Enterprising Women in Novels of Manners: The Social Economies of Austen, Thackeray and Wharton

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ABSTRACT (academic)

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to my family: to my husband, my equal partner, who sacrificed his own time and labor in support of my coursework, and to my children, especially for Adele, with whom I was pregnant when I attended the very first class, and who always wanted me to get an A. This is for you, baby.

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Introduction

Differing Values in Distinct Social Economies

The novel of manners offers readers a means of taking in a whole society from a close study of the interactions of a small sample of it. Novels of manners contain a sampling of the social DNA of the societies they portray, and from them readers get a glimpse both at the real context of those societies—and of the author's attitudes toward those contexts. Central to most novels of manners are women and their efforts to find themselves advantageously married. Since a woman in polite Western society during the 19th and early 20th centuries is barred by custom from earning her wealth, she must marry into it. There is a real sense, therefore, in which these "marriage plots" (so termed by Elsie Mitchie in her *The Vulgar Question of Money*[1]) are economic ventures, most especially for the women involved. In examining the rules which govern social mobility and courtship, one is really looking at a distinct economy.

Much like the literal economy of its time, the manners economy may at times value one source of capital more than another. There can be regulated economies, free-market economies, economies in crisis, inflation, speculative bubbles and debates over currency. Characters do not create these economies, but inherit and learn to act within them. Authors who present to us their novels of manners present us with episodes representative of a larger manners economy, which we must interpret through the lens of their own attitude toward that economy. For writers do not all hold the economies they present in equal degrees of respect and confidence, and their varying

[1] Mitchie outlines in this book the cultural attitudes toward female possession of wealth, versus perceptions of male wealth: "In the version of courtship in which a man is torn between two women, the woman is vulgar because she possesses the wealth and status the man himself may desire. In contrast when a woman is torn between two men, the one who represents the vulgar option is not the man who has wealth but the one who seeks it or presents himself as if he possessed it" (5).

attitudes cannot help but influence readers' perceptions of them. Most readers of Jane Austen perceive the economy she portrays in her novels as somewhat flawed but essentially just. When William Makepeace Thackeray presents us with *Vanity Fair*, a work with the same time setting as most of Austen's novels, we look to that economy with much less admiration. And readers behold with horror the corrupt social economy of New York society which seems to devour Lily Bart whole in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. The careful reader of all of these novels will read not only the society depicted in a novel of manners, but also the author's subtle or overt messages about the state of the social economy.

This paper will examine three well-known novels of manners by authors closely associated with the genre: Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair,* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Two novels are by women; two take place in England; and two overtly criticize as unjust or corrupt the social economies which they portray. I argue that there is a sustaining economic metaphor to characterize each author's attitude toward the manners economy they portray. In Jane Austen, social economies are controlled by an invisible hand which can be trusted to reward deserving economic agents, and punish the undeserving. William Thackeray shows how social economies can be impacted by speculative bubbles, when some commodities are temporarily given more value than they really hold. Within such a bubble, some characters will be able to make a fortune, while others who refuse to speculate lose out. Edith Wharton portrays a society which has gone off the gold standard of virtue, which values its social currencies without that organizing principle of virtue to give them stability. Women in these novels must be very studied economists in order to invest properly according to the prevailing conditions of their context.

One consistency in all these novels is the importance given to manners and etiquette. For Jane Austen, manners are of value only insofar as they provide evidence of a character's virtue; for William Thackeray, the most successful woman must possess virtue and also be willing to make investments of her manners and charm; Wharton portrays an economy where virtue no longer has any value at all and manners are mere expensive ornaments of the wealthy. Each novel has some relationship with the codes of etiquette of its day. For that reason, I have made a study of the conduct or etiquette books available to the characters in each context. There is much insight to be gained from an application of the principles within and social use of these conduct books toward our understanding of these novels of manners. Female characters in these novels rise or fall depending on their ability to value the rules of etiquette as they are valued in their separate economies of manners.

Each economy of manners works according to established principles and rules, and each character throughout the novels experiences some change in fortune depending on their level of skill and understanding of the machinations of that economy. In this way, economies of manners greatly resemble social games, albeit with rather higher stakes for the individual player. It will be instructive, therefore, to examine the way social games are played in each novel. The descriptions of Speculation as played in *Mansfield Park,* the "games of chance" portrayed in *Vanity Fair*, and Bridge in *The House of Mirth* communicate a great deal about the nature of each social economy. From a short study of these games, we will gain an appreciation of the system within which each female protagonist was an agent.

Economies of Table Games

The social act of playing cards is one which can be heavy with significance. Individuals, usually of a similar social class, sit down together to strategize against one another, make feints, deceive one another, determine which of them is the best or worthiest and often even make off with significant amounts of each other's money—all in the name of a polite amusement. In novels of manners, which present characters as more or less skillful social agents within their varying contexts, descriptions of card playing can symbolize much about character and context. The games vary, the stakes vary, and strategies vary according to context, but each card game in each novel of manners should be rich with meaning for the interpreter of the novel.

Speculation in Mansfield Park

Let us begin by pulling up our chairs to the card tables at Mansfield Park and observe what we may from their playing. Among the players are Lady Bertram, Fanny and William Price, Henry and Mary Crawford. The game of Speculation begins when Lady Bertram is asked to choose between that game and Whist. This is a "critical" social situation, Austen's tongue-in-cheek commentary explains. The choice is between "which will amuse [Lady Bertram] most" (*Mansfield Park* 221) and the mock-importance with which Austen describes Lady Bertram's decision-making offers some comment on the actual frivolity of the pursuit in this context. Characters may win or lose literal money, but their actual social standing will not be determined by a round of "Speculation;" in *Mansfield Park,* "Speculation" is, after all, only a game.[2]

[2] Laura Voracheck analyzes this scene eloquently in her essay, "Speculation and the Emotional Economy of *Mansfield Park*." The choice of Speculation as the entertainment for the unmarried characters (and Lady Bertram) is significant, as Voracheck explains: "As all this conjecturing about potential spouses suggests, the game of Speculation can be linked to the marriage market. The card game is an apt metaphor for the marriage market as it is a round game in which players act independently rather than cooperate with a partner as in Whist, the game played

Still, the game has much to reveal about the characters who play. Lady Bertram "hesitates" when deciding what to play; Sir Thomas is "luckily" at hand to be asked his opinion; with his recommendation of Speculation Lady Bertram is satisfied, though she owns that she "knows nothing of it" (*MP* 221). This is but one in a running line of criticisms Austen has for Lady Bertram's indolence, weak mind, and weak will. Still, Lady Bertram's fortune is already made, both economically and socially. She does not, fundamentally, need to play this very "odd game" in which she is "never to see [her] cards" and "Mr. Crawford does all the rest" (*MP* 222).[3] Lady Bertram can be a child, led by the hand by Henry Crawford, she can lose the game itself, and yet her social losses come to nothing. We must look to the characters whose fortunes are yet to be determined to see how Speculation is played.

Fanny Price begins the game by protesting that she does not know how to play the game either. Unlike Lady Bertram, however, "it was impossible for Fanny not to feel herself mistress of the rules in three minutes" (222). Fanny is intelligent and could potentially play with great skill. Henry Crawford does not, however, find it so easy to teach her the necessary "avarice" or hardness of heart to pursue her own interest (222). Fanny spends the whole game frustrated in her attempt to give the game to William, her cherished brother, the only being Fanny has been truly free to love. Fanny's selflessness still, interestingly, does not lose her the game; Mr. Crawford sees to that:

> No, no, you must not part with your queen. You have bought her too dearly, and your brother does not offer half her value. No, no, sir, hands off—hands off. Your sister does not part with the queen. She is quite determined. The game will be yours.. it will certainly be yours. (225)

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by the remaining characters at the party. While Whist more closely resembles marriage, with partners working together to their mutual advantage, Speculation corresponds to courtship, with players acting in their own interests (with the notable exception of Fanny)" (Voracheck 186).

[3] Austen here gives us a microcosm of the social economy within which women like Fanny and Mary could navigate. Men decide the game, and often retain control over how the game is played, but women are still able to make choices which can being them gains or losses within the context.

The reader is irritated on Fanny's behalf for Henry Crawford's condescending tone as he subjugates her will and agency in the game, and looks fondly on Edmund as he observes, "Poor Fanny! Not allowed to cheat herself as she wishes" (226). And yet, it is interesting that Fanny does win the game, and with the sympathy of all players (and of the reader).[4] One supposes that had she won the game using her own avarice instead of borrowing Mr. Crawford's, she might not be so much the heroine of the scene.

Let us look at the winner of the last deal, for comparison. Mary Crawford's intelligence, like Fanny's, is more than enough for comprehension and strategic participation in Speculation. She plays in rather a different emotional state than does Fanny; Mary is "suspicious" and "resentful" as she makes a "hasty" move to deprive William of his knave and win the game. William, the object of Fanny's attempted sacrifice, becomes the victim of Mary Crawford's ambition, under irritated spirits. Mary speaks with her usual wit and self-promotion: "I will stake my last like a woman of spirit. No cold prudence for me. I am not born to sit still and do nothing. If I lose the game, it shall not be for not striving for it" (224). Not for Mary is the tranquility of virtuous passivity. She can neither afford to throw the game away, nor to play a conservative long game. She must promote herself with a win, and with a reference to her own "spirit," or there is a danger that all Edmund's fond glances might be directed at Fanny alone. She does gain a win, but the victory is short-lived: "The game was hers," we are told, "and only did not pay her

[4] Laura Voracheck's analysis of Fanny's play is that she plays "conservatively." She puts forth that "Perhaps because she has so little capital to begin with, Fanny plays the marriage game conservatively" (Voracheck 189). But this explanation ignores the reality that Fanny cannot be said to have played Speculation at all. At every turn, Henry Crawford makes her decisions for her, as he does for Lady Bertram. Fanny may have less monetary capital, but Austen makes it quite clear that in this economy, the capital which one accumulates through virtue has greater value. Fanny does not speculate, either in the card game or in the figurative realm of marriage; the true wealth is already hers.

for what she had given to secure it" (224). Mary wins the game, but it costs her more than the game was worth.

Speculation soon gives way to a high-stakes conversation about the future of Thornton Lacy. What had been a game of mastery over cards becomes a game of mastery over the future. Will Edmund's quieter hopes for the property prevail, or will Henry's grand vision of improvement be realized? Mary throws her vote in favor of her brother, whom she names a "capital improver." Fanny silently supports Edmund with her "grave, even reproachful" look at Henry (226). Though the players cease to give attention to their cards, the game continues.

As in the card game, Mary will go on to win the round for Edmund's affection, but not the game. She will not gain back her investment in his attention, ultimately. Fanny's virtue will prove to be a more valuable source of wealth, for her, than all Mary's "spirit." Mr. Crawford's attempt to overwhelm Fanny's will and receive her gratitude will be vain. Fanny does not have to strive to win, in the end. Here may be read an analogy to the market in *Mansfield Park*. Those with virtue win in the end, without appearing to strive for it. A woman does not need to gamble to make social advances if she has virtue. A woman without virtue, despite what gains she may make by playing, will not ultimately win the best social standing. In Jane Austen's economy, virtue is the only investment which guarantees a return. One does better to sit on one's wealth of virtue than to make too great a show of it and risk losing one's most valuable asset. The invisible hand will ensure that the virtuous meet their reward.

Games of Chance in Vanity Fair

In the middle of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* is a chapter which contains a very different description of card-playing from that in *Mansfield Park*. The chapter is titled

“How to Live Well on Nothing a Year,” which gives us to understand that for these characters, playing cards is no matter of mere amusement. Cards, billiards, and games of gambling and chance are these characters’ livelihood and means of survival. Becky Sharp, now Mrs. Rawdon Crawley, Thackeray’s sharp-eyed, quick-witted social climbing heroine, focuses her efforts at survival “on nothing a year” upon ingratiating herself to the upper classes. She is “welcomed” into “some of the most distinguished houses of the restored French nobility,” people who, in England, might move in the same circle as Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram. Social strategist that she is, Becky sees her greatest opportunity in indirect access to wealth, such as one receives from access to the wealthy and respectable. But for her husband, Colonel Rawdon, “The old women who played écarté made such a noise about a five-franc piece, that it was not worth Colonel Crawley’s while to sit down at a card-table.” Colonel Crawley does not have the patience for this indirect a game; he wants to earn money directly by a show of skill at “games of chance” (*Vanity Fair* 420).

Mr. Thackeray gives us no specific names of games in this chapter, nor is the reader given a play-by-play of any of the actions of the game. In *Vanity Fair* the observer is at more of a distance; the personalities of the players are not the point. The other players at Rawdon’s table are vague figures only, against whom Rawdon directs his considerable skill. This skill, Thackeray explains, is the result of focused practice: “To use a cue at billiards well is like using a pencil, or a German flute, or a small-sword—you cannot master any one of these implements at first, and it is only by repeated study and perseverance, joined to a natural taste, that a man can excel in the handling of either” (420). By comparing the instruments of gambling to a more or less neutral list of tools, Thackeray does two things; first, he neutralizes negative moral associations with gambling. A billiard cue or hand of cards becomes one tool among many

equally valid to effect one's will in the world. Second, Thackeray challenges the uncertainty or randomness usually associated with gambling. Rawdon's success is due to his "consummate skill and boldness" and as such, perhaps should be considered more thoroughly deserved than billiards winnings generally are (420-421).

The description of Captain Crawley's pursuit of success through gambling gives us a picture of a man waging strategic war. He keeps his endgame in mind, even as he deceitfully draws in his nameless opponents:

> At games of cards he was equally skillful; for though he would constantly lose money at the commencement of an evening, playing so carelessly and making such blunders, that newcomers were often inclined to think meanly of his talent; yet when roused to action and awakened to caution by repeated small losses, it was remarked that Crawley's play became quite different, and that he was pretty sure of beating his enemy thoroughly before the night was over. Indeed, very few men could say that they ever had the better of him. His successes were so repeated that no wonder the envious and the vanquished spoke sometimes with bitterness regarding them. (421)

No mere diversion this; games are Rawdon's vocation. He not only makes strategic efforts to win individual games; he looks further and even feigns weakness to invite players to join him at the table in future games. Fittingly, Thackeray uses military language to describe this deadly serious game; his opponents (like enemies in battle) are nameless, known only as "the enemy" and later, "the vanquished." At *Mansfield Park*, the card game can be seen as symbolic of the fluctuating fortunes of the characters; in *Vanity Fair*, the games literally create the rise of the Crawley family.

Mrs. Rawdon does not remain passive, though she does not choose to play games, herself. With her intuitive grasp of social expectation, she not only pointedly does not play, but she adopts an endearing moral outrage about the games: "She spoke of her husband's passion for dice with the deepest grief; she bewailed it to everybody who came to her house" (421). Oddly, at first, Becky's protestations encourage participation. It may be that this is another feint,

comparable to Rawdon's "blunders" in early rounds of games, designed to convince players that to play against Colonel Crawley will mean easy money. But even when Colonel Crawley has won a game, Becky will do such a thing as to allow a servant to hear her spending an entire night in tears, and witnessing her going "on her knees to her husband to beseech him to remit the debt, and burn the acknowledgement" (421-422). She is not successful in her petition, and whether or not she and her husband agreed upon this pantomime in secret before it was enacted, their interests are furthered: "of course he must pay; to talk of burning IOU's was child's play" (422). The two of them together have entered into an economic partnership and created a phenomenon in which on the one side are children, emotional women, and respectability, and on the other side are independent men who do as they like. As a result, "the young fellows gathered around Mrs. Crawley"' despite her protestations, they are now considered to be "*her* fatal card-tables" (422; emphasis mine).

But no sooner is the phenomenon created than its temporary nature becomes evident to the Crawleys. The winds begin to change: "Her house began to have an unfortunate reputation." After a few unpleasant exchanges, and "in spite of Rawdon's undoubted skill and constant successes, it became evident to Rebecca… that their position was a precarious one, and that, even though they paid scarcely anybody, their little capital would end one day by dwindling to zero." Rawdon and Rebecca have created a craze, during which time the desirability of playing at Rebecca's "fatal card-table" has been artificially inflated. But like all crazes, it is best to be among the first in, and among the first out if one is to profit by them. "Some day people may be tired of play, and then where are we?" Rebecca posits to Rawdon, with her usual sagacity for reading the market. Before it can collapse around them, the Crawleys pull out of the games (*VF* 422).

A few conclusions might suggest themselves from this (literally) central chapter. Card-playing in the world of *Vanity Fair* is not polite, nor it is a mere diversion; it is war, it is an art, and it is a living. It is not "how you play the game," as the saying goes, that matters, but only "whether you win or lose." Card-playing here is a means to profit at others' expense, not a means to get to know the other players. As such, the game has comparatively less respectability than it does when played at low stakes around genteel tables in *Mansfield Park.* And finally, card-playing in this context is a temporary craze. Our protagonists create conditions in which what they possess has artificially high value, but this cannot last indefinitely. Sooner or later, the bubble must burst, as all speculative bubbles must do.

