married an English lord. Once greetings had been exchanged, Consuelo realized that Lady Paget was critically appraising her: “The simple dress I was wearing, my shyness and diffidence... appeared to awaken her ridicule... ‘If I am to bring her out,’ she told my mother, ‘she must be able to compete at least as far as clothes are concerned with far better-looking girls’... tulle must give way to satin, the baby *décolletage* to a more generous display of neck and arms, naiveté to

³²⁰ Constance Cary Harrison, “The New York Society Girl,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, 7.

³²¹ Charles Dana Gibson, *Drawings* (New York: R. H. Russell and Son, 1894), 5.

sophistication.”³²² At the ball, rows of chaperones lined the walls, “discussing the merits of their charges.”³²³

The debut process did not begin with the coming out ball, but with a series of calls. In the late autumn a girl’s mother took her around to call on all the women on her calling list. Huybertie Pruyn recalled that “one was not properly introduced [into Society] unless this was done.”³²⁴ The call involved the leaving of one’s card, or rather, for the debutante, accompanying one’s mother who left her card with her daughter’s name newly inscribed upon it. By doing so, the Society mother ushered her daughter into her inner circle. Her friends signaled their acceptance of the debutante by inviting her to their homes, to balls at Delmonico’s, and to sit beside them in their private opera boxes at the Academy or the Metropolitan. As the debutante yearbooks of Pauline Robinson from 1900-1906 illustrated, the popular debutante—the one who impressed with their speech, their body language, and their dress—received so many invitations that she could not make every entertainment.³²⁵ Edith Wharton remembered that the pleasant young hostesses of New York High Society were “always friendly and welcoming to any young girl ‘who could talk’, and the ambition of the *debutante* was to be invited to their houses and treated on an equal footing with them...some of the hostesses had drawing rooms big enough for informal dances, and to be invited to these was the privilege of a half-dozen of the younger girls.”³²⁶ Even Pauline Robinson, who received dozens of invites each season, was not popular enough (or perhaps not well-connected enough) to be granted

³²² Balsan, 38.

³²³ Ibid, 34.

³²⁴ Pruyn, 214.

³²⁵ Pauline Lentilhon Robinson, *Debutante Yearbooks, 1900-1906*, Robinson Family Papers, 1822-1966, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

³²⁶ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 78-79.

access to every social entertainment; Anna Foster Robinson wrote to her sister, Pauline, that her daughter was so disappointed not to receive an invitation to the Gerry's entertainment. But, as Anna explained, "as only three debutantes received an invitation, she cannot feel slighted."³²⁷

Whether a debutante was popular or not, her mother's social position guaranteed her access to High Society. And, as the memoirs of Consuelo Vanderbilt and Edith Wharton suggest, the debutante's mother pretty well guaranteed her daughter a degree of success by passing her own cultural capital down to her. A girl's mother was her figurative calling card into Society; without her, a girl had no right of entry. The stated purpose of the debut was to introduce daughters into Society and, by extension, into the marriage market. More significantly, it functioned to perpetuate an American aristocracy. The debut was akin to the court presentations of the daughters of English aristocrats across the Atlantic. As in England, aristocracy beget aristocracy, for only daughters of Society women could participate in the debut ritual to become Society women themselves. A few years later, they would provide their own daughter entrée into Society.

However, even the debut ritual was permeable. Maureen Montgomery terms the debut an "access ritual" because, as she points out, the social climber's entrance into Society closely imitated the debut.³²⁸ The social climber did not have a mother who could introduce her into Society, but she could potentially find a sponsor, a Society woman who essentially served as a substitute mother, teaching the social climber how to behave in Society and introducing her to her network of friends. The responsibility then fell upon the social climber to impress the women of Society, by displaying her cultural

³²⁷ Anna Foster Robinson to Pauline Foster DuPont, 1897, Papers of Pauline Foster Du Pont, 1861-1902, Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.

³²⁸Montgomery, 43.

capital, enough to where they would invite her to their entertainments. Lily Bart, Wharton's money-strapped heroine in *The House of Mirth*, for example, for a short time makes a living as a sponsor to a social climber and her husband. Or, according to Mary King Van Rensselaer, some women with social aspirations participated in charitable events to meet Society women who could "take them up."

As with other mechanisms of exclusion like elite spaces, speech, and dress, upwardly mobile outsiders appropriated the debut ritual and turned it on its head. They used it as a tool of access, of inclusion. Ultimately, in a country founded upon democratic principles, an aristocratic grouping could not be sustained. Those who were excluded were not content to remain in a position of inferiority. They aspired to be Society women, or at any rate, to be more like Society women. To many American women, the Society woman embodied the American dream. She was fashionable, wealthy, leisured, and refined. She had achieved the pinnacle of socioeconomic success, relative to other women of Gilded Age America. Most social aspirants would never dine with the Vanderbilts or sit in Mrs. Astor's opera box. However, they could don an imitation of Alva Vanderbilt's hat and adopt other symbols of status like French heels and upright posture that might, for a time, lift them from the humdrum of everyday into a fantasy of fashion, wealth, leisure, and most importantly, status.

