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Authorship, Gender, and the Modern Muse in Edith Wharton's Vance Weston Novels: A Response to Judith P. Saunders*

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Edith Wharton's last two completed novels, *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) and *The Gods Arrive* (1932), together trace the life of aspiring writer Vance Weston across roughly a decade.[1] Mobilizing a common device of the *Künstlerroman*, Wharton parallels Vance's authorial education with his sexual one. The nineteen-year-old's first effort at writing stems from heartbreak: upon learning that his grandfather is having an affair with his own former girlfriend, Floss Delaney, Vance channels his despair and sexual jealousy into a short story, "One Day." Encouraged by this experience—"at last he had found out a way of reconciling his soul to its experiences" (*HRB* 31)—he determines to become a writer and travels to New York, settling with distant relations in the Hudson River Valley. There he meets a cultured young woman, Halo Tarrant, who serves as muse, literary advisor, and writing partner to him for the rest of the novel. While Vance makes several attempts on the literary scene, his romantic life suffers: an ill-advised marriage to his unsophisticated young cousin, Laura Lou, leaves him restless, and, not surprisingly, he falls in love with the married Halo, his intellectual equal. In fact, his friendship with Halo results in the only substantial work he writes in *Hudson River Bracketed*, the historical novel *Instead*.

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The Gods Arrive opens with a recently-widowed Vance and Halo—who is now separated from her husband—sailing for Europe to pursue, in earnest, Vance's literary career. As they travel to such places as Cordova, Spain, and Oubli-sur-Mer, France, Vance works on and publishes two more novels, but, though he depends upon Halo in several material ways, he no longer desires her literary advice. These tensions, along with the social pressures of traveling as an unmarried couple, culminate in a mutual agreement to part ways, with the two returning separately to the United States. This break coincides with the failure of Vance's most recent novel, *Colossus*, written partly while under the infatuation of his old flame, Floss. *The Gods Arrive* concludes with Vance reuniting with Halo, who, unbeknownst to him, is pregnant with their child. While Wharton provides no definite resolution—on the closing pages, it is unclear if Vance has truly learned from his interwoven sexual and artistic experiences—she does suggest a correlation between the imminent birth of the couple's child and the rebirth of Vance's creative abilities.

Judith P. Saunders's thoughtful article, "Wharton's *Hudson River Bracketed* and Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan': Re-Creating Xanadu in an American Landscape," focuses less on these *Künstlerroman* tropes and more on the novel's allusions. Specifically, arguing that Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" fundamentally informs the first novel in Wharton's diptych, Saunders looks closely at both Wharton's overt allusions to the poem and the more subtle ways that Coleridge resurfaces at various points throughout the novel. Perhaps most compellingly, Saunders argues that "Wharton goes far beyond the usual parameters of literary reference and allusion: her novel *enacts* the poem" (204). That is, the narrative arc of the novel—the content and chronology of its major events—mirrors the structure of the "Kubla Khan." As Saunders points out, this renders *Hudson River Bracketed* "unique" within "Wharton's oeuvre," because, although the author often relies on allusion, "nowhere else does it play such a structurally central role" (205).

Saunders's article enriches existing Wharton scholarship in important ways. For one, it asks us to reevaluate how Wharton comments on the state of modern authorship through *Hudson River Bracketed*; while critics have noted that Vance often serves as a placeholder for Wharton's frustrations with modernist writing, less attention has been given to the ways in which he acts, at key moments, as her surrogate. Indeed, Vance's epiphanic moment of discovering "Kubla Khan" echoes Wharton's own experience when reading Coleridge as a child, which she describes in her autobiographical piece "A Little Girl's New York" (1938). Saunders's essay, then, identifies an important affinity between Vance and his creator and, as such, works toward a more precise understanding of how Wharton both engages and disengages with a transforming, post-war literary scene in her late works. Moreover, Saunders's essay is no mere exercise in locating places where Coleridge and "Kubla Khan" appear in the novel. Instead, she uses those allusive moments as vehicles for exploring a rich set of ideas within *Hudson River Bracketed*, including the role that inspiration plays in the writing process, publishing cultures, and the literary functions of place and nature.