"The terrible god of chance" in *The House of Mirth*

In Wharton's *The House of Mirth* card games have another significance altogether. We find Lily quite early in the novel alone in her room, trying to make sense of what happened at bridge that night. Her mood fluctuates from wry resignation, to helplessness, to near despair: "Bridge at Bellomont usually lasted till the small hours, and when Lily went to bed that night she had played too long for her own good" (*The House of Mirth* 22). We experience none of the game in real time; all is narrated from Lily's hazy memory well after bridge is over. Two things are weighing on Lily's mind: her heavy losses at bridge, and Mrs. Dorset's flirtation with her conquest, Percy Gryce. Both games seem to have been played simultaneously, creating a set of parallel games. Lily's seething over the unfairness in both games reinforces the parallel. In both games, only the rich can really afford to play: "[T]he mere thought of that other woman, who could take a man up and toss him aside as she willed, without having to regard him as a possible factor in her plans, filled Lily Bart with envy… It was a hateful fate—but how could she escape

from it?” (23). The same helplessness fills her as she contemplates her participation in regular games of bridge.

Lily had been reluctant to begin to play bridge at all, as “she knew she could never afford it.” She remembers watching the slow progress of the addiction to gambling in the life of Ned Silverton. Silverton was a wholesome young scholar until seduced to the game by the likes of the divorced Mrs. Fisher, who seems to be at least half of Silverton’s addiction: “Since then he had developed a taste for Mrs. Fisher and bridge, and the latter at least had involved him in expenses from which he had been more than once rescued by harassed maiden sisters, who.. went without sugar in their tea to keep their darling afloat” (23). For those that are not themselves rich, bridge only creates dependencies, both on the game itself and on one’s relatives and friends to clear one’s debts. Lily is decidedly wary of “the spell of the terrible god of chance” and avoids the game as long as it is possible for her.

But before long Lily finds it is socially impossible for her to avoid bridge. The game is all the rage with her wealthy, care-free companions, and “in the last year she had found that her hostesses expected her to take a place at the card-table. It was one of the taxes she had to pay for their prolonged hospitality, and for the dresses and trinkets which occasionally replenished her insufficient wardrobe” (24). And just as she fears, the “passion” for gambling begins to take root in her. It is difficult for the reader to blame Lily for this growing fascination, as she is utterly dependent on her aunt for money and has no permissible means to earn any on her own. Thus in order to pay her “tax” to the wealthy people who support her, Lily acquires an expensive addiction, to keep them company in their own addictions. And as she does, the true injustice of her social environment reveals itself to her in the game.

For although the less moneyed players stand to benefit most from the game, they never seem to gain anything but debt. It is the independently wealthy like Bertha Dorset "whose husband showered money on her" and Judy Trenor "who could have afforded to lose a thousand a night" who come away with piles of money in their winnings (24). By the bare rules of the game, bridge should be a game of chance and skill, and yet, skilled as she is at any social contest among equal competitors, she cannot seem to win. At both flirtation and bridge, the game seems fixed to favor those who have no need of winnings. This economy seems a warped fulfillment of Christ's declaration that "[W]hosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath."[5] For such as Lily, card playing can be neither a mere harmless (if illustrative) amusement, as in *Mansfield Park,* nor can she even for a limited time earn a living from cards (as in *Vanity Fair*); neither virtue nor skill profits her at the Bellomont bridge table.

Throughout these games, readers can make central observations about the nature of the social economies in each novel. The economy portrayed in *Mansfield Park*, though a male-dominated system in which men determine the game and teach the rules, does offer women some choices for which they are rewarded or punished by that system. A woman in this economy would do well to sit upon her store of virtue, and neither make a show of it nor attempt to win more of it through any type of social gamble. In *Vanity Fair,* by contrast, though women should not officially play at gambling games, are in reality encouraged by their social economy to gamble constantly, if indirectly, taking advantage of conditions which favor the charms they have to offer. *The House of Mirth* gives a grimmer picture, a social economy in which women are all but forced to gamble if they are to participate. In this economy, women with literal wealth

[5] Matthew 13:12 KJV

inevitably lose nothing from the game, but women without wealth are gradually impoverished by participation. The games in these novels truly display the social economies their authors portray in miniature.

Economies of Manners

The novel of manners remains a popular form to this day, though fewer official examples of the genre are being produced than in the past. To enjoy these novels, one must be willing to look at the actions of the characters at very close range, and to be able to interpret these actions according to a hermeneutic which may not be immediately familiar to a 21st-century reader. Many of the most important scenes take place indoors, in confined spaces such as crowded ballrooms, drawing rooms, dining rooms and libraries. In short, they take place in the spaces most familiar to middle and upper class women of the periods. In limited society and confined spaces, characters exchange actions and words which in their contexts are ponderous with meaning. We see the fortunes of some characters rise, the fortunes of others fall, according to their skill and according to the conditions of their contexts. In this way, the novel of manners presents us with a social economy. Before the women's movement and the introduction of large numbers of women into the workforce, this was the woman's economy: the economy of manners.

The English Regency, the period in which *Mansfield Park* was written and in which *Vanity Fair* is set, is a setting undergirded with rigid social codes. If one had the fortune (or misfortune, depending on one's outlook) of finding oneself among the upper classes during this time, one was confronted at every turn with minute behavioral expectations. There were rules for eating, rules for walking, rules for greeting, rules for social visits and rules for relationships of

every kind.[6] According to one Regency era book of etiquette, *The Mirror of the Graces*, manners were necessary to the functioning of a society, which the author describes "as a grand machine, in which each member has the place best fitted for him" (*The Mirror of the Graces* 204-205). During this period, following an age which gloried in reason and science, a manners novice could find many books of manners codified in print in which polite conventions were nearly always given both a rational and a moral basis. According to *The Laws of Etiquette; or, Short Rules and Reflections for Conduct in Society*, published in 1836, "The formalities of refined society were at first established for the purpose of facilitating the intercourse of persons of the same standing, and increasing the happiness of all to whom they apply" (19). These formalities existed, according to these writers, in order to make life in society more convenient and enjoyable. This is a practical view, but others assigned a more exalted ideology to polite social conventions. In her letters to her daughter, Mrs. Peddle connects social responsibilities and courtesies directly to the cultivation of virtue, the chief human happiness. She explains,

> The Creator had not been wanting to provide a happiness exalted as the mind itself can conceive; but man himself errs in the pursuit of it; some placing it in riches, some in power, scarcely one in an age of supposing it to be where it actually is—in the practice of virtue…Rest assured that in the exercise of social and religious duties, the mind will find her solid happiness. (*Rudiments of Taste* 3)

Depending on the source of one's education, manners could be an outward expression of an individual's virtue, or a means of gaining esteem and a kind of power within society. This emphasis upon proper, well-bred behavior, in the social economy of the day, became a sort of social capital or power in the early 19th century. And unlike other forms of capital, such as

[6] Images of how, exactly, one was to hold one's body while doing such activities as "walking," "standing" and "offering/receiving" an object can be found in *The Rudiments of Genteel Behavior*, published in 1737.

independent wealth, work in a trade, education or primogeniture, this was a form to which women had equal access with men.

Manners themselves, as a system, empowered women within a very restrictive society. It gave them an economy in which they could have abundant currency. Women were at least as able to practice good manners and prove their gentle upbringing as were men, and more was expected of them. Within this patriarchal society, women had a great deal more at stake; in the introduction to his *Principles of Politeness Addressed to Every Young Lady*, Lord Chesterfield urges his young lady readers to observe not only his instructions to them but to be proficient also in what is expected of young men, for "what is unseemly and improper in our sex, is absolutely horrid in yours" (2). Not only were women expected to be more proficient in manners, but they were often regarded as the authorities upon polite behavior for both men and women. The (male) author of *The Laws of Etiquette* declared, "A young man… in entering the world, cannot be too careful to conciliate the goodwill of women" (127). Women were the gatekeepers of good society, and it was the opinion of respectable women that most mattered as young men and women attempted to make good in this social economy. This is because, according to *The Laws of Etiquette,*

> Women observe all the delicacies of propriety in manners, and all the shades of impropriety, better than men; not only because they attend to them earlier and longer, but because their perceptions are more refined than those of the other sex, who are habitually employed about greater things. Women divine, rather than arrive at, proper conclusions. (*The Laws of Etiquette* 130)

Of all the ways in which an individual in English society could rise, such as inheritance, profit from a trade, education or bestowed rank, only the value conferred upon an individual with excellent manners (and excellent moral character) was as open to women as to men. In fact, it was often women, in this case, doing the conferring. In *The Mirror of the Graces*, the author

notes, “Women in every country have a greater influence than men choose to confess. Though haughtiness of mind will not allow them always to acknowledge the truth, yet we see the proof in its effects” (211). She goes on to urge that women are morally obligated to “teach men to obey” the ordered system of deference to one’s social superiors. Social leadership and recognition through careful attention to right behavior was the only currency which women could dole out as well as earn.

As Jane Austen and William Makepeace Thackeray (and, to some extent, Edith Wharton) observe in their novels, mastering true good manners could be a source of power and security for women. However, for Austen and Thackeray, the *source* of the social wealth which good manners give was to be inward virtue. When a character in *Mansfield Park* or *Vanity Fair* is exposed for having charming outward manners but no virtue, it is as if they are exposed as economic frauds by writing bad checks. When this happens to a male character, he is usually consigned to the reader’s bad opinion; for female characters, this moral bankruptcy often spells ruin. Where good manners were evidence of inward virtue and a powerful moral compass, they were a source of wealth and security for women. Where good manners were only a set of outward habits, or where they were only strategies of ambition, that woman was in danger of finding herself socially bankrupt. All this is overturned, however, in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, and upon this fact rests her critique of the economy she portrays: virtue is no longer the standard of value.

Jane Austen sets her novels in her own present, in the English Regency period. William Thackeray’s project differs in that the setting of *Vanity Fair,* also the English Regency period, is in his own past. He writes as a Victorian, from a different social and economic context, about a period nearly fifty years in his rearview. He will bring an attitude born out of his own economic

context to his relation of Regency society. We will ask in this essay about the source of his cynicism. It may be that Thackeray's view of the economy of manners in which Becky Sharp is able to rise and Amelia Sedley cannot derives from his experience with economic realities unknown to Austen.

When we turn to the manners economy found in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth,* we will have crossed an ocean and come over fifty years forward in time to a distinct manners context. Conduct books are here put to a different use than what we see in England in the early part of the 19th Century, when Charles William Day described etiquette as "the barrier which society draws around itself" (11).[7] The etiquette books in Wharton's New York do not so much seek to reinforce the ideals of an aristocratic class as to provide practical knowledge to aspiring social climbers. What the upper classes had always been expected to know in terms of the practical expression of etiquette, now appears published and ready for middle-class consumption. At the same time, society's elite was suffering something of a crisis of identity, in that the Gilded Age's pursuit of fashion and style deemphasized notions of personal virtue and correctness of manner, and thus, devalued those things as currencies. Each novel contains many of the same currencies, but valued at dramatically different rates in each context. In each novel, female protagonists must take stock of the prevailing economic conditions, but their success or failure will have as much to do with the function or dysfunction of those conditions as with their own social choices.

[7] Charles William Day notes that "in a mercantile country like England, people are continually rising in the world. . . But although their capacities for enjoyment increase, it rarely happens that the polish of their manners keeps pace with the rapidity of their advancement: hence such persons are often painfully reminded that wealth alone is insufficient to protect them from the mortifications which a limited acquaintance with society entails upon the ambitious" (Day 13-14). Clearly, for Day, etiquette is more of a marker of achieved status than it is a means to achieve status.

Chapter 1: *Mansfield Park*: The Virtuous Invisible Hand

Austen had clearly been reading various types of conduct books with excellent fictional results.
-Allison G. Sulloway, *Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood*

You could not shock her more than she shocks me;
Beside her Joyce seems as innocent as grass.
It makes me most uncomfortable to see
An English spinster of the middle-class
Describe the amorous effects of 'brass',
Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
The economic basis of society.
-W. H. Auden, "Letter to Lord Byron"

The Bank Restriction Act and Jane Austen's Confidence

The work of Jane Austen displays a great deal of confidence in the ability of the social economy she portrays, made up of relatively genteel families in the country, to sort out and reward deserving members. Looking at the context of the literal economy during her time, however, one might struggle to find a basis for her confidence. Austen wrote during an economic period known as the Restriction Period. After the passage of the Bank Restriction Act of 1797, banks were no longer required to provide gold payments in exchange for paper bank notes. This was a period of economic uncertainty for the English economy, and hardly an occasion for much confidence. But it is important to consider in whom Jane Austen places her confidence. Austen had little confidence in urban wealth, where bank notes were so freely traded. Urban wealth had for its basis the inability of the banks to, as Mary Poovey puts it, keep their promise.

In her book *Genres of the Credit Economy* Mary Poovey considers economic developments in British history and how these are reflected in 18th and 19th century literature. She offers the following commentary on the interaction between the Bank Restriction Act of

1797 and Austen's writing of *Pride and Prejudice* (referred to here by its initial title, *First Impressions*):

> The Bank Restriction Act was passed in May 1797, as we have seen, and it was debated during the spring of that year, when Austen was, presumably, readying *First Impressions* for its (unsuccessful) submission to the publishers Cadell and Davies. This act also sanctioned a breach of promise, of course, like the breach of promise that Elizabeth associates with her resolution to thank Darcy; in the case of the act, the suspended promise was the notice printed on the face of every Bank note—the promise that the Bank would redeem the note with gold. (Poovey 369)

In *Pride and Prejudice*, as in *Mansfield Park*, Austen reveals her greater trust in the landed gentry (Mr. Darcy, like Sir Thomas, represents the essential virtue of this class) to assign values properly.[8] Consistently, those whose virtue is developed meet with a reward, and those whose store of virtue is impoverished meet with a similar impoverishment in their circumstances.

The source of this rewarding and punishing is a force at work in the country, among the landed gentry. Poovey explains the effect of the Restriction Act on the power of this class by observing that "the power associated with land and with gentlemen like Darcy was beginning to be usurped by the moneyed men who backed the Restriction. . . the Restriction Act and its prolongation revealed that the Bank of England's directors were successfully equating the interests of the Bank—and not the landed gentry—with the welfare of the nation as a whole" (Poovey 371-372). Jane Austen, as Poovey has it, thoroughly sides with the landed gentry in her novels. In an economic context of so much uncertainty, they were the reliable sources of wealth and designators of value. Jane Austen's trust in country families, and property holders like Mr. Darcy and Sir Thomas, was higher than her trust in urban wealth. Even as bank notes fluctuated

[8] There are exceptions; Lady Catherine De Bourgh certainly possesses little in the way of either virtue or manners, and Lady Bertram's wealth seems entirely bound up what the beauty of her youth had bought her.

in value, land remained, and in the country, a woman's wealth of virtue would be more capable of holding its value than banknotes in the hand of a London merchant.

The Invisible Hand in Jane Austen's Virtue Economy

In *Mansfield Park*, "a fully commercial society" according to Elsie B. Mitchie, readers have the opportunity to study the characters of an array of economic agents (40). There is the stoic Sir Thomas, wealthy in both money and manners, and then there are his children, most of whom inherit the manners and not the virtue (Edmund being the exception). The visitors from London are wealthy in the manners and wealth of the city, but these turn out not to retain their value in the country. Lest the reader conclude that living in the country confers virtue in itself, however, we witness Mrs. Norris living off Sir Thomas' reputation for virtue much as she lives off of his literal wealth; she herself has little wealth of either category. The characters who come and go from *Mansfield Park* demonstrate that at least in the country, we can trust the stability of social currency because that currency has virtue for its basis. Like gold, virtue seems to be a limited quantity. Those who possess it can afford to make their virtuous social decisions without fear of ruin; those whose supply of virtue is low must beware of being ruined by overdraft fees. By looking at the development of these characters and the outcome each meets, we observe that Jane Austen trusts the invisible hand of virtue to sort out the deserving from the undeserving. With virtue as the standard of social wealth, agents can interact in a free market.

When we meet her, Fanny Price is being brought to Sir Thomas' estate out of charity. It is understood that the charity the family intends to give her, however, will be less in the form of money or inheritance than in the opportunities afforded by an education befitting a lady. Mrs. Norris sets the expectation from the beginning: "Give a girl an education, and introduce her

properly into the world, and ten to one but she has the means of settling well, without farther expense to anybody" (*Mansfield Park* 8). This education, and the outward manners and habits that will go with it, are to be her inheritance, her capital. Through some combination of luck, education, and "the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure," Fanny does not disappoint the Bertrams (*MP* 439). Her adult manners turn out to be immaculate, linked as they are to her inward virtue. This virtue seems to be the happy result of the struggle of her situation and the officious attention of her cousin, Edmund, whose "strong good sense and uprightness of mind, bid most fairly for utility, honour, and happiness" (*MP* 21). Despite Mrs. Norris' exertions to bring Fanny to Mansfield, despite Sir Thomas' consent which allowed Fanny to stay, it is Edmund to whom Fanny owes her most valuable acquirement: inward virtue, the manners of the mind.