This culture of aspiration was bolstered (and vice versa) by a culture of commercialism. The growth of media distribution, rise of department stores, and launch of the ready-made clothing industry encouraged the social aspirations of *Nouveaux Riche*, middle class, and working women alike. These industries capitalized on the Society woman's modes of distinction, making the trappings of status purchasable commodities.

When widely dispensed to outsiders, and at low cost, the Society woman's cultural capital no longer distinguished her from outsiders. She could not assert her superiority over others (or justify exclusion) by keeping her back upright and wearing Worth dresses. Her modes of distinction had become popularized.

Together, social climbing women, mass-circulated media, and the ready-made clothing industry undermined Society's exclusivity. However, as I have illustrated, Society women themselves advertently and inadvertently aided these invading forces. They invited social climbers to their entertainments; they sent photographs to newspapers and magazines; they allowed reporters into their ballrooms; they posed for portraits; and they wrote etiquette manuals that were distributed to women of lower socioeconomic positions. By so doing, they gained celebrity and widely-recognized status. Newspapers and magazines celebrated their beauty, accomplishments, and fashion sense. Etiquette manuals promoted the notion that they set standards for proper social conduct. The Faustian bargain for the Society woman was that by allowing herself to be held up as a model, she allowed herself to be held up as a model *to be followed*. In most cases, popularization of her modes of distinction was an unintended consequence of self-promotion.

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, New York High Society had broken off into smaller, competing societies, held together more by its member's possession of wealth than by their possession of culture capital.³²⁹ Never again would one elite group dominate the social landscape of the United States. There would be other elite societies, to be sure, but no group, tied together by blood, boodle, and common practice, received the same degree of publicity or inspired such widespread imitation. A

³²⁹ Homberger, 277.

number of factors contributed to the breakdown of Society, a comprehensive examination of which would make for a fascinating future study. The death of Mrs. Astor, who worked to maintain Society's cohesion for three decades by bringing its members together en masse, initiated the division. In the longer-term, some of the women of Society longed for greater social liberty and rebelled against the restrictive practices that bonded Society. Alva Vanderbilt who had spent her younger years in pursuit of social position, became a zealous suffragette after her second husband's death in 1907.

Ultimately, New York High Society's failure lay in its success. To be successful, it had to maintain exclusivity. The women of Society upheld exclusivity for a short time by cultivating forms of cultural capital. They controlled access to space, speech, body language, and dress, ensuring that the marks of distinction were passed down only to their own daughters. In the end however, cultural capital was transmittable. In fact, it was the key to inclusion. Outsiders appropriated cultural capital and used it to gain entry into the elite circle. By the turn of the century, Society had expanded to such a degree that it was no longer very exclusive. At the same time, Society women were no longer as noticeably distinguished from others, owing, in part, to the mass circulation of media and the ready-made clothing industry. Even poor factory girls donned High Society-inspired fashions.

The saga of America's aristocracy is not a story about political or economic power. Certainly, New York High Society's ascendancy was grounded in wealth. However, it was perpetuated by its female members, by women who possessed little power, either politically or economically, in their own right. Nevertheless, they carved out positions of power for themselves. They wielded enormous influence over social and cultural trends in America. These women constructed an elite social identity on

ballrooms, grammar, posture, and Worth dresses. Unfortunately, the sources of their power were also severely limiting; they perpetuated preeminence only by obeying restrictive codes. Moreover, they reaped power by suppressing other women. Perhaps then, the Society woman and the outsider alike benefited when democratization and the suffrage movement supplanted this system of limitation and exclusion.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

“All Society in Costume,” *New York Times*, 27 March 1883, 1.

Ashmore, Ruth. “To Be a Social Success,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, August 1896.

Balsan, Consuelo Vanderbilt. *The Glitter and the Gold*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1952.

Barrett, Richmond. *Good Old Summer Days*. New York: Appleton-Century, 1941.

“Bradley-Martin Banquet,” *The New York Times*, 17 May 1899, 6.

Coates, Foster. “Jewel Caskets of Fashionable Women,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, November 1890, 11.

Dale, Daphne. *Our Manners and Social Customs: A Practical Guide to Deportment, Easy Manners, and Social Etiquette*. Chicago: Elliott and Beezley, 1892, 139.

