

# *Op. Cit.*

**REVISTA DE ESTUDOS ANGLO-AMERICANOS**  
*A JOURNAL OF ANGLO-AMERICAN STUDIES*

**II Série, N.º 8: 2019**  
2nd Series, No. 8: 2019

Citation: Beatrice Melodia Festa. Autonomy, Responsibility and Spiritual Matriarchism: Edith Wharton's Reinforcement of Feminist Roles through Mythology. *Op. Cit.: A JOURNAL OF ANGLO-AMERICAN STUDIES*. 2nd Series, Number 8 (2019). Online since March, 2019.  
URL: <https://sites.google.com/site/opcitapeaa/home>

ISSN 2182-9446  
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AUTONOMY, RESPONSIBILITY AND SPIRITUAL  
MATRIARCHISM: EDITH WHARTON'S REINFORCEMENT  
OF FEMINIST ROLES THROUGH MYTHOLOGY

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**ABSTRACT:** The present article aims to explore the representation of women, through the lens of mythology, in two seminal works of American novelist Edith Wharton. Through the complexities of Wharton's heroines and the illustration of mythical references in her novels, the article examines how her construction of femininity draws inspiration partially from classical matriarchal roles. By analyzing Wharton's reconstruction of mythical figures through her female subjects in *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), this article offers a new perspective on the illustration of empowerment in early twentieth century American literature. The article intends to investigate the successful use of the sacred as Wharton's key literary device to envision new powerful women, and therefore her embodying of female characters through mythical figures that eventually portrays a substantial subversion of patriarchy. Gender subordination and hierarchical imposition are channeled through the recurrent trope of mythology, which serves Wharton to enhance the power of the feminine.

**Keywords:** mythology, feminism, empowerment, matriarchy, American Literature.

**RESUMO:** O presente artigo pretende explorar a representação das mulheres, sob a óptica da mitologia, em duas obras influentes da romancista norte-americana Edith Wharton. Através das complexidades das heroínas de Wharton e da ilustração de referências míticas nos seus romances, o artigo examina o modo como a sua construção do feminino se inspira parcialmente em papéis matriarcais clássicos. Analisando a

reconstrução de figuras míticas realizada por Wharton na figura das suas personagens femininas em *The House of Mirth* (1905) e *The Age of Innocence* (1920), o artigo oferece uma nova perspectiva da ilustração do empoderamento na literatura norte-americana dos inícios do século XX. O artigo pretende investigar o emprego bem-sucedido do sagrado como recurso literário central de Wharton com vista a conceber mulheres poderosas novas, e portanto a sua encarnação de personagens femininas através de figuras míticas que constitui uma subversão substantiva do patriarcado. A subordinação de género e a imposição hierárquica são canalizadas pelo tropo recorrente da mitologia, que serve a Wharton para realçar o poder do feminino.

**Palavras-chave:** mitologia, feminismo, empoderamento, matriarcado, Literatura Norte-Americana.

In her compelling work on the morality of femininity, Carol Singley affirms that while replete with the religious and moral choice of marriage, Wharton's literary aspirations also indisputably take the form of spiritual quests (20). In her inarguably feminist works, Wharton encapsulates the essence of marriage, representing women and their moral path toward acquisition and consumption as adhering to social norms in a struggle to maintain their privileged social status in the narrow, elitist world of upper-class New York.<sup>1</sup> In *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), Wharton makes clear that "[a] good subject must contain in itself something that sheds light on our moral experience" (24).<sup>2</sup> This claim reinforces her emphasis on fiction as a representation of the spirit and its moral condition. This concept is at the core of Wharton's narratives, enriched by her portrayals of America's upper class in the late nineteenth century. As such, recent scholarly work has asserted that, by focusing on the moral dimension of femininity, she is keen to mirror a female-centered spirituality on an ethical path in which female subjects are forcibly entangled in the conflict between passion and social duty.

Firmly detaching herself from the theological critics of her time who addressed religious and spiritual issues from a patriarchal perspective, as I

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<sup>1</sup> The sacrament of marriage was the vocation of religious Victorian upper-class women and was included among elitist traditional practices of the leisure class in the early twentieth century. Wharton, as a member of the Victorian leisure class in America, illuminated gender, middle-class values and perspectives, in her female psychological dramas.