During the period of Edmund and Fanny's growing up, we observe the powerful connection Jane Austen held to exist between inward habits of mind and outward habits of behavior.[9] In chapter 2, the influences which formed Fanny's mind are contrasted with those forming the minds of her cousins, Maria and Julia. Maria's and Julia's minds are formed by flattery and consciousness of their own superiority. When they approach Mrs. Norris with the exasperating problem of young, newly-arrived Fanny's inferior education and abilities, she answers them by saying,

> To be sure, my dear, that is very stupid indeed, and shows a great want of genius and emulation. But, all things considered, I do not know whether it is not as well that it should be so, for, though you know (owing to me) your papa and mama are so good as to bring her up with you, it is not at all necessary that she should be as accomplished as you are;—on the contrary, it is much more desirable that there should be a difference. (*MP* 19)

[9] In *Those Elegant Decorums*, Jane Nardin contrasts propriety in *Mansfield Park* with its representation in Austen's other novels, saying, "In neither *Sense and Sensibility* nor *Pride and Prejudice* does the reader get a sense, as he does in *Mansfield Park*, that the heroine must consciously renounce polite society's corrupt concept of propriety in order to understand the nature of true propriety" (Nardin 88).

We are informed that, “Such were the counsels by which Mrs. Norris assisted to form her nieces' minds; and it is not very wonderful that, with all their promising talents and early information, they should be entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity and humility” (*MP* 19-20). As generously dowered as they are, Julia and Maria grow up lacking the true manners flowing from inward virtue, the only wealth of which women were fully in command. By contrast, Fanny, struggling in the consciousness of her poverty, has her mind formed and improved by Edmund. His encouragement, his attention, and his praise keep the knowledge of her own social inferiority from destroying her spirit, even as her struggle gives her mind discipline.

As the children grow, we see the contrast in what their manners amount to. The women of the novel are given many tests of their character, in which only Fanny demonstrates the manners of true inward virtue. The first such test is the question of Fanny’s horse. Horseback riding was considered an important aspect of Regency women’s activities and education: in his *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters,* John Gregory advises his daughters to be regular in their outdoor exercise, “such as walking and riding on horse back,” not only because of the health benefits of such activities, but because “An attention to your health is a duty you owe to yourselves and to your friends. Bad health seldom fails to have an influence on the spirits and temper” (Gregory 24-25). According to Gregory, then, care for one’s physical health is a moral duty. However, because of the politics of her situation, Fanny must passively allow Edmund to defend her need for a horse. The first solution, devised by her aunts, is for Maria and Julia to share. Maria and Julia fail this first test of their manners, for though their dispositions have been “carefully formed to general civility and obligingness,” they still “had no idea of carrying their

obliging manners to the sacrifice of any real pleasure" (*MP* 33-35). They are unwilling to exert themselves to any kind of self-denial.

A horse also provides a prop for Mary Crawford to show the state of her own manners. Edmund's attention had given Fanny a horse of her own, so that she might cultivate the discipline of attending to her health while she enjoyed the pleasure of riding. But with the arrival of the beautiful and sophisticated Miss Crawford (who rapidly becomes an excellent horse-woman), Fanny's wants and needs are once again neglected. On her second day of riding Fanny's horse alongside Edmund, Miss Crawford stays out riding so long that Fanny's own ride is cut short. After a half-apology from Miss Crawford, meant to charm her way out of blame, Fanny nonetheless remains "extremely civil" and offers her horse to Miss Crawford for the whole of the next day (*MP* 65-6). That Fanny is able to take comfort in Edmund's happiness is evidence that she alone is the possessor of true good manners; as Lord Chesterfield reminds us, "True politeness consists in making everybody happy about you" (*Principles of Politeness Addressed to Every Young Lady* 77). Edmund may be less able to see the gap in Miss Crawford's manners here than he was when Miss Crawford was so impolite as to let her dislike of her uncle show. But Edmund's judgment is becoming clouded where Miss Crawford is concerned. Fanny, however, has shown herself by far the most virtuous of the Mansfield women.

The next tests that Fanny, Mary Crawford, and the Bertram sisters undergo all relate to the person and behavior of Henry Crawford. Mr. Crawford arrives, archly mocking both marriage itself and his sister's plan to attach him to Julia Bertram. In the weeks that follow, Henry pursues Julia on the surface, flirting determinedly with Maria all the time. As he flirts and constantly singles out the engaged Maria for attention, he makes a spectacle of her respectability and inflames the jealousy of Mr. Rushworth—yet he does not make any declarations of love. The

narrator has Maria, in at last resolving upon marrying Mr. Rushworth, think in economic terms: "Henry Crawford had destroyed her happiness, but he should not know that he had done it; he should not destroy her credit, her appearance, her prosperity, too" (*MP* 187). The "credit" here, listed as a separate resource from "prosperity" cannot mean literal wealth; it rather means her reputation. She has gambled with it by flirting with Henry as an engaged woman, but to continue to do so after her marriage would reveal the truth, that her pleasant, engaging manners are only superficial. Should she reveal in continuing her affair with Henry Crawford that she has no virtue, Maria knows well she risks losing every kind of capital she possesses.

When once the two sisters have left Mansfield, Henry Crawford directs his sights upon Fanny. In a conversation with his sister, Henry reveals how he intends to pass the time during his last two weeks at Mansfield: "My plan is to make Fanny Price fall in love with me" (*MP* 212). This project is not intended to involve his own feelings, however; Henry makes it clear that his only object is to overcome Fanny's reserve enough to observe evidence of feelings for him: "It can be but for a fortnight… and if a fortnight can kill her, she must have a constitution which nothing could save…I only want her to …feel that when I go away that she shall be never happy again. I want nothing more" (*MP* 214). Whatever about his feelings or intentions can be said to change in that next fortnight, his having begun the project as a form of emotional conquest reveals him to be, by John Gregory's standards, a male coquet.[10] According to Gregory,

> Male coquetry is much more inexcusable than female… Very few men will give themselves the trouble to gain or retain any woman's affections, unless they have views on her either of an honourable or dishonourable kind. Men employed in the pursuits of business, ambition, or pleasure, will not give themselves the trouble to engage a woman's affections merely from the **vanity of conquest**, and of triumphing over the heart of an innocent and defenceless girl. Besides, people never value much what is entirely in their power. (Gregory 44, emphasis mine)

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[10] Allison Sulloway likewise recognizes that Crawford's behavior here would have been censured by official standards of polite conduct. She writes, "Crawford was one of those men who served as a warning to women in the conduct books of all three persuasions" (*Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood* 167).

This coquetry, which has been Crawford's mode for the duration of his time at Mansfield, does not go unrecognized by Fanny. She sees in him an unprincipled, insincere man; as Gregory notes, his affection for her, were she "entirely in their power," could not have been genuine. The longer Crawford's project of winning her love remains unsuccessful, indeed, the more he seems to value her: "You know with what idle designs I began," he says to Mary, "but this is the end of them… My own [affections] are entirely fixed" (*MP* 269). Crawford may see his growing affection for Fanny as sincere and genuine, and the reader may even be won over to his side of the matter, but Fanny can see no evidence of virtuous love. Nothing in his behavior can demonstrate but that he is motivated by the challenge of having Fanny "entirely in his power" so that he may de-value and drop her as he did Julia and Maria. In refusing steadfastly, despite the manipulation of Sir Thomas and the advocacy of Edmund on Crawford's behalf, Fanny does not compromise her genuine, virtuous propriety, for "a lady's civility… must not be carried into compliance, which may betray her into irrecoverable difficulties. The word complaisance has led your sex into greater errors than all other things put together" (*Principles of Politeness* 25-26). Politeness and propriety, here, do not mean accepting every proposal or request made to one, merely to be agreeable company. Fanny knows, with a confidence and certainty she rarely displays, that this is a time to stand her ground.

It is perhaps a pity that John Gregory's thoughts on "Friendship, Love and Marriage" were addressed so specifically to his daughters. If Mr. Crawford had only read this portion, he would perhaps have known how a gentleman of "spirit and dignity" was to behave upon Fanny's refusal, for Gregory forecasts that the rejected gentleman "will give you no further trouble, nor apply to your friends for their intercession. This last is a method of courtship which every man of spirit will disdain" (Gregory 41). Fanny, at least, knows her duty according to the good manners

of her virtue, for she does not let Mr. Crawford "linger in a miserable suspense" but gives her negative answer immediately (Gregory 39).

In the ensuing weeks, Fanny maintains a balance between listening to and considering the feelings of those to whom she is obliged (Edmund and Sir Thomas) and yet remaining resolute in her considered judgment upon Henry Crawford's character. Jane Nardin describes the art of moral choices in Austen's world thus: "Feelings can never, Jane Austen thinks, be eliminated from the process of making moral choices, but feeling is a very unsafe guide to follow here... because even good feelings can never be consistently good guides to morality" (Nardin 101). Fanny must undergo a lengthy trial of her inward virtue, which she must endure alone, as she is usually the only one who can see Henry's impropriety for what it is. When she consults Edmund about the etiquette problem posed by the gift of Mary Crawford's necklace, she hints at her real concern in wearing it: the necklace may have been an indirect gift of Henry Crawford's. Edmund, caught up in his desire to please Mary Crawford, does not make the connection. But were Fanny's suspicion correct, she would be accepting an expensive gift from a gentleman suitor, which was not strictly correct behavior even did she welcome Henry's advances. As the gentleman author of *The Laws of Etiquette* advised, "Especially never offer to a lady a gift of great cost: it is in the highest degree indelicate, and looks as if you were desirous of placing her under an obligation to you, and of buying her good will" (200). Fanny is a shrewder judge of true good manners than any of the more materially advantaged characters in the book, and neither do her outward manners falter. She will be vindicated only three months later by Henry and Maria's elopement, for a lack of inward virtue will always find its way to the surface of a character's behavior in Jane Austen's society.

Maria's crisis of virtue has been a long time in the making. Both Bertram girls, but the older especially, exemplify the problem of too much disconnect between outward manners and inward character. The "Lady of Distinction" who authored *A Mirror of the Graces* was careful to point out, as she introduced a discussion of what is elegant in the female appearance, that

> We may safely teach a well-educated girl, that virtue ought to wear an inviting aspect—that it is due to her excellence to decorate her comely apparel. But we must never cease to remember that it is VIRTUE we seek to adorn. It must not be a merely beautiful form; for that if it possesses not the charm of intelligence, the bond of rational tenderness, is a frame without a soul—a statue which we look on and admire, pass away and forget. (*A Mirror of the Graces* 15)

The Bertram girls' manners, like their appearances, are "carefully formed" to please (*MP* 33-34). They gain the favor of the neighborhood with their good humor, attractiveness, and *apparent* goodness of heart, controlling their vanity so effectively "that they seemed to be quite free from it" (*MP* 34). The fact that the girls are not positively said to *be* free from vanity, but rather that they only *seem* to be because of the order they impose upon it, will be noted by the reader familiar with Austen. Likewise, the development of the belief that "they had no faults" should warn the reader that their character will be in serious danger of betraying them (*MP* 34). Maria's manners continue a mere matter of seeming and control; when Mrs. Grant fails to extend her dinner invitation to dine with the Crawfords to Maria (thinking she would naturally prefer to dine with her fiancé at the Park), Maria's "good manners were severely taxed to conceal her vexation and anger till she reached home" (*MP* 67). For Maria, manners are a merely external effort to control any ill-natured or selfish feeling she should happen to feel; they do not bring about, as with Fanny, an internal struggle to feel as she ought to feel. Fanny, having given up her horse to oblige Miss Crawford, had spent the same afternoon endeavoring to feel comforted by Edmund's pleasure in the ride—in other words, in trying to feel as she ought, and adjust her manners from

the inside. The great disparity in outcomes for Maria and Fanny is the direct result of their two lifetimes of differing approaches to manners.

Maria makes the two causally connected moral choices which ruin her out of this lack of inward virtue. As Jane Nardin prescribes, feelings ought to be considered in making moral choices, though never given full reign in the final decision. Maria makes one choice, the choice to marry Mr. Rushworth, out of no positive feeling at all, but in negative feelings of distaste for her stifled life at Mansfield and in bitterness at Mr. Crawford's rejection, and also in an emotionless sense of ambition. The other choice, to run away with Henry Crawford, she apparently makes solely out of feeling. We remember that Austen describes Maria's character as having been ruined by excessive praise, especially that of Mrs. Norris.[11] Mrs. Peddle puts her finger on the internal problem, that Maria's passions, or feelings, were fed a poor diet: "Perhaps the natural passions of the human mind may be reduced to two—the love of pleasure, and the love of praise, and from the corruptions of these may be traced every irregular affection of the heart" (*Rudiments of Taste* 11). As a result of this poor diet, Maria's virtue grows puny and underdeveloped, but with enough of outward manners to indicate health to Sir Thomas and the neighborhood. Her outward manners attract Mr. Rushworth, but she has not the inward propriety to decline what would be an irrational, unhappy marriage to a fool. Nor does she have the character to keep her feelings forever in check, for she at last flees Mr. Rushworth with Crawford. Thus, Maria's outward manners can be a valuable and sufficient supply of wealth to her only in so far as her virtue can back her expenditures in the social economy. When her virtue is exhausted, she experiences a kind of social bankruptcy which she is forced to share with the

[11] It was praises, in chapter 6, which Austen blames for convincing both girls they "had no faults" (34). In the final analysis in chapter 48, when Austen deals out rewards and punishments for all, she explains, "that Julia escaped better than Maria was owing, in some measure, to a favourable difference of disposition and circumstance, but in a greater to her having been less the darling of that very aunt, less flattered and less spoilt" (*MP* 432).

inflationary Mrs. Norris. One can trust the invisible hand, the landed gentry in this economy, eventually to sort out those whose moral and social failings should bankrupt them.

The outcome for Mary Crawford, though not harshly punitive as is Maria's fate, is still rebuke, disappointment, and loss. This difference is appropriate to Austen's justice, since Mary's social guilt is less. If Maria lacks the virtue to be uncomfortable, Mary lacks the virtue to be sincere. Manners literature can corroborate Austen's view that good character requires some sincerity. While Chesterfield regulates and limits the uses of female wit, John Gregory declares wit to be utterly inappropriate in a female; for her, even humor is dangerous:

> Wit is the most dangerous talent you can possess… Wit is so flattering to vanity, that those who possess it may become intoxicated, and lose all self-command… Humor is a different quality. It will make your company much solicited; but be cautious how you indulge it—It is often a great enemy to delicacy, and still a greater one to dignity of character. (Gregory 17)

Austen turns out not to have such a strong double standard when it comes to male and female talent for wit. In fact, her works contain few male wits compared to the examples of witty females. Such characters as Elizabeth Bennett also demonstrate that a woman can be a lively wit and still remain solidly in the category of virtue. Austen would most likely hold all characters accountable to follow Chesterfield's *Principles of Politeness and of Knowing the World*. For young gentlemen, Lord Chesterfield stipulates that wit must remain sincere—"an affectation of wit" will make one "a coxcomb"—and never cruel—"If you have wit, use it to please, but never to hurt" (*Principles of Politeness* 76 and 79). Mary Crawford wins Edmund's praise early on for her liveliness and playfulness; she draws criticism only when she uses it inappropriately. He allows Mary to have the right to some small indiscretions; as he says, "the right of a lively mind, Fanny, seizing whatever may contribute to its own amusement… perfectly allowable, when untinctured by ill humour or roughness… She is perfectly feminine" (*MP* 61). Stern, serious

Edmund's admiration for Mary's sparkling wit and surface-level pleasantness eventually makes him unable to notice, as Fanny does, that Miss Crawford is often playful when she ought to be serious. In the days of their intimacy at the parsonage, Fanny is described as being only rarely amused by Miss Crawford's wit, and then "often at the expense of her judgment, when it was raised by pleasantry on people or subjects which she wished to be respected" (*MP* 193). In time, however, "the charm is broken" and Edmund sees the lack of virtue and right-feeling beneath Miss Crawford's pleasant manners (*MP* 423). Mary's character is, in fact, corrupted by the hypocritical and vain societal force that Thackeray will name "Vanity Fair." Miss Crawford's manners were able to temporarily captivate Edmund, but without inward virtue, real happiness, at least for a time, must elude her. The invisible hand cannot give her a foothold without the investment capital of a virtuous character.