Saunders limits her analysis to *Hudson River Bracketed*, which is understandable; her objective is to lay bare "the intricate role" that "Kubla Khan" plays in the first novel, which, as she states, "has yet to be adequately analyzed and appreciated" (187).[2] Saunders does mention *The Gods Arrive* in endnotes, but she is less interested in the sequel, since, as she points out, the allusions to Coleridge disappear (213n16) or, more precisely, evolve into allusions to Goethe (212n10). In the following response, I explore what happens when we extend Saunders's arguments to *The Gods Arrive*. Why might Wharton shift her allusions away from Coleridge—and I agree with Saunders that, for the most part, she does—and toward Goethe? What work do the latter allusions perform? Do the major themes that Saunders treats—namely, inspiration, writing, and place—figure in *The Gods Arrive*, and, if so, do they figure differently? I argue that these subjects get reworked, sometimes radically, in the second novel, revealing

Wharton's views on such interlaced issues as modern authorship, gender, and tensions between past and present.

The Modern Muse

In a discussion of how Halo inspires Vance's writing in *Hudson River Bracketed*, Saunders explains that scholars tend to offer "sharp criticism of the selfless role Halo plays in ministering to Vance's talent and career" and therefore overlook how "the mythological idea of a Muse" governs their relationship (211n7). In Saunders's opinion, this is a mistake. In her reading, Wharton's mobilization of "the muse-like function" through Halo connects the novel not only to ancient literary traditions but also to Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." Halo, who, in a crucial episode early in the first novel, introduces Vance to the inspirational Thundertop mountain in the Hudson River Valley, is akin to Coleridge's "'damsel with a dulcimer' [...] 'singing of Mount Abora'" (200). Saunders goes on to claim that "the most striking parallel with Coleridge's 'damsel' manifests itself in Halo's assistance, as 'monitress and muse,' with the writing of *Instead*" (200-01). Focusing on the muse in this way allows Saunders to examine the productive and creative bond Vance and Halo share in *Hudson River Bracketed*. Put bluntly, Vance could not have written *Instead* without Halo. As Saunders states, Vance, like "Coleridge's artist-speaker," "re-create[s] Khan's pleasure-dome" with and through his muse: "With Halo's help, he is representing the Willows in fictive form, re-imagining the history of the house, its grounds, and its owner. [...] Without the inspiration and encouragement supplied by Halo [...] that act of re-creation could not have come to fruition" (201). In making this argument about the muse, Saunders demonstrates just how indebted Vance's authorship is to Halo, also revealing, albeit indirectly, one way in which Wharton undermines modern conceptions of the individual Genius.

As such, Saunders offers a corrective to current scholarship on the novel, since, as she argues, critics are "less inclined than Wharton or her contemporaries to take serious interest in the mythological idea of a Muse"; instead, they focus "what now may appear to be an unequal and gender-biased relationship" (211n7). While Saunders makes a valuable point here, she passes up an opportunity to grapple with the ways in which Wharton was not only relying upon but also attempting to redefine the concept of the muse in a post-war, modern era. That is, aligning Halo with the Romantic "damsel with the dulcimer" or mythological muse has its limits, since Wharton takes pains to show us that Halo is not a passive vessel, inspiring or serving as a repository for masculine fantasies, but rather a savvy agent working in Vance's best interests.

Indeed, Halo provides Vance with factual information for his novel, reads his drafts, gives him incisive feedback, and, more practically, makes available the space in which he writes. She also, I would argue, becomes his unofficial—and unremunerated—literary agent and publicist. In several places in the novel, she performs quasi-professional tasks, passing along Vance's poetry to the critic George Frenside, for example, or serving as mediator between Vance and her husband Lewis Tarrant, who is Vance's editor. She even enlightens Vance about industry etiquette after he stands up Lewis: "'Editors are busy people, you know, Vance. [...] If you make another appointment you must be sure to keep it'" (*HRB* 218). Therefore, in *Hudson River Bracketed*, Wharton, through Halo, experiments with updating Coleridge's "damsel with the dulcimer," giving us a portrait of what we might call the Modern Muse. Put differently, she reworks a pre-war literary construct—specifically, Coleridge's Romantic muse, which itself relies upon much earlier antecedents—so that it accommodates the agency and aspirations of the New Woman.