<sup>2</sup> The Victorian exemplar of the perfect woman was once defined as the "Angel in the House". This term was coined by poet Coventry Patmore, who in his collection of poems, entitled *The Angel in the House* (1862), idealized his wife as the perfect model of Victorian womanhood. Women at the time were seen as passive, powerless, pure and graceful, and above all submissive to their husbands in a patriarchal system. They were firmly located in the domestic realm.

intend to show, Wharton recasts the role of women as they start negotiating patriarchies and somehow becoming alienated from them through moral strength and self-autonomy. Yet, I propose to reconsider her powerful heroines through their relation to mythology as a literary trope to empower femininity. As Singley notes, portraying an America grounded in values such as religion and morality, the roles that populate Wharton's novels impose their own will on a male-dominated social system which leaves no space for female individuality. In their social struggle to maintain their autonomy, the women of Wharton's novels often reject cultural models or impose models of their own choosing on both men and society at large in order to achieve their goals.

Critical accounts frequently read Wharton's women as doomed victims in a society of conventions that offers no possibility of subverting social systems. Susan Goodman's thorough analysis of Wharton's female archetypes opens with the assertion that her victimized "heroines [...] know that conflict with men if not unthinkable is self-destructive" (2). This vision allows us to more closely consider femininity as the victimized, submissive, repressed sex. Needless to say, Wharton's womanly ruminations have often been associated to a neat criticism of female confinement of the American elite at the turn of the century.

If it is essentially easy to consider Wharton's characters as passive figures, a difficult task is to look at her women as powerful wives rather than submissive maidens. As Jane Morgan and other scholars have pointed out, Wharton's women occupy a position of inferiority, thus becoming the weak, servile element in her novels (7). However, we shall not be concerned here with the "weak" side of feminism and the powerless role of female subjects, but rather with their presence as passionate heroines, destructive women, and autonomous characters. In light of this, the concern of the present article is to explore socio-gender relations by looking at Wharton's ability to illustrate female roles, in perpetuation of matriarchal conceptions, imposing their force upon vulnerable and disempowered men. Wharton's novels and their recurrent references to the allegorical presence of mythology offer a new perspective on gender and therefore deserve larger investigation.

In this regard, Barbara Rowland and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea unravel many aspects of womanhood, redefining the sense of liberal feminism with the concept of female "empowerment". Drawing on feminist and queer readings, they claim that "Empowerment has meant extending the options of women beyond the domestic and public sphere". We can easily use this term today to talk about "the progress women have made in gaining access to previously closed male domains" (605). They furthermore argue that "this focus sought to extend to women certain 'rights' which typically were assumed to be granted to males" (607). We can agree that the twentieth century saw an incessant need to redefine gender roles and the search for alternative images of womanhood, leading to the construction, at least in literature, of

new liberal ladies. One consequence was the shift in the image of women from angels ensconced in the domestic sphere to emblems of autonomy. In her introduction to the Italian edition of James's *Daisy Miller* (1878) Donatella Izzo claims there was a strong ideology in Victorian society, which imposed the cult of "True Womanhood".<sup>3</sup> Female vocation became tied with domesticity, purity, submissiveness and sacrifice.

However, this interpretation does not conform to the masculine stereotypes described by Wharton, which offer examples of masculine passivism rather than manifesting patriarchal activism. In an article published in *The New York Times*, Janet Malcom supported this claim by affirming that "The World of Edith Wharton's novels is a dark nightmarish place peopled by weak, desperate men and destructive narcissistic women". To view her novels in these terms, one must recognize that the relationship between sexes in Wharton, as Jane Morgan has pointed out, can be described as one of subordination and domination, "in which a strong enslaving element, and a weak, servile one are joined in mutual dependence" (7). As such, the servile aspect in her novels is represented by men, whereas the strong presence is that of women. Indeed, the substantial references to mythology in Wharton's novels offer a strategy of female empowerment in which women tend to occupy a dominant position.