In Austen's writing, characters usually get what they deserve from society, and in no other novel does she seem so determined to commend the deserving and condemn the undeserving. At the end of the novel, against all odds, Maria is ruined, Julia is embarrassed and young Susan Price is elevated, in what Jane Nardin calls Austen's "novel in praise of hardship, work, and renunciation" (108). Susan, whom Fanny is at first tempted to consider in the same slovenly, unworthy light as the rest of her family, later distinguishes herself by a powerful desire to do right, which the novel treats as a virtue in itself. Without any real hope of gaining social capital from improving her manners, Susan wishes to improve them seemingly on principle. She tries "to be useful, where [Fanny] could only have gone away and cried," and this and other promising signs of inner virtue draw Fanny's notice (*MP* 367). In Austen's novels, for a woman, a solid good character determined to improve itself is a security in itself. Susan is, at last, "established at Mansfield, with every appearance of equal permanency" (*MP* 438). Thus do the

circumstances of female characters in *Mansfield Park* adjust themselves to the inward character of each, as demonstrated by their manners. As these women experience improvements or deterioration in their character, their social destinies are accordingly adjusted. Jane Austen demonstrates in her novels a great faith in the invisible hand of this economy. As will be seen, Thackeray's faith in the virtue of the social economy is lower, though the importance he places on the virtue and manners of the individual is equally pronounced.

Chapter 2:
The Speculative Bubble of *Vanity Fair*

> *Implicit in this metaphor [of the looking glass] are certain assumptions about the world that Thackeray finds increasingly difficult to believe in—first, that there is a just relationship between one's actions and the consequences reaped from them and, second, that one may gain a certain wisdom in this world, if only the knowledge that the way one is treated by the world depends largely upon the self one presents to it.*
> Robert Lougy, "Vision and Satire: The Warped Looking Glass in *Vanity Fair*."

> *Who was the blundering idiot who said that "fine words butter no parsnips"? Half the parsnips of society are served and rendered palatable with no other sauce.*
> *Vanity Fair,* chapter 62

The Victorian Perspective and the Speculative Bubble

William Makepeace Thackeray set *Vanity Fair* in the early years of the 19th century, but importantly, he wrote from a later historical context. Thackeray was a Victorian, and this may be just one reason (besides biographical and educational differences between the two authors) why he and Jane Austen reveal such dramatic differences in their attitudes toward society. Thackeray wrote during a time when speculation and bubbles which that activity can create had produced catastrophic results in the British economy. "The great financial crisis of 1847," says Milton Briggs in *An Economic History of England,* "was largely a result" of "wild speculation and feverish progress, culminating in the railway mania of 1840-1850" (Briggs 155). The speculative bubble was not a new economic phenomenon by any means; the late 18th and early 19th century had known many such bubbles to inflate and burst as the British empire expanded.[12] But the railway mania which triggered the crisis in 1847 would have loomed large on the

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[12] From McCartney et al: "Investment manias were one of the most striking features of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century British economy. The first was the South Sea Bubble of 1719-1720, the second was the canal mania of 1791-1794, when more than 40 new inland waterways were authorized, but it was the anticipated returns of the new railway companies that provoked most excitement, leading to successive manias in 1824-1825, 1835-1837 and 1845-1847" ("The Railway Mania of 1845-1847" 21).

economic landscape while Thackeray was writing; we remember that *Vanity Fair* was first published in 1848.

When investors speculate that the price or value of a certain commodity will rise, they abandon the steadier principles of economics in a short-term effort to enrich themselves. One does not engage in speculation because one thinks it will be good for the economy as a whole, in the long term; rather, one speculates to gain an advantage for one's own economic position. Such is Becky, Thackeray's shrewd, speculating heroine, who takes advantage of the temporarily inflated value assigned to charm, fashion, and engaging manners in the context of Vanity Fair. She has no investment in the more stable level of Civilized Society; she cannot trust it to reward her. If she is to make gains, she must make them quickly and take advantage of any favorable economic development she notices. Speculative bubbles not only hurt those investors who do not sell in time to avoid the collapse; there can be more general disasters as well. There can be crises, as in the Crisis of 1847, and banks can fail in the collapse of a speculative bubble. Socially, too, a character's conservative investments in virtue can be of no avail because of the impact of Vanity Fair on Civilized Society. A Lady Jane can find herself on inferior standing among courtiers to a Becky Crawley merely because of the exaggerated appreciation given to Becky's choice of dress. An Amelia Sedley can lose social standing because of years of steadfast devotion to her husband (and his memory) and child. Thackeray must have watched both social and economic bubbles with both amusement and concern, for his tone in documenting *Vanity Fair* contain both emotions. *Vanity Fair* presents a manners economy which still recognizes virtue as valuable, and in which characters still invest in that currency. But the distinguishing feature of this context, and the occasion for the writing of the novel, is the danger presented by speculative bubbles, in which certain commodities are, for a time, over-valued by investors.

Thackeray might advise that his female characters be willing to diversify their investments, so as to take advantage of temporary bubbles without being utterly ruined when they inevitably burst. As we shall see from our analysis of the novel, the notion of temporary small economies which functioned like bubbles on the surface of the main economy is pervasive in Thackeray's sardonic depiction of "Vanity Fair."

Vanity Fair: Social Agency in a Bubble Economy

In order to trace the use of manners as capital for women in *Vanity Fair*, we must first define the social economy in the novel, especially as it differs from that of *Mansfield Park*. Jane Austen's social market is a trustworthy invisible hand. Society will, in time, reward the virtuous and punish the vicious. Those with manners but with no virtue will eventually betray themselves, and the machinations of a basically just society produce good outcomes for those whose good manners point to this developed inward virtue. Not so in *Vanity Fair*. William Thackeray portrays layers of social reality in this novel, for a bubble has emerged in the social economy. Within this bubble, currencies such as charm, fashion and social strategy have in inflated value, and many scramble to take advantage of the bubble while it exists. There is still a layer of society present in the novel which rewards those who adhere to tradition, honor, reverence and family, and which can be understood as Civilized Society. But the bubble, the layer which rewards individuals for sparkling charm, fine clothes, a lofty title, or appearances alongside social elites, is the layer Thackeray dubs "Vanity Fair." In this layer's ability to reward virtue and punish vice, Thackeray has no confidence.

Becky Sharp, who in this "novel without a hero" must stand as an instructive protagonist, knows instinctively how to make use of the superficial layer of society, but her lack of inward virtue gives her no foundation in the ground layer social economy. Still, despite her precipitous

fall from grace, degradation and misery do not have quite the last word on Becky's life. Her fate at the close of the novel is so indeterminate that the reader cannot look only to individual characters for insight upon the use of manners in these economies. The novel exists, therefore, not to defame the Becky Sharps (or to praise the Amelia Sedleys, for that matter) but to expose that superficial layer of society Thackeray calls "Vanity Fair" for the corrupt, inflationary and ultimately temporary economy that it is.

An ideal woman, whose adept manners are a reflection of inward virtue and wisdom, does not seem to exist in Vanity Fair. If any can be said who have both virtue and skillful manners, it might be Lady Jane Sheepshanks, but the reader cannot be certain of her real abilities as she never experiences any loss or changes of fortune in the novel. Were Thackeray to present a successful, virtuous heroine, she would be one whose dexterous, intelligent manners are the result of a virtuous and wise character. Instead of an ideal, readers are presented with two paired opposites in Amelia and Becky, each with one half of the necessary equation for socio-economic growth. Amelia has all of the virtue, but none of the intelligent, worldly-wise skill in her manners. Becky possesses every instinct for skillful social manners, often called "charm," but is often revealed to be an utter pauper as to virtue. To succeed in the England which Thackeray presents, one must possess the outward and the inward goods, both the ready banknote check of skillful manners, and the abundant wealth of inward virtue.

This sense of more than one society co-existing can be seen, as Robert E. Lougy points out, in Thackeray's illustration on the title page of the book. This illustration features a serious-faced fool in motley gazing into a mirror, while out the window and in the background can be seen a dignified gothic cathedral and smaller tidy buildings, and about the image Lougy observes, "These two worlds are divided…The sense of two separate worlds also characterizes

the novel itself, with the pastoral or private vision in the background, set off against the predominant world of façade, loneliness, and alienation" (Lougy 256). The game being played in Vanity Fair can bring literal wealth and social mobility opportunities, but it is also dangerous to one's virtue to play the game for very long, just as it is dangerous to invest too much wealth in the stock market. Vanity Fair is a thrilling social casino, and just as risky as a literal version. Vanity Fair is, however, a social reality; in order to navigate the social layers successfully and to make the best use of that wealth of virtue, it is sometimes necessary to be a woman of the world as well as a lady of virtue. The 1836 *Laws of Etiquette* is, generally, a conduct book, focusing on outward behaviors more than inward character. However, the author does distinguish between the person who is a mere "man of fashion" and the person who deserves the title of "gentleman." He explains,

> "We must here stop to point out an error which is often committed both in practice and opinion, and which consists in confounding together the gentleman and the man of fashion. No two characters can be more distinct than these. Good sense and self-respect are the foundations of the one — notoriety and influence the objects of the other. Men of fashion are to be seen everywhere: a pure and mere gentleman is the rarest thing alive." (*Laws of Etiquette* 22)

To be a pure gentleman would be the superior aspiration, of course. However, in order for a person to be recognized as a gentleman among gentleman, he must learn to make use of his abilities in the fashionable world. It is notable that the author considers "good sense" to be essential to the identity of a gentleman; clearly, Mr. Thackeray also considers good sense to be indispensable in a lady, and would most admire a lady with both inward virtue and the outward charms to make that virtue truly useful. It is not enough for a person to possess wealth; one must also be adept at spending it appropriately and with effective generosity.

Miss Amelia Sedley possesses that wealth of virtue in large quantities. When Amelia leaves Miss Pinkerton's Academy for Young Ladies, she has no need of social mobility

opportunities. She is the only daughter of an affluent family, who leaves school in possession of the coveted "dixonary" and letter from Miss Pinkerton detailing the accomplishments and graces she has attained at school, and set up, it would seem, for a charmed life. She has had few enough in the way of trials and challenges at school; her timid nature (belonging as it does to a daughter of wealthy parents) had inspired Miss Pinkerton to give "all masters and teachers particular orders to treat Miss Sedley with the utmost gentleness, as harsh treatment was injurious to her" (*VF* 11). Amelia should have few exertions to make to maintain her place in society at the opening of the novel. She does, it is true, at times display naiveté and a lack of good worldly sense. George Osborne, after cutting the aspirational Miss Sharp rather coldly, admonishes his "dearest Amelia," saying, "you are too good—too kind. You don't know the world. I do. And your little friend Miss Sharp must learn her station" (*VF* 69-70). As it happens, Miss Sharp does not need a better acquaintance with "the world" nearly as badly as Amelia does. Miss Sedley has taken very much to heart moral advice such as this from the author of *The Mirror of the Graces*, who wrote in 1811,

> Let religion and morality be the foundation of the female character. We may safely teach a well-educated girl, that virtue ought to wear an inviting aspect—that it is due to her excellence to decorate her comely apparel. But we must never cease to remember that it is VIRTUE we seek to adorn. (*The Mirror of the Graces* 6-7)

Amelia emphasizes the religion, the morality, the VIRTUE within herself, but as later events reveal, she has not developed that outward "inviting aspect" of outward ingratiating behavior. Amelia does not make use of the wealth of her virtue in such a way as to secure herself when her fortune changes. She is not prepared to take advantage, even in a small way, of the opportunities available in Vanity Fair's bubble economy.

Amelia's first crisis occurs after the loss of her father's fortune. She retains possession of her accomplishments, her virtue, and her reputation for innocence, and if she only possessed the

"knowledge of the human heart" which Mrs. Pebble advises should be a young lady's chief aim (*Rudiments of Taste* 11). Amelia might have recognized that she possessed one other thing of great value: the heart of Captain Dobbin.[13] She does not possess sense and spirit enough to realize that George Osborne's heart is not, and never has been, truly in her possession, and to withdraw her own and dispose of it more advantageously; as Thackeray explains, "Given once, the pure bashful maiden was too modest, too tender, too trustful, too weak, too much woman to recall it" (*VF* 196). Amelia makes little effort to charm her betrothed Captain Osborne back to her side when he is distracted. The submissive letter which her father orders her to write, releasing George from the engagement, she writes, with no artful attempts to retain him. It is only by the offices of her real admirer, Captain Dobbin, that George is persuaded to marry Amelia after all, and raise her from her the ignominy of poverty. In short, Amelia had virtue enough "in the bank" but was unable to apply herself to winning manners and knowledge of the world to secure happiness for herself. Though the foundation of Civilized Society requires that women possess virtue, and she would be foolish to gamble her virtue away entirely, one is also wise to take advantage of a speculative bubble. It is this sort of worldly wisdom that Amelia lacks, utterly.

When George is disinherited and receives the news of it, Amelia faces her second crisis. Far from recognizing the seriousness of their situation, Amelia's concern is primarily for the

[13] This realization is one at which Amelia's friend Becky would have had no difficulty arriving, in her place. We may perhaps lay some (though not all) of the blame for Amelia's deficiencies in knowledge of humanity and "the world" upon her having been sheltered over-much at home and at Miss Pinkerton's school. Lord Chesterfield remarks upon the difficulty of arriving at a knowledge of the world when one has been too little exposed to it in his *Principles of Politeness, and of Knowing the World*. He writes, "I will allow that one bred up in a cloister or college, may reason well on the structure of the human mind; he may investigate the nature of man, and give a tolerable account of his head, his heart, his passions, and his sentiments: But at the same time he may know nothing of him; he has not lived with him… He must be ignorant of the various prejudices, propensities and antipathies, that always bias him, and frequently determine him. His knowledge is acquired only from theory, which differs widely from practice…whereas a man of the world, one who collects his knowledge from his own experience and observation, is seldom wrong; he is well acquainted with the operations of the human mind" (45-46).

ruffled feelings of her new husband. Inside, she is all sentiment: “The idea of sharing poverty and privation in company with the beloved object is, as we have before said, far from being disagreeable to a warm-hearted woman. The notion was actually pleasant to little Amelia.” George receives another opportunity to smirk at Amelia’s naiveté; she thinks two thousand pounds “an immense deal of money.” Far from trying to convince George to write to his family, far from trying to ingratiate herself to any members of the family to secure an ally, Amelia freezes her manners account, so to speak, and will make no withdrawals. In the very same chapter, in direct contrast to this episode, Becky dictates a letter which Rawdon writes to his estranged (and wealthy) Aunt Crawley, which will later be reflected upon. (*VF* 280-281)

Amelia’s deficiency is not in virtue, nor in the knowledge of polite behavior. No, her problem is in her unwillingness to make what might seem to her to be a vulgar, designing use of her abilities. She wants to be taken “on credit,” in a society which rejoices to reward small investments of charm and pleasing manners. She is one of those women whom John Gregory describes as being

> …gentle, modest, blessed with sense, taste, delicacy, and every milder feminine virtue of the heart, but of such weak spirits, bashful and timid: I see such women sinking into obscurity and insignificance, and gradually losing every elegant accomplishment; for this evident reason, that they are not united to a partner who has sense, and worth, and taste enough to know their value… who, by his affection and tenderness, might make such a woman happy in exerting every talent, and accomplishing herself in every elegant art that could contribute to his amusement. (Gregory 47)

Amelia has the materials for social success in abundance, but either from pride or from general weakness of intellect, she does not “exert her talent.” The speculative bubble of Vanity Fair does not ruin her, but it does impoverish her as she refuses to speculate even on a small scale.

True to Gregory’s prediction, for quite a long time Amelia’s life is one which sinks “into obscurity and insignificance.” Upon the death of George, the third crisis in Amelia’s life, Amelia

continues to play the martyr; her object of single-minded concern has only shifted, from George, to his infant namesake. She does not trouble to write to George's family and makes no effort to arrange a meeting. When Old Osborne spies her from afar, she "did not know who had passed" (*VF* 413). Amelia not only does not see old Mr. Osborne in the street, she hardly notices when William Dobbin, her faithful assistant, leaves her in despair: "She was looking at her child, who was laughing in his sleep" (*VF* 417). Amelia sees no reason to "exert her talent" upon her personal appearance, either. Her widow's cap of chapter 33 is standard and decorous, but even years later, after rules governing the severe mourning garb would be relaxed for her, Amelia still gives no thought to a charming appearance. According to Lou Taylor's *Mourning Dress*, "Widows… mourned their husbands for two and a half years" (136). But even when Georgy is old enough to be learning to read, Thackeray notes that, "the thrifty widow… always wore a black gown and a straw bonnet with a black ribbon" (*VF* 454). Although Taylor later notes that "Many widows never came out of half-mourning" (146), mourning dress would certainly be off-putting for any potential suitors Amelia might receive. Amelia's well-groomed appearance, after her prescribed mourning period had ended, could have been a source of wealth for her; as the author of *Laws of Etiquette* quips, "Numbers have owed their elevation to their attention to the toilet. Place, fortune, marriage have all been lost by neglecting it" (52-53) To prolong widowhood, in Amelia's case, was to prolong poverty. It would be in her interest to find a way to re-marry respectably, but Amelia is not particularly skilled at looking out for her own interest.