However, and here it is essential to extend Saunders's focus and turn to *The Gods Arrive*, this experiment ultimately miscarries. On the one hand, it fails because of the hypocrisy of the bohemian artists with whom Vance and Halo fraternize in Europe, a group that,

though "free and jolly and clever" (*GA* 94), holds conventional views. Halo and Vance find themselves figuratively homeless, lacking a community in which their unorthodox relationship, both working and romantic, can develop. On the other hand, and more important to my argument, it fails because of problems inherent in the muse device itself. Halo cannot outrun its traditional trappings, as, in the second novel, Vance increasingly views her as an empty construct rather than an actual individual. In his more punctilious moments, Vance recognizes this: "'Funny ... ' he reflected ... 'when I go away anywhere I always shut up the idea of her in a box, as if she were a toy; or turn her to the wall, like an unfinished picture ...'" (*GA* 122; ellipses original). I submit that this objectification of Halo—she becomes a mere thing to Vance, by turns an idea or a material article—is a logical, though unfortunate, endpoint to the Romantic muse narrative that Saunders identifies in *Hudson River Bracketed*.[3]

Through Halo, accordingly Wharton attempts to modernize the paradigmatic muse, but too many obstacles stand in her way, including, most conspicuously, her main character Vance, the novel's chief representative of post-war authorship. Vance seems perfectly content with both the traditional archetype and the gendered power structures it underwrites. When, in *The Gods Arrive*, Halo resists this arrangement, Vance seeks a muse elsewhere, either in strangers—as in the episode where he stumbles upon a sleeping young woman in a forest, which recalls not "Kubla Khan" but *Endymion* (see *GA* 117-18)—or in women like Floss Delaney, who are satisfied with passively inspiring rather than actively participating in his art. In the episode where Halo learns that Vance has been spending time with Floss and other unsavory individuals, Wharton powerfully records her heroine's anguish:

> It was bitter to think that these were the companions he had chosen, the people who had been sharing his pleasures, listening to his talk, perhaps receiving his confidences and laughing at his inflammable enthusiasm, while she, who had given him her life, sat alone, forgotten, as utterly cut off from him as if she had never had any share in his existence. (*GA* 328)

In passages like this one, which we discover through turning to sequel only, Wharton exposes the devastating emotional consequences of forcing an individual to perform Coleridge's "damsel with a dulcimer."

This tension surrounding inspiration might explain why, as Saunders points out, Coleridge all but disappears in *The Gods Arrive*. Wharton exchanges "Kubla Khan" for *Faust*, as Vance replaces one literary muse—Coleridge's damsel, which the living, breathing Halo uneasily and never fully occupies—with another, Goethe's mythological underworld Mothers. While Vance is still "sure that he loved [Halo] as much as ever, was as happy as ever in her company," in the sequel to *Hudson River Bracketed* "the deep workings of his imagination" are "no longer roused by her presence" (*GA* 111). Instead, he becomes increasingly preoccupied with "the scene where Faust descends to the Mothers," a "passage [...] which had always haunted him" (*GA* 23). Goethe's set piece serves as a model for Vance's own writing process, as he "exultantly" realizes: "'You have to go plumb down to the Mothers to fish up the real thing'" (*GA* 121). Critics have interpreted Wharton's use of these Goethe allusions in various ways while recognizing that they describe, as James Tuttleton put in in an early reappraisal of the Vance Weston novels, the "formal epistemology of the creative imagination" (342).[4] In Tuttleton's estimation, the Goethe allusions demonstrate that "the artist's task is to sound the depths of his imagination, to energize the union of the finite and the Infinite, in a form and vision projecting the image of man in his web of being" (342). In this respect, Vance seems to be evolving, both as a writer and as an ethical being; instead of exploiting Halo—relegating her to the status of muse, object, or construct—he turns to a source that will at once inspire him and place him in relation to others in a cosmic "web."

However, Vance's "pursuit of the Mothers" is ultimately misguided, "since he construes them as his own subjective depths, the walled-in well of his soul" (Kim 164). Vance's supposed quest for the Moth-

ers, as Sharon Kim astutely claims, is really a journey into his own interiority. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the book that results from Vance's new muse is the ego-driven, masturbatory *Colossus*, a thinly-veiled parody of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which Wharton, in an oft-cited letter to Bernard Berenson, described as "pornography (the rudest schoolboy kind)" (*Letters* 461). Therefore, Wharton ultimately reveals that these two inspirations, as Vance uses them, are proverbial sides of the same coin. Both expose, though in different ways, the narcissistic impulses undergirding the very idea of the muse.