“Dancing At Bar Harbor,” *The New York Times*, 30 July 1895, 4.

“Daughter Born To Mrs. John Jacob Astor,” *The New York Times*, 8 July 1902, 1.

Decorum: A Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society, Westvaco Corporation, 1979.

Du Pont, Pauline Fosters. Papers, 1861-1902. Winterthur Manuscripts, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington.

“Evening Gown from Worth,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, 17 March 1894, 3.

Fabbri, Edith Shepard. 1842-1898. Manuscript Department, The New York Historical Society, New York.

“French Fashion Notes,” *The New York Times*, 13 May 1888, 16.

“From Four Hundred to Forty Thousand.” *The New York Times*, 24 January 1925, 12.

“Guests of Mrs. Astor.” *New York Times*, 27 January 1891, 2.

Harrison, Constance Cary “The New York Society Girl,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, October 1892, 7.

- Hartley, Florence. *The Ladies' Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness*. Boston: DeWolfe, Fiske, and Company, 1882.
- “Leading Social Event of the Season Takes Place To-night at Fifth Ave. Mansions—Two Houses Thrown Into One.” *The Evening World*, 9 January 1905, 7.
- Margaret Watts Livingston and others. *Correct Social Usage: A Course of Instruction in Good Form, Style, and Deportment by Eighteen Distinguished Authors*, Eighth Revised Edition. New York: New York Society of Self-Culture, 1907.
- Lord, Ruth. *Henry Du Pont and Winterthur: A Daughter's Portrait*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.
- McAllister, Ward. *Society as I Have Found It*. New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1890.
- “Mrs. Astor's Annual Ball,” *The New York Times*, 8 January 1901, 1.
- “Mrs. John Jacob Astor Turns Society's Hair from Various Hues to White and Powdered Locks,” *The Evening World*, 8 February 1908, Magazine and Story Section.
- “Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish Talks in Pungent Style,” *The New York Times*, 26 September 1903, 1.
- “New York Fashions,” *Harper's Bazaar*, 2 November 1867, 3.
- . 20 December 1884, 811.
- . 30 December 1893, 1071.
- Pruyn, Huybertie. *An Albany Girlhood*. ed. Alice P. Kenney. Albany: Washington Park Press Ltd., 1990.
- Robinson Family Papers. 1822-1966. Manuscript Department, The New York Historical Society, New York.
- “Saunterings,” *Town Topics*, 7 July 1887, 1-2.
- . 15 December 1887.
- . 4 December 1890, 1-2.
- . 11 December 1890, 1-2.
- . 18 December, 1890, 1-2.

----. 3 December 1891, 1-2.

----. 10 December 1891, 1-2.

----. 4 February 1892, 1-2.

----. 10 December 1892, 1-2.

----. 5 July 1894, 1-2.

----. 1 January 1899, 1-2.

----. 7 December 1899, 1-2.

----. 31 January 1901, 1-2.

Sherwood, Mary Elizabeth W. *Manners and Social Usages*. New York: Harper, 1897; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1975.

Sloane, Florence Adele. *Maverick in Mauve: The Diary of a Romantic Age*. Garden City: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1983.

“Society At the Opera,” *New York Times*, 25 November 1894, 19.

“Stage Hands Cheer as Society Poses,” *New York Times*, 24 February 1908, 7.

Stuyvesant-Rutherford Papers. 1647-1917, Manuscript Department, The New York Historical Society, New York.

“The Art of Conversation,” *New York Times*, 13 February 1891, 3.

“The Astor-Willing Wedding,” *The Sun*, 31 January 1891, 3.

“The New American Aristocracy,” *The Cosmopolitan: A Monthly Illustrated Magazine*, October 1898, 701.

“The Nouveau Riche,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, 18 November 1882, 736.

“The Week in Society,” *The New York Daily Tribune*, 10 January 1897, 4.

Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Van Rensselaer, May King and Frederic Van De Water. *The Social Ladder*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1924.

Wharton, Edith. *A Backward Glance*. New York: Touchstone, 1998.

----. *The Age of Innocence*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1995.

----. *The Custom of the Country*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.

----. *Old New York*. New York: Pocket Books, 2002.

----. *The House of Mirth*. New York: Berkley Books, 1981.

“What is Going On In Society,” *The Sun*, 8 February 1885, 4.

Secondary Sources

Benstock, Shari. “No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton,” University of Texas. 28 April 2009. <<http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/excerpts/exbennop.html>> (30 April 2009).

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson. Trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

----. “The Forms of Capital,” in *The Sociology of Economic Life*, ed. Mark S. Granovetter and Richard Swedberg. Boulder: Westview Press, 2001.