The task of looking out for Amelia always falls to the reliable Captain Dobbin. It is to him that Amelia owes her eventual reconciliation to George's father and her subsequent reversal of fortunes when he includes her in his will. Amelia has the good fortune to have an intermediary, who will sing her praises and charm the world for her. It is a hard truth that the

hypocrisy of Vanity Fair does not see value in one who is good but not charming; it is this hypocrisy that Thackeray highlights when he observes, drily, that upon her sudden elevation in fortune, "It was edifying to remark how Mrs. George Osborne rose in the estimation of the people forming her circle of acquaintance" (*VF* 717). He goes on to highlight her rise in cynical terms; from a jewel in the rough, Amelia has become a jewel, set and polished. How much earlier Amelia could have come into this good fortune had she made strategic use of charming manners, can only be guessed. But it is surely significant that, when her last chance at Dobbin's hand (and income) was nearly lost, it was Becky who sat her down and convinced her of Dobbin's worth. Becky echoes George's sentiments, but unlike George, chivalry does not forbid Becky from giving Amelia her full opinion: "You are no more fit to live in the world than a baby in arms. You must marry, or you and your precious boy will go to ruin" (*VF* 801). Significantly, Becky's advice involves a social act: "Now let us get pen and ink and write to him to come this minute" (*VF* 802). It does not turn out to be too late for Amelia to gain William Dobbin's hand, but it is decidedly too late for her to have his wholehearted devotion as before: "Had she been worthy of the love I gave her," Dobbin muses to himself as he prepares to return to military service, "she would have returned it long ago" (*VF* 797). Amelia, as refined and virtuous as she is, is too passive to have been so bold as to return love, even when it is in her own and her son's interest. Her wealth of virtue is of no practical use to her.

Listening at the door during William Dobbin's dramatic farewell speech to Amelia is her opposite, Becky. The sensible Mrs. Rawdon Crawley was able, interestingly, to divine Dobbin's worth: "If I could have had such a husband as that--a man with a heart and brains too! I would not have minded his large feet" (*VF* 788). Becky recognizes that time is of the essence in that last crisis of Amelia's life, and she raced off immediately to write him a letter. That the letter proves

ineffectual does not diminish Becky's resourcefulness or social wisdom. In making her case to Amelia that her extended devotion to George Osborne's memory has, in fact, been a bad investment, Becky produces her evidence: George's letter: "It was that which George had put into her bouquet and given to Becky on the night of the Duchess of Richmond's ball. It was as she said: the foolish young man had asked her to fly" (*VF* 801). Becky did not accept George Osborne's offer that day, but she did retain the letter, knowing that it might serve some strategic use. To take a strictly honorable approach, as Amelia might have done, one could say that she should have destroyed this evidence of dishonor. But as always, Becky can never bring herself to be purely virtuous when doing so would be impractical. In this case, the real offender against virtue and etiquette alike is George himself. The "gentleman" who wrote *The Laws of Etiquette* cautions the letter-writer to be discreet:

> In letters of every description, even those to the most intimate and reliable friends, there is need of the upmost caution in expressing sentiments and opinions. In spite of promises and injunctions, no man ever burns a letter… A short lapse of time, and a much smaller matter than a thunderstorm, will change your friends as readily as your cream; and if their affections do not change, your opinions may, and the evidence of the change may be an inconvenient document. (95-96)

Had George survived, this letter would have proved an inconvenient document indeed, but in Becky's hands, retaining it proved most convenient and she did not hesitate to use it. Sharp, later Mrs. Rawdon Crawley, makes free and cunning use of whatever is available to her, including her charming manners. Her expenditures are always timely, and always strategic, but unfortunately for her, they at last exceed her wealth.

Becky, the poor orphan, charity student and later indentured employee of Miss Pinkerton's academy, had not, according to Thackeray, "been much of a dissembler, until now her loneliness taught her to feign" (*VF* 20). Because of her status and lack of family connections she has not been ever granted the luxury to do other than make dexterous use of her social skills to secure

her well-being. The upbringing Rebecca receives, made to represent her father to bankers and debt collectors, and rewarded as she was in childhood for her wit and ability to entertain, these are not the most promising conditions in which nourish virtue. Thackeray reports that, at sixteen, Becky's "sense of ridicule was much stronger than her gratitude," evidence of a desperately low balance of inward virtue (*VF* 19). What Becky has, in contrast to Amelia, is the ability to appear virtuous, by means of generous and timely deposits of charming behavior. Becky is a splendid actress, and as Thackeray reinforces, "we have written to no purpose if [our readers] have not discovered that she was a very clever woman" (*VF* 104). Becky allows her charm to drop sufficiently in front of Miss Pinkerton so that she can achieve her goal of being sent away from the school at last. She has made use of her wit with her father's friends, and her skills at school; Becky's visit to Amelia represents the first high stakes test of her charming manners.

The ability to custom mold one's manners to the audience and circumstance, far from being universally regarded as hypocrisy, is recommended by authorities on politeness. In *Principles of Politeness*, Lord Chesterfield prescribes:

> Wherever then you are, search into the characters of men; find out, if possible, their foibles, their governing passion, or their particular merit; take them on their weak side, and you will generally succeed; their prevailing vanity you may readily discover, by observing their favorite topic of conversation; for every one talks most of what he would be thought most to excel in. (44)

This strategic application of manners is Becky's great gift. Becky is a young woman with nothing to lose and everything to gain from a speculative bubble. She takes the measure of Jos Sedley immediately. She sees his shyness, his unattractive girth and yet vain attention to showy dress, and his blundering foolishness, and recognizes that he must not be frightened off. She begins by complimenting his features girlishly to Amelia, and the narrator boasts of Becky, "The first move showed considerable skill" (*VF* 29). She knows this compliment will make its way to

Joseph, but she also knows that by communicating it to Amelia, it will most likely get to Joseph by way of his mother. The narrator's observations then upon the effectiveness of complimenting children to their mothers is reminiscent of the *Laws of Etiquette*'s similar advice: "Talk to a mother about her children. Women are never tired of hearing of themselves and their children" (114). Next, Becky advances her campaign. Recognizing his points of weakness and his points of vanity, she says to herself, "I must be very quiet… and very much interested about India" (*VF* 30). The virginal white dress, the apparent naiveté, and the carefully applied flattery proved marvelously effective, and in a span only a few days Becky has Jos Sedley, hitherto a stranger, on the point of proposing, when her plans are ruined by—well in part, by Vanity Fair. The atmosphere of Vauxhall ("everybody had rack punch at Vauxhall") itself, working upon the unsophisticated Jos Sedley, causes him to wreck all of Becky's progress in a dramatic display of drunkenness, and to drive in the death knell in a hangover soaked letter (*VF* 64). That nothing Becky said or did was able to embarrass Jos like his own foolishness was, however, a mark of her very great skill.

Becky's later career is filled with deft social moves. She suits her strategy, as Chesterfield advises, to the unique foibles of each individual she encounters. As she settles at Queen's Crawley as governess, Becky individualizes her charm offensive for each person there. Her flattery of Sir Pitt, pretending as she does to require his help with French, and her studied admiration for Pitt Crawley's moralizing are quite brilliant. Becky flatters, it is true, but she does so in a subtle, situational manner that usually gains her object. She follows Lord Chesterfield's instruction admirably: "…A man of the world," explains Chesterfield, "one who has made life his study, knows the power of flattery… he knows how to apply it; he watches the opportunity and does it indirectly, by inference, comparison, and hint" (*Principles of Politeness* 43). Becky

Sharp misses no opportunity, because she cannot afford to do so. In this patriarchal world, her best chance at advancement and comfort in life is to marry, and as well as she can manage. Becky seems to think it best to make her move and secure a husband as quickly as possible; perhaps to avoid the details of her past catching up with her and ruining her prospects, as later happens when Mrs. Bute becomes curious about her new niece's connections. Becky successfully charms and secretly marries Rawdon Crawley, notably not the eldest son but the one most favored by his wealthy aunt.[14] However, her charms prove doubly effective, for Sir Pitt himself proposes marriage to the pretty little governess.[15]

From that time on, Becky maximizes every opportunity to ingratiate herself with those who might be useful to her ambitions. When his marriage to Becky cause Rawden to be cast off by his wealthy aunt, Becky applies every diplomatic strategy available to the wife of the offender. In an amusing contrast to the same chapter's earlier scene in which Amelia submits to poverty with George with trusting meekness, Becky rallies: "You will now, if you please, my dear, sit down at the writing-table and pen me a pretty little letter to Miss Crawley," she directs her husband and if Miss Crawley recognizes that Rebecca is the real author of Rawdon's conciliatory letter, it at least gains him an audience (*VF* 288). Rawden, alas, does not have the pluck to make what would have been a very polite, and probably very profitable, visit to his aunt while she was in the humor to receive him. Rawdon generally is most successful when he listens

[14] This may not have been so wisely done. John Gregory advises his daughters, "Do not marry a fool; he is the most intractable of all animals; he is led by his passions and caprices, and is incapable of hearing the voice of reason. It may probably too hurt your vanity to have a husband for whom you have a reason to blush and tremble every time they open their lips in company. But the worst circumstance that attends a fool is his constant jealousy of his wife being thought to govern him" (Gregory 53-54). Becky underestimates the jealousy of her fool husband, and the consequences of this oversight are severe.

[15] An interesting detail is that this proposal scene contains, for Becky, "some of the most genuine tears that ever fell from her eyes" (*VF* 164). The reader is left to guess the meaning of these tears, but a possible interpretation is that Becky regrets having married Rawdon so hastily, now that a baronet is offering her his hand.

to his wife. On his own, he has no idea how to ingratiate himself, and is foolish enough to underestimate the importance of securing allies among the servants, and as a result he is "only obeyed with sulky acquiescence; when his disgrace came, there was nobody to help him" (*VF* 209). But Rebecca is often able to be of service to her husband in a conduct advisory capacity. Upon the death of his father, for example, Pitt Crawley follows the custom explained in *The Laws of Etiquette*:

> When any member of a family is dead, it is customary to send intelligence of the misfortune to all who have been connected with the deceased in relations of business or friendship. The letters which are sent contain a special invitation to assist at the funeral. An invitation of this sort should never be refused, though, of course, you do not send a reply, for no other reason that I know of, excepting the impossibility of framing any formula of accept-ance. (182)

Becky is well aware that the request this letter extends must be accepted. She insists despite Rawdon's protestations that she and Rawdon *will* attend Sir Pitt, though admittedly, not merely because politeness requires it, but because "I mean that your brother should give you a seat in Parliament, you silly old creature" (*VF* 476). More and more as her saga continues, she reveals the ruthlessness of her ambition, and her meagre supply of virtue cannot keep pace with her charm expenditures. Becky may know better than to literally gamble with Rawdon and the officers in order to live on nothing a year, but her whole life can be seen as a series of gambles, some of which are to her profit, and some to her loss.

Becky continues to steer their family ship into greatness, but her ambition begins to out-strip her abilities. She courts the favor of the Steyne family, and with great success for a long time. Her playing religious, nostalgic music for Lady Steyne was one of her more brilliant strategies, and successfully protected her from that Lady's wrath and jealousy. But the company of some of the most shining heroes of Vanity Fair seems to be Becky's rack punch, for her ambition in this portion makes her uncharacteristically clumsy. Becky finds herself among not only nobility but

actual royalty in chapter 48, and her confident assumption of the diamond-wearing courtier actually made Lady Jane, her sister-in-law, laugh. The narrator explains that "to be thought, a respectable woman was Becky's aim in life, and she got up the genteel with amazing assiduity, readiness, and success. We have said, there were times when she believed herself to be a fine lady and **forgot that there was no money in the chest at home**" (*VF* 555, emphasis mine). This money which runs out has a metaphorical equivalent in Becky's almost total absence of virtue. When Becky does not bail Rawdon from jail immediately, but instead continues her campaign into Lord Steyne's good graces, the reader sees that her judgment has been corrupted by Vanity Fair. She has attempted a charm investment which reveals the empty state of her character's account. It is no accident that the night in which Becky's social credit is destroyed by her implied affair and lack of wifely virtue, is also the night which marks Becky's financial ruin. "All her lies and schemes," Becky muses in chapter 53, "all her selfishness and her wiles, all her wit and genius had come to this bankruptcy" (*VF* 625). Becky's skill had won her relative security and respectability, at least by association, but Vanity Fair had taught her not to be content. The world of Vanity Fair, as Thackeray portrays it, urges all who visit to reject the teachings of virtue, such as the admonition in *The Mirror of the Graces* that "ambition condemns its wretched votary to forego the sweets of content and present ease, for the uneasy dreams of rank and power" (9). That foundation of Civilized Society, which judges individuals by their virtue, tumbled Becky from the heights in a great seismic lurch. The bubble finally burst.

Becky's fate, however, is rather more ambiguous than the fate of unvirtuous women in Jane Austen. True, she has been cast out of decent English society, but Becky continues to have agency in her life after her rupture from her husband. She is not unhappy, even after having left the "life of hum-drum virtue," for "Becky loved society and, indeed, could no more exist without

it than an opium-eater without his dram, and she was happy enough at the period of her boarding-house life" (*VF* 755). Becky is even given a second chance at respectability, as she is able to re-enter Amelia's good graces with her charms and counterfeits. Upon the closing of the novel, though estranged from her husband, child and respectable English society, Becky's charms mean that she never wants for bed, board, and entertainment; "she goes to church, and never without a footman" (*VF* 808). As for Amelia, she is married and secure, but having rebuffed her faithful Dobbin for so long, she must sigh at times and wonder if he does not love his daughter better than he loves Amelia herself (*VF* 809). This rather ambivalent ending for his central female duo, who, as Kathleen Rogers has it, "Thackeray balances one…against another," prevent the reader from seeing the novel as a clear, cautionary moral tale (258). A woman must be both skilled and virtuous to survive in this layered social world. Amelia has found a foundation to support her, though seems incapable of bettering her condition alone, and Becky? She floats along upon the surface of Vanity Fair, subject to occasional tectonic shifts from the moral foundation. In this way her character is a living argument for Thackeray's critique of Vanity Fair as a bubble which could permanently advantage undeserving agents. As Peter Capuano explains in his book, *Changing Hands*, "the socially ambitious Becky offer[s] a fictional realization of what many members of the genteel class feared most: those who merely *acted* like they belonged to proper society" (92) Becky's dexterous maneuvering does grant her a measure of long-term stability, and the possibility of a renewed "career" in the future.

The condemnation in the novel, then, is not for any particular characters (who, we are reminded upon its conclusion, are merely puppets). *Vanity Fair* is an exposé, rather, of a duplicitous, corrupt and inflationary social economy. Vanity Fair, in contrast to the generally virtuous society which Austen presents (and which is still present in this novel among such as

Lady Jane) does not reward prudent investing, integrity, and good social credit. It promises cheap social loans, it opens up endless line of credit and is completely unaffected by the ruin of the unwary. Thackeray gives practical, if sarcastic advice for women attempting to be successful in this economy: "never have any feelings which may make you uncomfortable," he warns, "or make any promises which you cannot at any required moment command and withdraw. That is the way to get on, and be respected, and have a virtuous character in Vanity Fair" (*VF* 201). But his best and most sincere advice for any virtuous character in Vanity Fair is escape, such as that the narrator hopes for Miss Crawley: "Let us hope that Lady Jane supported her kindly, and led her with gentle hand out of the busy struggle of Vanity Fair" (*VF* 405).[16] Outside, or perhaps beneath the insubstantial atmosphere of Vanity Fair, a woman's virtue could translate more directly into wealth. But Vanity Fair has a way of persisting and of permeating even to more stable layers of society, so it is perhaps best to be prepared to make practical use of one's virtue in the form of charming, polite, and consistent "politeness, and knowing the world."[17]

[16] That one seems to escape fully only in death, however, does not leave the reader with much sense of optimism on this point.