Moreover, in *The Gods Arrive*, Wharton shows that Vance's interiority lacks authenticity, for *Colossus*, the novel that he writes under the inspiration of the Mothers, is highly derivative. He does not "fish up the real thing" but rather a confused mixture of modernist techniques he has internalized while reading trendy authors' works. He realizes, too late, that "'Colossus' was not his own book, brain of his brain, flesh of his flesh, as it had seemed while he was at work on it, but a kind of hybrid monster made out of the crossing of his own imaginings with those imposed on him by the literary fashions and influences of the day" (*GA* 393). This is precisely the criticism Halo articulates earlier in the novel when she reads a draft of *Colossus*. As she tells Vance, "'I have an idea you haven't found yourself—expressed your real self, I mean—in this book as you did in the others. You're not ... not quite as free from other influences ... echoes ...' (*GA* 342; ellipses original).

As Halo implies, *Instead*, though written in collaboration with her, is a purer form of self-expression than the parthenogenetic *Colossus*, and, indeed, what Vance thought would be "his masterpiece" becomes instead a "heavy lifeless production," a grotesque stillborn work that "died on his hands" (*GA* 393). Saunders argues that through *Hudson River Bracketed* Wharton illustrates that "[t]he artist must command remarkable inner strength in order to grapple successfully with" the act of creation, which takes place in an interior "realm fraught with contradiction and paradox" (202). Here Saunders references the binaries that organize Xanadu, including "height and

depth, calm and tumult, sun and ice" (202), and that get echoed through seasonal patterns in *Hudson River Bracketed*. We might add to this list of contradictions isolation and communion or independence and dependence, since Wharton shows, especially in *The Gods Arrive*, that the modern author also must reconcile these contradictions if he or she hopes to succeed as an artist.

Authorship, Place, and History: Wharton's Midwest

At the end of *The Gods Arrive*, Vance still has not achieved success, but Wharton does suggest that he is headed toward it. Significantly, she signals this not only through the reconciliation of Vance and Halo, his romantic and erstwhile professional partner, but also through geographical settings, which serve as yet another type of muse. Saunders identifies the complex role that place plays in *Hudson River Bracketed*, stating that "[f]rom the outset" of the novel, Wharton "emphasizes the importance of place, indicating that setting will serve not as mere backdrop for action but as subject" (188). Saunders deftly analyzes the ways in which Wharton contrasts Vance's Midwestern hometown with the East coast. The Midwest evokes cultural poverty and historical amnesia, while the East—particularly Halo's ancestral home of the Willows in the Hudson River Valley—connotes erudition and a rootedness in the past. Vance, Saunders writes, "finds himself in a natural environment more fertile and luxuriant than that of the Plains states, one more varied in terrain, more majestic in effect" (193). This place becomes critical to his development, since his "encounters with Halo at the Willows and at Thundertop bring [him] into contact with precisely the elements his early background has denied him: cultural history and natural glory" (Saunders 193). Therefore, Vance's flight from the Midwest to the East announces a forward progression in his character even as it takes him back into the past.

Once again, it is instructive to apply Saunders's arguments to *The Gods Arrive*, since, in the sequel, Wharton continues to parallel

Vance's relationship to place and his development as an individual and author. Indeed, plotting out his various travels reveals a map of not only his literal journeys but also his emotional and artistic ones. Significantly, *The Gods Arrive* opens, as the first sentence tells us, on a "big Atlantic liner," with Vance and Halo leaving New York for Europe. It is as if Vance needs to continue pushing eastward in order to gain access to more remote histories, ones that will enrich his imagination and make their way into his writing. And this is precisely what happens: Vance's next major work, *A Puritan in Spain*, is a historical novel set in a Spanish port town in the 1830s. However, while the book meets with positive reviews, Vance is dissatisfied: "The thing had come too easily; he knew it had not been fetched up out of the depths" (*GA* 73). Vance writes his next work, *Colossus*, in various European cultural centers as well, but it also, as I discuss above, disappoints Vance, not to mention the critics and his general readership. Wharton suggests that Vance's experiences in Europe, particularly the way he inhabits place, are too superficial. The towns and cities he occupies inform neither his deep consciousness—the "depths" that he plumbs during the creative process—nor his writing in any meaningful or authentic way.