Browne, Junius Henri. *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New York*. Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1869; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1975.

Canning, Kathleen. *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class, and Citizenship*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.

“Charles Dana Gibson” *The National Museum of American Illustration*, 6 May 2009 <<http://www.americanillustration.org/html/cg/bio.html>> (19 May 2009).

Collins, James. “Determination and Contradiction: An Appreciation and Critique of the Work of Pierre Bourdieu on Language and Education,” in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Connell, R. W. *Gender*. Malden: Polity Press, 2002.

Cowles, Virginia. *The Astors*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979.

Ellis, Edward Rob and Jeanyee Wong. *The Epic of New York: A Narrative*. New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2004.

- Enstad, Nan. *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Fields, Jill. "'Fighting the Corsetless Evil': Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930," *Journal of Social History* 33 (1999).
- Frerichs, Sarah Cutts. "Sewell as an Educator—An Assessment," *The Victorian Web: Literature, History, and Culture in the Age of Victoria*. 8 April 2008. <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/sewell/6c.html>> (19 May 2009).
- "Gilded Age," *American Experience*. 19 May 2009. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/carnegie/gildedage.html>> (19 May 2009).
- Gilfoyle, Timothy J. *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994.
- Homberger, Eric. *Mrs. Astor's New York: Money and Social Power in a Gilded Age*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002
- Jaher, Frederic Cople. *The Urban Establishment Upper Strata in Boston, New York, Charleston, Chicago, and Los Angeles*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982.
- Kasson, John F. *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1990.
- King, Greg. *A Season of Splendor: The Court of Mrs. Astor in Gilded Age New York*. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2009
- Lavender, Catherine. "The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood," *Women in New York City, 1890-1940*, 10 September 2003, <<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/386/truewoman.html>> (19 May 2009).
- Leach, William. *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Lehr, Elizabeth Drexel. *King Lehr and the Gilded Age*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1993.
- MacColl, Gail and Carol McD. Wallace. *To Marry an English Lord, Or How Anglomania Really Got Started*. New York: Workman Publishing, Co., 1989.

- McGerr, Michael. *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Montgomery, Maureen E. *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Morris, Lloyd R. *Incredible New York: High Life and Low Life of Last Hundred Years*. New York: Random House, 1975.
- Nettels, Elsa. *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton, and Cather*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997.
- Patterson, Jerry E. *The First Four Hundred: Mrs. Astor's New York in the Gilded Age*. New York: Rizzoli, 2000.
- Peiss, Kathy. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986.
- Perrot, Philippe. *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*. Trans. Richard Bievenu. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Pitz, Henry C. Introduction to *The Gibson Girl and Her America* by Charles Dana Gibson and Edmund Vincent Gillon (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1969).
- Poole, David. *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist: The Facts of Daily Life in Nineteenth-Century England*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993.
- Preston, Clare. *Edith Wharton's Social Register*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 2000.
- Pyne, Kathleen. "On Women and Ambivalence in the Evolutionary Topos," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture*. 19 May 2009. <Erreur ! Référence de lien hypertexte non valide.> (19 May 2009).
- Scott, Joan Wallach. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- Shrock, Joel. *The Gilded Age*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004.
- Stott, Annette. "Floral Femininity: A Pictorial Definition," *American Art* 6 (1992).
- Weininger, Elliot B. and Annette Lareau . "Cultural Capital." 11 July 2006. <http://www.brockport.edu/sociology/faculty/Cultural_Capital.pdfhttp://www.brockport.edu/sociology/faculty/Cultural_Capital.pdf> (30 April 2009).

Wood, Sharon E.. *The Freedom of the Streets*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

Yosifon, David and Peter N. Stearns, "The Rise and Fall of American Posture," *The American Historical Review* 103 (1998).

Visual Sources

Curran, Charles Courtney. "Lotus Lilies" in *Take A Closer Look*. 6 May 2008.
<http://www.terraamericanart.org/dynamic/subpages/sb_subpages_link_b_1_127_9.pdf> (24 June 2009).

Duran, Charles-Émile-Auguste Carolus. "Mrs. William Astor." 24 June 2009.
<http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/european_paintings/mrs_william_astor_caroline_webster_schermerhorn_charles_emile_auguste_carolus_duran/objectview.aspx?collID=11&OID=110000282> (24 June 2009).

Gibson, Charles Dana. *Drawings*. New York: R. H. Russell and Son, 1894.

----. *Sketches and Cartoons*. New York: R. H. Russell and Son, 1898.

Singer Sargent, John. "Mrs. Henry White." 5 January 2005.
<http://www.jssgallery.org/Paintings/Mrs_Henry_White.htm> (24 June 2009).