[17] From Lord Chesterfield's title, *Principles of Politeness and of Knowing the World*

Chapter 3: *The House of Mirth*: Off The Gold Standard

> *There might have been an excuse, or some semblance of a cause, for our borrowing our etiquette from England while our own habits were unfounded. There is certainly none now. American ways are running in well-oiled grooves.*
> (*Etiquette for Americans* 5)

> *Economic histories undoubtedly offer better descriptions of the triumph of finance capital in the early years of this century. But Wharton's novel is without peer when it comes to defining the* culture *of capitalism, especially insofar as that culture was a rigidly gendered phenomenon.*
> (Lillian S. Robinson, "The Traffic in Women: A Cultural Critique of *The House of Mirth*")

Economic Context: Anxiety over Value

The turn of the twentieth century in America was certainly a time of social upheaval, but it was also a period of great economic anxiety. Much of this anxiety related to a question of currency and of value, of gold standard versus free silver. Those who favored "free silver" favored an increase in the official value of silver compared to gold, as they feared the scarcity of currency which they felt would result from remaining on the gold standard. In the election of 1896, the two major parties focused many of their arguments around the question of whether or not to remain on the gold standard. The Democrats, and their nominee, William Jennings Bryan, supported bimetallism; the Republicans (and William McKinley, their nominee) supported remaining on the gold standard. This economic debate was a deeply emotional one for many involved. The question of currency touched upon issues of identity, class, the value of work, and participants' sense of what was natural or unnatural.

For Democrats, the appeal of free silver was an appeal to the common man; to remain on the gold standard would be to allow the continued tyranny of the wealthy over the ability of the

working class to flourish.[18] The indictment of the gold standard position comes from a sense of loyalty to the working classes, and from a sense of silver as an American currency, and not one which the British controlled. In contrast, the Republican argument is framed in David Jayne Hill's *A Primer of Finance: The Honest Dollar the Basis for Prosperity* as less an issue of class loyalty and more of education. Hill agrees that the issue of currency is "on the front line of battle" for the 1896 election, but asserts that the American people need to be educated in order to understand what is at stake.[19] The free-silverites, according to Hill, favor the inflation of the value of silver in order that those in debt might have an easier time re-paying their debts (21). But for the government to thus artificially inflate the value of silver compared to gold would be to challenge the very nature of value. Do we value a thing because it is rare, Republicans seem to challenge voters, or do we value it because an authority determines its worth?

This question of differing methods of valuing currency was part of the background of political life in America at the turn of the century. Socially, too, the question of what retained its value, in a manners economy which had undergone great change with the rise of a new wealthy

[18] It was also a question of asserting a distinct American identity in the world marketplace. Ignatius Donnelly's 1896 book, *The Bryan Campaign for the American People's Money*, is a many-faceted argument both for the Democratic platform and for William Jennings Bryan as a presidential candidate. After an introduction to Jennings Bryan as a man and a politician, Donnelly begins to address the most important issues on the party's platform, while "[r]ecognizing that the money question is paramount to all others at this time" (Donnelly vi). Much of the book is devoted to the issue. To Donnelly, "gold monometallism is a British policy," which is "not only un-American, but anti-American" (vi). He also frames the conflict as a kind of class warfare, and has his fictional farmer character defend the free silver position to a skeptic in these terms: "You want scarce money; [Free-Silverites] want abundant money. They want everybody out of debt; you want all those who have any assets in a condition that they will be forced to borrow from you, at a high rate of interest. They want universal prosperity; you want general embarrassment. They want to rise to a higher level of civilization; you are hanging on to their legs to pull them down. They desire to work for themselves; you want them to work for you, that you may live in idleness. They are producing, you are consuming; they are created, you are swallowing" (Donnelly 141).

[19] "But it is evident that adequate comprehension of the momentous issues involved in the inflation of the national currency, and especially in a sudden change of the standard of value, is not to be acquired without serious and patient investigation on the part of every citizen" (Hill 2). Hill's approach is methodical, historical, and also appeals to an ideology based in his sense of what is natural to humanity. In explaining the difference between "real money" and "representative money," Hill asserts, "Human nature the world over has settled upon the precious metals, gold and silver, as commodities fitted to constitute real money. If there is a doubt as to which of these two is to be preferred to the other, it must be settled by asking the question, Which is most *desired*?" (Hill 2-3).

entrepreneur class, was a pertinent one. Wharton participated in the conversation about the nature of humankind and of the social changes and their implications. In *The Novel of Manners in America,* James Tuttleton presents this theme in his chapter on Edith Wharton: "In 'The Great American Novel,' Mrs. Wharton asked whether *human* nature could exist if denuded of 'the web of custom, manners, culture it has elaborately spun upon itself?'…If you strip away the web of custom and manners, she argued, the only thing left is 'that hollow unreality, "Man" ' " (124). Edith Wharton speculated about this question in her fiction, as well. *The House of Mirth* can be viewed as an attempt to hold up a mirror to New York society to ask the question, Is this what we are like? Is this what we have become? Are these the things which now have value?

Another critic who connects the economic questions of the turn of the 20th century to the period's literature is Walter Benn Michaels. His *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* begins with a question of how the work of producing literature is valued: "What kind of work is writing?" asks Benn Michaels, and his exploration of the question leads him to consider the atmosphere produced by the debate over the gold standard (3). He discusses the twin phenomena of "misers" and "spendthrifts" in literature like Frank Norris' *Vandover and the Brute*, and incorporates much of the political propaganda surrounding the currency debate into his exploration. Benn Michaels' language in recounting this literature gives an overall mood of anxiety in this period. For Norris' character Ignatius Donnelly, there is a "threat" in the issue; the "polemics of the nineties" are "motivated by… fear;" Norris' *McTeague* describes a "threat that the money will disappear;" *McTeague*'s ending is "staging the great fear of the silver men" (Benn Michaels 144, 147, 148, 150). This fear and sense of threat threaded between the political and the literary writings of the day, and the debate all centers around the question of value.[20]

[20] Benn Michaels' discussion of David A. Wells' *Robinson Crusoe's Money* uses language which, though economic, can certainly apply to Wharton's social questions: "The real point of *Robinson Crusoe's Money* is to show that

Those who defended adherence to the gold standard, by Benn Michaels' depiction, drew their arguments from a tradition which, they held, was rooted in nature itself. In a later chapter, Benn Michaels extends his application of the economic anxiety over value which he describes to *The House of Mirth* in great detail.[21]

Edith Wharton was no economist. Her interest in society had more to do with the social than with the overtly financial. And yet, the questions raised by the debate over the gold standard make their way into the central allegation of the novel, namely that one's social wealth no longer rests firmly upon one's character or virtue, and has rather shifted to rest more upon one's visible association with wealth. Personal virtue may well be the gold standard to which Wharton would adhere, while she depicts a society which had abandoned that standard, only to artificially inflate the value of other commodities, such as one's ability to publically consume, or one's possessions.

Wharton gives us a heroine who is a strong economic agent in her context, but who, in her desire to use currency no longer accepted in that context, demonstrates herself to be an economic anachronism. Arguably, the more Lily tries to make virtuous decisions, the faster she

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nothing ever acquires value, that no money can become good and true unless it is already good and true, and therefore that nature's money, like Robinson Crusoe's, must be made of gold" (150).

[21] That Walter Benn Michaels includes Edith Wharton in his examination of *The Logic of Naturalism* may or may not mean that he considers her a naturalistic writer (Benn Michaels also discusses Hawthorne's gothic "The House of Seven Gables" at length in chapter three, leading one to conclude that he does not limit his discussion to naturalist writers). But he sees her as very caught up in the literature depicting a "market society" (225). Benn Michaels sees a Lily Bart whose impulses "embody her desire to escape the market" and the tragedy of *The House of Mirth*, for him, is "her inability to do so" (227). Lily, in this assessment, wishes to be an independent speculator, who can take calculated risks and see them pay off. For Benn Michaels, Lily's failure in this social economy was rooted in her need to be a speculator and not a commercial investor (228). I contend that the social economy portrayed in *The House of Mirth* simply had no place for a woman operating independently of a man's legitimizing sponsorship. But both Benn Michaels' analysis and that in this essay see a conflict between the kind of economic agent Lily wished to be, and the changing economy within her society. Benn Michaels observes that in *The House of Mirth,* "making one's way on the social and financial markets of New York begins to look more like farming than gambling" (225). In order to farm, one must first have the raw materials; one must have land to farm it, just as in *The House of Mirth* one must have wealth to gain it. The metaphors differ, but Lily's conundrum is the same.

loses her social wealth. Her refusal to make use of Bertha Dorset's letters, for example, seals her doom with that set of people. Often when her competitive spirits are at the point of rallying her to offensive action against another, her powers are checked by a rising compassion and pity. When Bertha Dorset reveals her antagonistic posture toward Lily, Lily experiences "a sense of remembered treachery that was like the gleam of a knife in the dusk. But compassion, in a moment, got the better of her instinctive recoil. What was this outpouring of senseless bitterness but the tracked creatures's attempt to cloud the medium through which it was fleeing?" (*HoM* 162). When making out her final accounts, rather than paying Gus Trenor only a small sum to "pacify" him as Lily used to pacify her dress-maker, she repays the whole debt, thus bringing her accounts to zero (24). Selden observes in his eulogistic visit to her room that "the obligation [to Trenor] had been intolerable to her, that the first opportunity she had freed herself from it, though the act left her face to face with bare unmitigated poverty" (255). Nothing impoverishes one in this economy like adherence to principles of morality; as Wai Chee Dimock points out, "[w]hat is honorable from a moral point of view is plain foolishness within the context of the marketplace" (788). When her accounts are at zero, Lily can no longer hope to succeed in a society which requires a woman possess money in order for her to earn it. With her balance of social and literal wealth at zero, Lily's sense of bankruptcy leads to her fatal overdose; her attempts to make use of virtue avail her nothing.

Though women's wealth of virtue in other social economies did require a man's financial endorsement, there was, at least, a way for a woman of poor economic means to increase her own value on the market. She could reinforce and retain her virtue, and she could make pointed expenditures of charm and manners in order to draw attention to that virtue. But in the society in which Lily moves, which does not accept virtue as currency (and has devalued etiquette

considerably), women are increasingly without means to increase their own social (and material).[22]

Whether Edith Wharton literally shared this concern about free silver, or indeed whether her concern stretched to the interests of the working women, the Gerty Farishes of the world, is uncertain. But she did share the concern that women are particularly vulnerable to social and economic change. Simon Rosedale's social fortunes may rise and fall, but no one can take away from him the ability to earn. But a removal from the gold standard of virtue seriously threatened any independence a woman in an economy of manners might be said to possess. For many women, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman (as discussed in the coda), women's agency in these economies had become so weak that they called for abandoning the social economy altogether.

Etiquette Literature and *The House of Mirth*: Expensive Externalities as Capital

In the economy of *Mansfield Park,* Jane Austen presents an economy in which any woman who retains her virtue (and the manners which display that virtue) possesses capital, no matter her literal economic status. In *Vanity Fair*, William Makepeace Thackeray displays a bubble economy which has artificially inflated the value of charm, but which still has the firm ground of the old economy of virtue beneath it. Edith Wharton shows us another snapshot of a

[22] The plight of the working woman was of a concern for one editorial writer in 1896, who saw working women's independence as threatened by the advent of free silver. In an article which appears in the October 10, 1896 edition of the *Clinton Mirror*, the unnamed author expresses this concern: "While the value of the wages earned by everyone who works for a living will be greatly reduced by the free coinage of silver, the working women will be far worse off than the men. Their wages will not probably be reduced in a greater ratio than the wages of the men, but they will stand a poorer chance of securing an advance to meet the increased cost of living." ("Would Affect Women" 6) Speaking of working women, the author says, "They are an industrious, self-supporting class, many of them contributing to the family fund from their weekly earnings and having a just pride in their ability to aid others" (6). The author also recognizes the unique vulnerability of women to economic turmoil, when he observes, "as always, it is the weaker that must bear the greater share of the burden" (6).

distinct economy, half a century and an ocean removed from that of *Vanity Fair*'s. *The House of Mirth* depicts a social economy in which the gold standard of virtue has been abandoned. The currency accepted by the society which surrounds our heroine, Lily Bart, is a conspicuous display of the trappings of wealth. As we shall see, the anxiety over the debate over literal currency (adhering to the gold standard vs. bimetallism) formed a background to anxiety over social change and the sudden advance of newly rich families into society.

Of the three novels under consideration in this project, *The House of Mirth* might be the most explicitly economic in its descriptions of the social market. Many critics in the 20th century have remarked upon the economic overtones of this novel. Jennie Wahl's essay, "Edith Wharton as Economist" observes that "fundamental economic concepts of markets, gains from trade, opportunity costs associated with choices made, and cost- benefit calculations permeate Wharton's work" (9). All novels of manners involve economics, as the wealth status of one's would-be marriage match must factor into a protagonist's calculations. But Wharton's *The House of Mirth* abandons subtlety in its treatment of the economy of manners it portrays. Prominent among critics who analyze economic issues in this work is Wai Chee Dimock, who offers a strong Marxist critique of the "all-consuming system of exchange" within which Lily operates. As she considers the forces at work on Lily, and the language Wharton employs to describe them, Dimock wonders rhetorically: "The persistent talk of 'cost' and 'payment' in *The House of Mirth* raises the question of currency. How does one compute the 'cost' of an action, what constitutes a "debt," and in what form must 'payments' be made?" (Dimock 783). Dimmock's powerfully argued indictment against the brutality of capitalism in *The House of Mirth* has generated a great deal of critical response since its 1985 publication. In their consideration of the economics of *The House of Mirth,* some critics see Lily herself as a

commodity, such as Lois Tyson who describes Lily in "Beyond Morality" as a "commodity-fetish" who must sell herself on the market (8). Others grant her more agency as see her as selling services for social gain. Though for Wendy Dubow, "Lily learns at a very early age to think of herself as a commodity," Dubow sees her as "our heroine" who "controls every situation" (12, 11). Many have been the re-workings of the economic forces in of *The House of Mirth*, and with good reason. Wharton's language in her novel is brazenly economic because questions of class and wealth and value were at the forefront of the cultural conversation at the time.

The turn of the twentieth century in America brought seismic changes to society and convention. Innovations in technology were rapidly inserting themselves into peoples' daily lives, and changes such as the rise of women's suffrage movement threatened the foundations of social structures. This period also brought sudden wealth to a class of people who had not been used to possessing it. As the upper classes sneered at the vulgar nouveaux riches, these newly wealthy Americans had to scramble to learn the ways and manners associated with respectable and elegant wealth. It is perhaps because of this phenomenon that, as Esther Arnesty observes,

> Never in American history had there been so much printed preoccupation with etiquette as in the first decade of the 20th century. At least seventy-one etiquette books and twice that number of magazine articles were published between 1900 and 1910. Significantly, most etiquette books now avoided "Society" in their titles—perhaps for good reason. Society's reputation for vulgar spending and tasteless antics had gone from bad to shocking with millionaires staging dinner parties where guests in formal attire dined on horseback or drank toasts to a monkey as guest of honor. (275)

We see from this depiction that "society" in the minds of middle-class Americans had begun to include the nouveaux riche—or that enough of the old guard had begun to emulate the rising wealthy to erode the respect of the middle class for the elite.

In his satirical book, *Manners for the Metropolis,* Francis Crowninshield felt it necessary to address both "people who have been born and brought up in refined and well-bred families, and are, at the same time, desirous of entering fashionable society" (one notes that "well-bred" is not seen as synonymous with "fashionable" here) and "our newer millionaires and plutocrats" in the foreword (4-5). Etiquette books such as those satirized in Crowninshield's book were not intended for the consumption of the established upper classes; as Aresty explains, "Anyone who found it necessary to inquire about etiquette books did not belong in society" (276). These rapid changes in who was allowed to benefit from the trappings of society created some degree of anxiety in the established upper classes. Crowninshield's foreword begins with a reference to the long history of social custom (though his tone is considerably less reverent than that of Lord Chesterfield, for example): "From time immemorial," he begins, "the gregarious instinct has contributed greatly to the charm of all populated regions" (2). Though satirical in intention, *Manners for the Metropolis* begins by alluding to the very real perplexity caused by a rapidly changing world:

> It is worthy of remark that, during the past decade, both in America and in England, sudden and violent changes have somewhat ruffled the placid waters of polite society. These new conditions of life have naturally necessitated new methods of social procedure. The telephone, coeducation, wireless telegraphy, motor cars, millionaires, bridge whist, women's rights, Sherry's, cocktails, four-day liners, pianolas, steam heat, directoire gowns, dirigible balloons, and talking machines have all contributed to an astonishing social metamorphosis…. It is, therefore, with motives of generosity, charity, and kindness that this little guide has been prepared by the benevolent author…To our newer millionaires and plutocrats it should be a very present help in time of trouble, for it is undeniable that many of these captains of industry—however strong and virile their natures—become utterly helpless and panic-stricken at the mere sight of a gold finger bowl, an alabaster bath, a pronged oyster fork, or the business end of an asparagus." (2-4)

This paragraph speaks to many of the same absurdities highlighted by Edith Wharton; namely, that the profound ideological questions of life ("women's rights") are given the same weight and importance in fashionable society as more trivial innovations ("cocktails" and "steam heat") and

merely practical questions of what to do with a finger bowl or oyster fork. The upper classes were experiencing an identity crisis.