In Book V of *The Gods Arrive*, the closing section of the diptych, Wharton suggests that Vance must travel West, not further East, in order to achieve his personal and artistic goals. Moreover, and this is key, I argue that returning to the Hudson River Valley is not enough: he must push past the East Coast and back into the Midwest. Saunders states that through "allusive patterns of iteration, echoing, and recursion," Wharton uses "Kubla Khan" to "celebrate" the Hudson River Valley as "a cornucopia of generative energies, natural and aesthetic, a place sustained by cultural-historical roots that North American otherwise conspicuously lacks" (210). This is absolutely the case. It should also be noted, as Saunders does (209), that it is the Hudson River Valley that originally inspires Vance's projected novel *Magic*, the work that Wharton implies will become his masterpiece if it is ever written.

But Wharton also suggests that the Midwest is as important as, if not more important than, the Hudson River Valley; this geographical setting fundamentally shaped Vance's identity, and he must appreciate it if he is ever to write an authentic work like *Magic*. Book V takes Vance back to his hometown of Euphoria, where, during a public reading, he abruptly comprehends his attachment to the Midwest: "his self had come out of Euphoria, been conceived and fashioned there, made of the summer heat on endless wheat-fields, the frozen winter skies [...]; the plants budding along the ditches on the way to Crampton, the fiery shade of the elm-grove down by the river ... he had been made out of all this, had come out of all this [...] " (*GA* 387). This is a crucial scene, for though Vance feels alienated from the town's inhabitants—the audience "wriggled in its seats, and twitched at its collar-buttons, and didn't understand him" (387)—he embraces the place itself, full of secret beauties that rival those of the Hudson River Valley.

This is no one-off scene in the book. When Vance later loses his beloved grandmother, he takes solace not in the magnificent settings of the Hudson River Valley but rather the more subdued splendors of wintry Midwestern woods. Wharton overtly codes this trip to the wilds of Wisconsin as a pilgrimage: Vance stays at the "Camp of Hope," reads *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, and nearly dies from an illness before being figuratively reborn, walking again with legs "like a baby's" and "look[ing] out with eyes cleansed by solitude on a new world in which everything was beautiful and important" (*GA* 419). The Midwestern environment is elemental to Vance's rebirth; even before he grows ill and convalesces, the "austere setting of hills and forests" (*GA* 413) restores his "vigour of mind and body," and he begins "to crave for a conscious intelligence [...] moulded on the large quiet lines of the landscape" (*GA* 415). Moreover, Vance, in "a mood of deep spiritual ardour such as his restless intelligence had never before attained," begins work on a new book that recalls his abandoned ideas for *Magic* (*GA* 416). Therefore, while Vance later thinks to himself that the Willows is "where his real life had begun" (*GA* 423),

Wharton shows that his identity is rooted in the Midwest, a place that he must evolve from, to be sure, but not reject altogether if he is to write his masterpiece.

The Past with a capital P—represented by Europe or, as Saunders argues, the Hudson River Valley—is important to Vance's literary endeavors, but so is his own, personal past, which is more intimately and mysteriously shaped by the Midwestern landscape. The struggle to reconcile personal and historical pasts, particularly pre-war pasts, with the present is a thematic tension that runs through much of Wharton's works from the 1920s and 1930s. In novels like *The Mother's Recompense* (1925) and *Twilight Sleep* (1927), it takes the form of inter-generational conflict and, more specifically, sexual competition between generations of women. By contrast, in the Vance Weston novels it gets encoded, through the device of the muse, into the dramas of modern authorship and gendered power. It even informs the various geographical settings in which those dramas unfold.

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NOTES

[1]Some inconsistencies exist with respect to the novels' time frame. For example, Vance is nineteen at the beginning of *Hudson River Bracketed*, and at the end of *The Gods Arrive* he muses that "he was still in his twenties" (*GA* 426), implying that ten or less years have passed; however, Halo, who is unmarried when she first meets Vance in *Hudson River Bracketed*, lives with her husband Lewis Tarrant for ten years (*GA* 5) and then for nearly three years with Vance (*GA* 423).

[2]For brief discussions of how Coleridge's poem and Romanticism more generally influence the novel, see Toth; and Tuttleton.

[3]Horner and Beer make a similar point when they argue that "Wharton's purpose [...] is to show how Vance's masculine poetic sensibility derives from a cultural mythicising of women that blinds him to their individuality" (123).

[4]See also Kim; Horner and Beer; and Singley.

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