Though etiquette literature in turn-of-the-century America was, on the whole, more practical and less ideological than that of Regency England, many authors still insisted that etiquette had an ideological basis in morality. “At the root of fine manners,” Mrs. Burton Kingsland insists in *Etiquette for All Occasions*, “usually lie the eternal principles of kindness and thoughtfulness; and, as some one has said, although courtesy is not Christianity, it is a very good imitation of it, since most of the rules of etiquette are based upon unselfishness, and the proper regard for the feelings of other people” (3). For the writer of *Etiquette for Americans*, the social graces exist for the purpose of social comfort: “There is no ordinance in the social legislation which does not confer comfort for obedience, and no well-established usage that has not been founded for that reason” (5). In contrast, Marion Harland’s 1905 book, *Everyday Etiquette*, contains no preamble and simply begins by stating conventions for receiving social invitations. The majority of the content of these American etiquette books in the gilded age is specific, situational advice for correct behavior. One difference from similar literature from the English Regency highlighted here is the greater degree of social mobility which can be said to exist in the American context; manners manuals in America were produced to assist people in social climbing. Conduct books in Regency England were produced to provide an ideological underpinning for the etiquette the upper class already observed. Because manners manuals in America were associated with social mobility, the content was more concrete, indicating a closer cultural association between correctness of specific protocol and actual societal power. In other words, observance of social protocols, in America, had changed from signifier to signified. Social capital, in this context, consisted in externalized behaviors associated with the upper class.

That these external behaviors were the most acceptable social currency in New York society is obvious to Wharton's Lily Bart. Lily may not have come to her Aunt Peniston with any monetary fortune, but she grows up wealthy in the knowledge of how to please with externalities. She certainly works very effectively upon Lawrence Selden, who is "refreshed" (*The House of Mirth* 1) by the very sight of her in Grand Central Station. The "eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing," the effects of which Lily must conceal with the artful use of a hat and veil, are themselves a kind of tax paid to the economy in which she moves (*HoM* 5-6). As the novel opens, we find Lily using her social credit to purchase what for a young woman in this economy is a luxury item: an afternoon speaking semi-candidly with a single, male friend. During their conversation, Lawrence Selden confesses his unwillingness to marry for money, though he knows this to be Lily's line of business, her only lasting chance at economic security. Lily insists from the beginning that the freedom Selden enjoys is not available to her. She provides an example of the way society forces women who are not content to be poor to daily make a sale of their externalities: "Your coat's a little shabby—but who cares? It doesn't keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself" (12). Etiquette manuals quite plainly underline a woman's obligation to own an attractive and correct gown for every occasion. *Etiquette for Americans* speaks of the "demands" which the current fashion places on women in society:

> The day is past when latitude or great variety in dress is considered original. Clothes, if they are startling at all, must be startling in degree to be borne…A garden-party, for instance, or out-of-door tea at a private house demands a muslin, silk, at any rate, an elaborate toilet… It is difficult to follow the vagaries of fashion in these regards; and etiquette unfortunately decrees that we shall follow the prevailing fashion. (239)

The "woman of fashion" responsible for this book creates an interesting distinction here between etiquette and fashion, etiquette being the rationale for following a fashion. Etiquette, though this

book considers it stable in principle, requires attention to the changing social conventions of the day, fashion being one. A woman in Lily's position, if she is to behave correctly, must follow the fashion of her set.[23] Selden's response may be somewhat sarcastic, but it alludes to the plain truth of Lily's situation: "Ah, well, there must be plenty of capital on the lookout for such an investment" (12). That women were themselves commodities offered on a market is not a new reality, but the crassness with which characters allude to it ("It's part of the business!" Lily quips later on the same page as she speaks of a dull party at which she must be seen) offers a contrast to the discourse in *Mansfield Park* and even in *Vanity Fair*. Lily cannot afford to invest in her principles or character, for the internal value of personal virtue will not be recognized in the market depicted in *The House of Mirth*. Social capital no longer has virtue for its basis.

After her meeting with Selden, Lily is overwhelmed with buyer's remorse; the visit with Selden was an indulgence bought on credit, and she must now find a way to make a sale. But she is fortunate, for she finds herself on board the train with the eligible and wealthy Percy Gryce. This scene contains some of the most skillful self-commodification we see in the novel, for Lily is not only able to sell herself, she is able to personalize her salesmanship to the intended buyer. She knows that Gryce is no socialite, that he remains very attached to his mother, and that he collects Americana (not a fashionable hobby, though an expensive one), and she proceeds accordingly. Though she has only just drunk tea with Lawrence Selden, Lily shrewdly decides to order tea on the train, and to pour it herself. The spectacle of her performance of "making tea on a lurching train" is an externality which she offers for this situation, in order to "impart a gently domestic air to the scene" (18). Lily not only offers Gryce aesthetic pleasure and the comfort of a

[23] Lily's garments for travelling, if dull in color, still allow her to sweep by the char-woman "with a murmur of silken linings" (*House of Mirth* 13). Silk, though expensive, had become one of the demands of fashion: "Silk dresses, which for some years have been tabooed, for daily and out-of-door wear, have come in again. They are now worn a great deal" (*Etiquette for Americans* 240).

hot cup of tea, she offers him the vision of herself as a hostess, a wife, someone with whom he might share an domestic table. The prettily poured tea is a good aesthetic choice, for as Mrs. Burton Kingslad observes in *Etiquette for All Occasions*, "[T]here is always something of old-fashioned homeliness about tea, which may account for its choice above other beverages" (Kingslad 111). Lily's strategic decision to serve Gryce tea would not only put him in mind of a hostess for a gracious home, but also of a tender wife whose wealth of external charm was all for him. Mrs. Kingslad describes a "tactful wife" who "tempts her husband as her last, best guest into the pleasant room after the guests depart where she sits before her urn" and "makes him a fresh cup of tea" (Kingslad 114). With this pleasant vision planted in his mind, Lily skillfully applies just the right quality and conversational lead to make herself appear a thoroughly tantalizing investment to Percy Gryce. "A good hostess" according to *Etiquette for Americans, "*can promote talking by her own course of procedure, if she chooses" (144). When "conversation flag[s]," Lily has just the product for the occasion: she expresses interest in Gryce's collection of Americana (*HoM* 18). This is the valuable skill which Judy Trenor will praise in chapter four ("I know you're wonderful about getting up people's subjects"), the ability to offer just the right remark and apparent interest in her object's conversation (38). Lily's salesmanship is superb, and as the scene closes she begins to think her afternoon at the Benedick paid for—when she is interrupted by a reminder, in the form of Bertha Dorset, of other sorts of social taxes she has paid, and must continue to pay.

As Lily explains to Selden, a woman in her position (without a personal fortune but expected to marry well) has a certain debt to society, and this debt cannot be paid merely by wearing elegant dresses and appearing ornamental. She must keep the wealthy company in their vices. Lily smokes because the fashionable people with whom she associates smokes, but that

does not mean she is free to enjoy it. Smoking is a social tax for spending time with the wealthy, but it is a tax which, in this instance, costs her social credit as well as literal money.[24] Lily must pretend not to smoke while in the company of her potential investor, Percy Gryce, and Bertha's casual reference to her past smoking loses her some credit in his eyes (22). Chapter three opens with a description of another vice Lily is expected to afford. Bridge, according to Lily, is "one of those taxes she had to pay for their prolonged hospitality, and for the dresses and trinkets which occasionally replenished her insufficient wardrobe" (24).[25] Bridge is a game which hardly receives any mention in the etiquette books of the early century, nor are women depicted in these manuals as smoking.[26] But we must remember that the intended audience of most etiquette books was the aspirational middle class, not the wealthy. For the wealthy, vices could be indulged with little to no loss in social standing. Interestingly, in Francis Crowninshield's satirical etiquette book, bridge receives an entire chapter of its own. Crowninshield begins by listing accessories associated with bridge-playing among fashionable elites:

In order to be an accomplished bridge player one must possess the following attributes:

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[24] Meredith Goldsmith provides this analysis of Lily's consumption of cigarettes in her social economy: "By endowing Lily with the smoking habit early in the novel, the text establishes the precariousness of her class status; while the middle classes cordoned themselves off from behavior that might unsettle their position, the elites could afford, or so they believed, to dabble in behavior considered more appropriate to immigrants and prostitutes. Despite the freedom of experimentation granted the leisure class, the novel makes clear that for Lily to indulge *too* conspicuously would be to endanger her class position" (Goldsmith, "Cigarettes, Tea, Cards, and Chloral: Addictive Habits and Consumer Culture in *The House of Mirth*," 245).

[25] *Etiquette for Americans* does acknowledge a social obligation which the unmarried and young have for "People who open their houses to you and give you food and drink, and bore themselves to death that you may have a chance to carry on a flirtation, or break one up dramatically, deserve some show of regard." However, far from recommending this debt be paid in games of bridge or shows of wealth, the author recommends the following recompense; "If you take the trouble to discover what has happened to them lately, so as to address at least two civil remarks on a topic of interest, you will find the investment a paying one" (150-151).

[26] *Etiquette for Americans* lists "cigarettes and lights for the men" among after-dinner amusements (*Etiquette for Americans* 77). *Etiquette for all Occasions* admonishes, "Gentlemen never smoke in the presence of ladies, unless by special permission" (Kingsland 349). *Everyday Etiquette* mentions that "Cigars may be lighted by the men after they have asked permission of the women to smoke" (Harland 173). Of the three, only *Etiquette for Americans* mentions the possibility of a woman smoking, stating that "highly respectable women" have been known to join gentlemen in smoking in public places, but declares that "there is no book on etiquette that does not reprehend" this practice (*Etiquette for Americans* 175-176).

A dress suit (This does not apply to ladies)

A large roll of clean bills with a rubber band encircling them.

A cigarette and ash tray

A stoical, blond and unimpassioned nature

A partner—usually of the opposite sex." (65-66)

This droll picture associates the playing of bridge firmly with elegance of dress, fashion, ready money and the presence of other new vices such as cigarettes. The display of all of these items and activities are social currency in *The House of Mirth*, for they help complete the *tableaux vivants* of wealth, ease, and visual beauty which the wealthy wished to see around them as an image in a mirror, reflecting their own wealth. In this economy, one does not improve oneself by making a study of books, or art, or any serious subject. According to Crowninshield, "The leaders of the Smart Set have ceased occupying their brains with literature, music, politics, art—subjects which were, a long time ago, discussed in our best society"; here, "their entire mental activities are now focused upon the game of bridge" (Crowninshield 68-69). The paradox for one such as Lily is that if she wants to secure wealth for herself by securing her welcome in society, she must make a show of already having the trappings of wealth. Lily spends the sight of herself in elegant and fashionable gowns, her presence at the bridge table, and her company in smoking cigarettes, just as she sells her charm and conversational prowess, and yet the cost of many of these currencies to Lily means that she operates in this economy at a continual deficit which only a wealthy marriage can relieve.

Lily displays flawless mastery of the conventions of her set, yet she finds herself in a paradoxical position. She cannot afford to behave truly immorally, yet the price of virtue is equally beyond her. Lily cannot "afford" to have been seen visiting Lawrence Selden's rooms

unchaperoned, yet she cannot afford to shrink from buying Mr. Rosedale's discretion with her company at the train station (*HoM* 15). Both her "impulse" and her "repugnance" are beyond her means (*HoM* 15-16). She cannot afford to smoke except when keeping such as Bertha Dorset company, nor can she be unmindful of her reputation. When the char-woman mistakes Lily for Lawrence Selden's mistress, and thus the writer of the letters she wishes to sell, Lily realizes the precariousness of her position as an unmarried woman in her society. Wharton reflects, "The code of Lily's world decreed that a woman's husband should be the only judge of her conduct: she was technically above suspicion" (82). Without a husband, Lily must avoid the censure of the world in every way she can. And yet, she often finds the way of virtue inaccessible. Since the letters are at large, Lily would prefer to simply buy and destroy them, though she knows well that "there is nothing society resents so much as having given its protection to those who have not known how to profit by it" (82). Lily must spend more of her own dwindling money in securing the letters, and then finds it almost as difficult to destroy them: "Mrs. Peniston's icy drawing-room grate shone with a forbidding lustre: the fire, like the lamps, was never lit except when there was company" (84). Lily is not company, nor is she afforded the privacy to deal with such matters anyway; Mrs. Peniston appears almost immediately after Mrs. Haffen's departure. Later, when Mr. Rosedale suggests that she use the letters to "get Bertha Dorset into line" and restore herself to good society, he remarks that the tarnish Lily's reputation has incurred is "bound to happen to a good-looking girl with stingy relatives" (202). In this economy, maintaining a good reputation, and refusing to participate in blackmail, are both the moral luxuries of someone whose wealth is hers to command.

Wendy DuBow observes that "Lily's moral principles frustrate her natural potential" (13). That it is her burgeoning morality which frustrates her efforts in the marriage market show

how far removed is this manners economy from that depicted in Austen (13). Lily could never afford the middle-class morality prescribed in *Etiquette for Americans*, which commands, "Do not show a friend's letter to anybody, no matter how trustworthy the friend, and never send it about" (135-136).[27] When Lily asks if it changes "the situation" that the compromising stories about her are not true, Mr. Rosedale puts it bluntly: "I believe it does in novels; but I'm certain it don't in real life" (*HoM* 199-200). If Rosedale's estimate can be trusted, actual virtue carries no value in this economy.

The only kind of virtue which this economy recognizes as valuable is that virtue which is bought by literal wealth, for wealth, in this social economy, is able to confer virtue. Mrs. Dorset's story, says Lily, is easier for the public to believe "because she has a big house and an opera box, and it's convenient to be on good terms with her" (176). Society here would rather make the wealthy virtuous than make the virtuous wealthy. Francis Crowninshield skewers the vulgar American veneration for wealth in his comparison of English "precedence at dinners" and that at American dinners. In England, he explains, this matter is decided by a clear hierarchy of rank. In America, Crowninshield suggests facetiously, "Let an opera box count 6 points; steam yacht, 5 town house, 5; country house, 4; motors, 3 each; every million dollars, 2; tiara, 1; good wine cellar, 1; ball-room in town-house, 1; a known grandparent of either sex, ½; culture, 1/8" (43). Wharton portrays the truth behind Crowninshield's satire: to be admired in America only requires that one possess material luxuries. Society will grant honorary virtue to those who can

[27] One cannot help but contrast Lily's response to letters which provide fodder for potential blackmail—with Becky Sharp/Crawly's response to a similar possession. Becky's instinct tells her to hold on to something which may prove to be socially valuable to her in the future; Lily's instinct is to wish to destroy the damning letters. When provided with the opportunity, and indeed when encouraged to take advantage of the prized letters, Lily refuses to participate in blackmail. Becky, one suspects, would have been happy to blackmail someone with George's letters and only lacked opportunity; nevertheless, she is able to produce them and is happy to make use of them when the time comes.

afford an opera box. Lily can neither afford the virtue conferred by wealth nor is she able to become wealthy without it.

In no episode is this departure from the value of virtue more evident than in Gus Trenor's attempt in chapter thirteen to cash in on the favor he says Lily owes. Lily's allowing a married man to have a hand in her financial investments would certainly not find approval in *Etiquette for Americans,* which recommends that men "have as few financial dealings as possible with acquaintances of her sex" (211). But this is a different world from that described in these etiquette books, as we will discuss later. Lily believed herself to be making use of her acquaintance's knowledge of the money economy, and no more. But just as the usual code did not apply to George Dorset in the question of protecting his wife's reputation, Gus Trenor is equally able to decide for himself which rules apply—and how to value the currency of women.[28] Never mind that he chose to invest with his own money instead of Lily's; after demanding that she pay up, Trenor rationalizes, "There's such a thing as fair play—and interest on one's money—and hang me if I'd had so much as a look from you" (*HoM* 116). Trenor decides how to interpret Lily's request for investment advice; Trenor decides how to evaluate the value of the favor. Here we see the vast distance between the world where a Gus Trenor can buy a woman's reputation with currency whose value he determines himself, and the world where Mrs. Burton Kingslad can advise, "A young man regardful of the proprieties never asks a girl to accompany him to any place of amusement without either extending the invitation to her mother or chaperon, or asking some married woman of suitable age and position to accompany them" (197). The world depicted in etiquette books has no bearing on the real behavior of the upper

[28] Jennie Wahl sees Trenor's ability to exact his own form of repayment as "typical in a market" where "both suppliers and demanders influence the price paid" (Wahl 11). In a literal market, demanders may influence the price but they do not choose the currency. Lily is not able to have a business transaction with Gus Trenor analogous to the literal market, because the demander (Trenor) is able to interpret the contract however he wishes.

classes, particularly on upper class men. After Lily's skillful efforts free her from paying Trenor's detestable price (and thoroughly shame him for asking it, at the same time), she realizes that she must now repay what Trenor chose to spend on her in order to "restore her self-respect" (*HoM* 134). She reflects that "a woman's dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage; and that the maintenance of a moral attribute should be dependent on dollars and cents, made the world appear a more sordid place than she had conceived it" (*HoM* 135). Far from being something which one can convert into social currency, virtue in this context is something which one must spend literal and social currency to afford.

In truth, Lily is living in a world in which etiquette books, in which knowledge of etiquette, can do very little for her. The etiquette books of the time do not have in mind an audience with old money. Marion Harland directs her advice quite openly to a symbolic "Mrs. Newlyrich" and explains quite candidly for whom her advice is meant—and for whom it is not: "We have put the wealthy, pushing vulgarian, who is part of the stock company of caricature and joke-wright, entirely out of the question. She has her sphere and her reward. Our business is with the woman of worthy aspirations and innate refinement, raised by a whirl of Fortune's wheel from decent poverty to actual wealth" (*Everyday Etiquette* 233).[29] Mrs. Harland wrote for the benefit of Mrs. Newlyrich, the social climber, in order that they might avoid imitating the "vulgarian" class. Far from consulting etiquette books, the families at the very top of New York society are a law unto themselves.

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[29] Ms. Harland continues, making it utterly clear that her business is with the upwardly mobile, not with the moneyed establishment: "She has a natural desire to mingle on equal terms with the better sort of rich people… Money has bought her fine house, and for money the artistic upholsterer has furnished it. Money has hired a staff of servants, whereas up to now, a maid-of-all-work was her sole 'help.' Money does not enable her to master the 'shibboleth' that would be her passport to the land she would possess. And to mangle it into 'sibboleth'—as the least sophisticated of us know—means social slaughter at the passages of Jordan" (233-234).

Lily demonstrates how thoroughly she inhabits this fashionable class of old money New Yorkers when it is revealed that she, like the adult Trenors and the other "Bellomont puppets" goes to church only rarely (*HoM* 43). As she contemplates attending church one week for the purpose of securing Percy's Gryce's confidence in her morality, we finding her "aris[ing] earlier than usual" and considering the novelty of her appearance in a "gray gown of devotional cut" (43).[30] The reader is amused at the hypocrisy of the moneyed elites who feel that allowing an omnibus to arrive and depart discharges any moral duty they may have to go to church. The readers of *Everyday Etiquette* were certainly convinced of their moral obligation to attend, however; Mrs. Harland idealistically observes about church that "There, if anywhere, the rich and the poor meet together on terms of absolute equality" (277).[31] Francis Crowninshield has no illusions about the real habits of the wealthy, however: "Church-going is no longer considered fashionable," he observes in *Manners for the Metropolis*: "If a lady finds that she *must* attend church, it is a wise precaution to bring a little child with her. This will not only make a good impression but will give her an excellent excuse for leaving before the sermon" (Crowninshield 122-123).[32] One notes that Lily intends to go to church in the company of the "young Trenors" (*HoM* 43). The neglect of church attendance among the upper classes is meant to amuse the reader, but it carries another significance. The wealthy neglect custom and morality itself. Jane Austen has Edmund express in *Mansfield Park* that the clergyman "has the guardianship of

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[30] It may be worth noting that, though not "Newlyrich" themselves, the Gryces are from Albany, new to New York City society, and thus, outsiders to this economy (*HoM* 21).

[31] Still, Mrs. Harland urges her readers not to capitalize on any closeness with the upper classes they may enjoy at church, for "Pew-proximity does not bring about social sympathy" (279).

[32] This observation by Crowninshield may be compared to the attitude which Mary Crawford has toward church attendance. When Mrs. Rushworth explains that the family no longer keeps up the tradition of chapel attendance, Mary quips, "Every generation has its improvements" (*MP* 81). We hear Jane Austen's own opinion in Fanny and Edmund's defense of the practice. Though the Rushworths may have stopped attending chapel, there are still those who adhere to the tradition among the landed gentry. Virtue dies last in the country, as Austen presents it.

religion and morals, and consequently of the manners which result from their influence" (*Mansfield Park* 86). New York society in *The House of Mirth*, however, has found that the experience of going to church has nothing of contemporary value to impart. Virtue, and much of etiquette, has lost all value to the "Bellomont puppets."

Francis Crowninshield candidly and humorously acknowledges the cultural gap between those who adhere to etiquette and those whom Edith Wharton portrays when he remarks, "Ladies do not call upon a bachelor, in his rooms, after attending a dinner given by him—except in Mrs. Wharton's novels" (38). Crowninshield makes one other reference to "Mrs. Wharton" in his chapter on "Conversation": "In discussing literature at a lunch or dinner," he drolly advises, "try to remember there are but a very few fashionable authors: They are as follows: Mrs. Wharton, Colonel Mann, Mrs. Glyn, Robert Hichens, F. Peter Dunne, John Fox, Jr.. and Billy Baxter" (29). In acknowledging Wharton as a "fashionable" author, he associates her firmly with the class he is skewering: wealthy New York society. Crowninshield plainly indicates a distinction between those who would benefit from etiquette manuals, and those "fashionable" people who, like Mrs. Wharton and her novels, operate outside of established etiquette. I would likewise acknowledge this distinction between the etiquette literature and the economy portrayed in "Mrs. Wharton's novels" by examining the economy in *The House of Mirth* for itself, without further reference to prescribed etiquette.

If virtue and correct etiquette are not the currency of this economy, what does carry value? Again and again Wharton answers this: the most valuable currency which a woman in this economy could possess was money itself; and if she could not lay claim to actual wealth, she must display the appearance of it at every opportunity. Judy Trenor's social talents are "backed by Mr. Trenor's bank account;" Bertha Dorset's "social credit is based on an impregnable bank-

account" (34, 204). Cash is the preferred method with which to pay one's social obligations. The preferred substitute for cash, if one must substitute something, is the appearance of wealth in elegant scenes of public affluence. Lily, "brought up to be ornamental," must appear in beautiful, elegant (and expensive) clothing, she must appear to be able to afford frequent games of bridge, and she must do these things in order to provide in herself a charming ornament to society functions (232). Occasionally, the society woman without wealth of her own must smooth over the indiscretions committed by her wealthy friends. Selden watches admiringly as Lily takes the focus off of the Dorsets' scandal: "She did… a great deal to adorn it" (169). Carry Fisher, reliably, puts the situation bluntly: "[Lily's] part in the affair was… to distract Dorset's attention from his wife. That was what she was 'there for': it was the price she had chosen to pay for three months of luxury and freedom from care" (177). The substitute for actual wealth which Lily must provide, the rent which she must pay for being among them, was an elegant, pleasing, fashionable and prosperous appearance. Lily explains to Gerty Farish that the substitutes which this society accepts for money themselves cost a great deal of money to provide:

> You think we live ON the rich, rather than with them: and so we do, in a sense—but it's a privilege we have to pay for! We eat their dinners, and drink their wine, and smoke their cigarettes, and use their carriages and their opera-boxes and their private cars—yes, but there's a tax to pay on every one of those luxuries. The man pays it by big tips to the servants, by playing cards beyond his means, by flowers and presents—and—and—lots of other things that cost; the girl pays it by tips and cards too—oh, yes, I've had to take up bridge again—and by going to the best dress-makers, and having just the right dress for every occasion, and always keeping herself fresh and exquisite and amusing! (207)

A man in this society who must pay his "tax" in tips, flowers, and presents has the possibility of earning the money for these things in some profession, as Selden does with his law practice. But Lily knows that a woman cannot afford this independence. She cannot quite believe, therefore, that Selden's "republic of the spirit" is truly available to her; as she points out, "one of the conditions of citizenship is not to think too much about money, and the only way not to think

about money is to have a great deal of it" (55, 56). Mr. Rosedale agrees with this assessment in his rather vulgar proposal to Lily: "I know there's one thing vulgar about money, and that's the thinking about it; and my wife would never have to demean herself in that way" (140). Rosedale shrewdly recognizes that a woman, to be respectable, must have access to money which she does not have to think about, and for that she must look to a man. If Lily were truly valued for her virtue, she would by no means be bankrupt; if she could be credited for her flawless manners, she would be wealthy indeed. But in a society in which women can no longer produce their own virtue, but must have it conferred on them because of their wealth, the independent woman is at an absolute disadvantage. Lily's independence and hints of a growing moral character are detrimental to her success in this social economy.

Critics generally see Lily as a victim of social forces more powerful than she, but not all recognize Lily as a moral character or indeed view her as sympathetically as she is viewed in this project. Joan Lidoff accuses Lily of being "locked in the regressive emotional state of primary narcissism" (521). C.J. Wershoven says of Lily that she "lack[s] the inner resources to constructing an independent life" (35). Lily undoubtedly has character flaws; she has not differentiated herself from her shallow society to develop a truly virtuous character in the vein of a Fanny Price. But Wharton purposely gives readers Lily's back story early in the novel so that we may see her formation; we are given the history of her "revised[d]" "view of the universe" which created her adult worldview (*HoM* 27). Her mother's words, "You'll get it all back, with your face…" echo in the reader's consciousness as we learn how her mother jealously worked to develop Lily's beauty, "as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance" (*HoM* 25, 29). We see the birth of Lily's own ambivalence toward marriage in her mother's strictures against love matches, while Mrs. Bart maintained that she had been "talked

into" her own marriage (*HoM* 29-30). In short, the reader witnesses the formation of every negative quality in Lily from her youth. In the wake of this formation, the birth of scruple, morals, and sprouts of virtue in Lily seem a miracle for which one is inclined to praise this orphaned heroine. Lily cannot be blamed for her failure by a just reading of *The House of Mirth.* To her small supply of virtue are added manifold other sources of currency (such as personal style, beauty, and impeccable and engaging manners) which still cannot "get it all back" in an economy whose system of valuation has become so skewed.

Ultimately, Lily is doomed because she operates in an economy in which she cannot produce her own wealth. She can labor at producing charm and ornament, she can cultivate her beauty and set it to advantage with expensive clothing, she can work to manage awkward situations so that the wealthy people around her are more comfortable, but she has no say over how the fruits of her labor are valued. In attempting to access the legacy her aunt Peniston left her, Lily is frustrated by the impenetrability of this legal institution, run by men, to her "personal appeal," and she "returned from her expedition with a sense of the powerlessness of beauty and charm against the unfeeling processes of the law" (179). The truth is that all women in this society depend upon men for the legitimacy of their wealth. They can accumulate all the public acclaim in their power for beauty, charm, a fashionable appearance and social dexterity, but it is men who decide on whom to confer literal money through marriage, through law, and through the power to participate on their behalf in the literal money economy. A woman who, like Lily, is unwilling to attach herself to a man simply for the benefit of access to his wealth, can find herself, however skilled, suddenly without any viable economic options at all. Having been discarded by the Bellomont set, Lily discovers that all that she has labored for, all that seemed to

carry objective value in the world, was worthless without the literal wealth which only men could earn:

> Having been accustomed to take herself at the popular valuation, as a person of energy and resource, naturally fitted to dominate any situation in which she found herself, she vaguely imagined that such gifts would be of value to seekers after social guidance; but there was unfortunately no specific head under which the art of saying and doing the right thing could be offered in the market, and even Mrs. Fisher's resourcefulness failed before the difficulty of discovering a workable vein in the vague wealth of Lily's graces. (209)

Her wealth is made "vague" because it has not found a suitable market; the value of currency, in the social as in the literal economy, depends on market forces. Women in wealth-based economies, where only men could earn their fortune, could never be the kind of economic agents which it was possible for them to be in economies based upon virtue. Edith Wharton's presentation of the New York society economy demonstrates that for women like Lily, the "standard of values had changed" (247). Lily's ruin and tragic death communicates a deep dissatisfaction with her society; Wharton's confidence in her context does not equal Jane Austen's in hers.

Coda

In times of heightened social change, watch the women.
(Nancy Bentley, *The Ethnography of Manners*, 163)

Social change being one of the few constants of the twentieth century, one might imagine that a greater number of novels of manners would be required as writers struggled to document and comment upon those changes to society. Instead, the social change which resulted in women entering the workforce has, at least as far as critics and canonizing thinkers are concerned, been accompanied by the near death of the form. In his *The Novel of Manners in America*, James Tuttleton observes with some regret the dearth of later 20th century novels of manners: "The most exciting writers today…are preoccupied with forms other than the novel of manners" (262). Tuttleton blames this reality in part on our modern literary criticism, which has made the self-fulfilling prophecy that "the realistic-naturalistic novel (and *particularly* the novel of manners) is dead" (264). I would argue that a major factor in the decline of this form (or at least, of officially recognized examples of it) is the decline of the assumptions it rested upon. The assumption that women must gain their fortune using such currencies as virtue, manners, beauty and charm, has slowly been done away with as women have entered the literal economy in steadily greater numbers throughout the century. Most novels of manners feature a female protagonist or protagonists involved in some sort of marriage plot, and often upon this marriage plot hangs their hope for material comfort or social mobility. This sort of economy existed in dependence upon the literal economy, which was controlled largely by the choices of men and of man-made law. As women trade in their social capital for literal capital by entering the workforce themselves, their independence makes them less captivating subjects for a novel of manners.

Edith Wharton may have been among the last of the novelists of manners, and the economy she portrays, the crumbling crisis of the economy of manners. In *The House of Mirth*, social wealth depends upon literal wealth, instead of the other way around.[33] And though Lily had not been prepared to enter the workforce, nor to think of earning her own wealth as an acceptable possibility, some contemporaries of Edith Wharton (and her characters) were thinking along these lines. The writer and sociologist Charlotte Perkins Gilman was born just two years before Wharton (and died two years before Wharton as well, interestingly), but her attitude toward the economy of manners was much less nostalgic. In her book *Women and Economics,* Gilman expressed herself more than ready to see the collapse of any need for a marriage plot to make women economically secure. She points with disapproval to the singularity of the human woman's dependence on men: "With us an entire sex lives in a relation of economic dependence upon the other sex, and the economic relation is combined with the sex-relation" (288). It is not the separate means of earning a living which Gilman most criticizes, but the dependence of women's work upon men's valuation. For "the human female," "their labor is the property of another: they work under another will; and what they receive depends not on their labor, but upon the power and will of another" (289). With her characteristic boldness, Charlotte Perkins Gilman states frankly the bare reality which undergirds the novel of manners:

> With the growth of civilization, we have gradually crystallized into law the visible necessity for feeding the helpless female; and even old women are maintained by their male relatives with a comfortable assurance. But to this day—save, indeed, for the increasing army of women wage-earners, who are changing the face of the world by their steady advance toward economic independence—the personal profit of women bears but too close a relation to their power to win and hold the other sex. From the odalisque with

[33] Even in England, landed aristocracy declined in both power and wealth. The decline had been slow, perhaps beginning early in the 19th century, but as F. M. L. Thompson describes, "[I]n political, economic and administrative essentials the landed interest had surrendered the keys of power before 1880. It remained for agricultural depression to make plain the extent of the accomplished fact, and for the landed aristocracy to enjoy the long twilight of great honor, prestige, and personal wealth, although their ascendancy was over" (291).

> the most bracelets to the debutante with the most bouquets, the relation still holds good,—women's economic profit comes through the power of sex attraction. (290)

For as different as they are, and as differently as their recorders present them, the economies in *Mansfield Park*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The House of Mirth* have in common that women live and act and make decisions within economies which are entirely dependent upon external, literal money economies. Whether women trade in virtue, proper etiquette, an ornamental appearance, strategic social acts, conversational arts, or the simple appearance of wealth and prosperity, they trade in something other than money. When once they gain access to a paycheck of their own, it should not cause astonishment that women's use of these other forms of currency should be in decline. The etiquette manual or conduct book is a genre which has died a parallel death with the novel of manners, for etiquette as a currency has been devalued. In describing Emily Post, one of the most prominent 20th century etiquette writers, Esther Arnesty comments, "Mrs. Post's own world was a narrow one, on the verge of disappearing" (294). Still, Arnesty remains optimistic about the state of true etiquette, which she defines in contrast to "knowing all the rules" as simply, "consideration for others" (294). Modern conceptions of manners may seem less intricate and arbitrary than those of the 19th century, but they are still rooted, Arnesty assures us, in social ideals. The difference is perhaps that a woman's social decisions can no longer be observed as weighing as heavily on her economic fortunes. Her world is enlarged; therefore, the sort of close observation typical of the novel of manners no longer gives the comprehensive picture it once did.

Artistically, many will feel this to be regrettable. The novel of manners remains a favorite genre into the 21st century, and Austen, Thackeray and Wharton have all known their share of modern film adaptations and cultural interest. James Tuttleton admits, "Far from being dead, the novel of manners is so flexible and elastic a form that I cannot help feeling sanguine for its future" (274). The reality which women (and men) inhabit in the 21st century is one which still involves

social decision-making, strategic relationship-building, and considerations of social ethics. These are eternal factors in the human experience. A new generation of novelists may be preparing to revive the novel of manners. When they do, they will illuminate again the reality that every human decision, however small, may be said to have some economic value.

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