To make this point narrowly, examples of masculine passivism can be found in some of her most canonical novels, such as *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Reef* (1912), *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), in which Wharton offers examples of vulnerable and submissive men. As Wershoven thoroughly discussed, most of Wharton's men often become submitted to a romantic triangle in which they are unable to choose between the conventional woman and the intruder who cannot fit into the conventional world (Wershoven 75). This may certainly be true for the male protagonist in *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer, who is unable to choose between his fiancée (the conventional woman) and her cousin, countess Ellen Olenska (the intruder). Newland's passive behavior is dominated by the strong imposition of his fiancée, May Welland, as he becomes entangled in a feminist triangle in which he has no possibility to affirm his authority. Even more revealing is the novel *The Reef*, in which the masculine presence is not strongly felt. The male protagonist, once more intertwined between the old conventional

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<sup>3</sup> This is one of the many examples of Henry James interrogating notions of gender. Most of his works describe his interest in complex redefinitions of roles in androgynous or feminine portrayals "feminizing the male or masculinizing the female in an androgynous union" (Person 34), as is well illustrated in novels such as *The Bostonians* (1886) or the aforementioned *Daisy Miller* (1879). A reference to Henry James while discussing Wharton seems necessary, considering their relationship as contemporary writers sharing similarities in style and whose correspondence marks one of the great literary friendships of the twentieth century.

wife and the new modern woman, condemns them both unconsciously. As the narrative unfolds, the male protagonist becomes enveloped in the illusion of a romantic relation, thus being unable to impose his own will and authority.

Another obvious example is to be found in the anti-hero, male protagonist in *The House of Mirth*, Lawrence Selden. This character is the example par excellence of the passive gentleman hero, who is eventually subjected to the female protagonist's choice and who, as Wharton skillfully anticipates in the final chapter, realized "the cowardice which had driven him from her [Lily] at the very moment of attainment. Yes - he had always feared his fate and he was too honest to disown his cowardice" (254-255). In *The Custom of the Country* (1913) it is Ralph Marvell who no longer enjoys significant wealth and is abandoned by his disconsolate wife Undine, who tries to climb the social ladder by re-marrying for money. These observations point us toward what scholars have termed "lurking feminism" (Nevius 16), which might be used in this case to describe Wharton's representations of masculinity, displaying vulnerable, passive and unemotional men, with a persistent air of detachment. It must be acknowledged, however, that Wharton was sympathetic to her female characters, who are "generally admirable, courageous, creative and dynamic" (McDowell in Nevius 23). As one of the first critics to consider Wharton as a feminist, Josephine Jessup's interpretation of femininity supports the claim that "[s]eldom has a writer undertaken the enthronement of her sex with firmer consistency than Edith Wharton. For the space of twenty novels she attempts to show the woman preeminent, man trailing at heel" (14). In this vein, masculinity in Wharton's narratives is described by critics as the passive force in her novels.

It is in this light that I now turn to Rowland and Schwartz's sense of empowerment to redefine Wharton's gender attitudes, thus offering a reinterpretation of the traits of femininity expressed in her narratives. This unusual characterization will stress the focus on feminine empowerments, allow an assessment of notions of autonomy, responsibility and personal freedom, and in turn illustrate the evolution of gender at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Just by looking at some of Wharton's most popular novels, such as *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*, a strangely unexplored aspect of her work is made clear: the portrayal of mythology as a way to highlight the powerful aspect of womanhood. Without denying the fact that mythological comparisons were conventional among Wharton's literary contemporaries, she was capable of using these parallels to further reinforce the role of female characters who are per se indisputably free, autonomous, and strong. At numerous times in her works, but most elaborately in *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, characters themselves embody that sense of self-determination and freedom that is often illustrated by Wharton through recurrent references to goddesses of ancient mythology and their ability to

hold primary power. In this way, mythology becomes an effective analogy to further highlight women's sense of empowerment.

Following this thread, Wharton employs myth metaphorically in order to give women access to authority. Allusions to the images of goddesses in classical mythology can be found in both *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920) in the characters of Lily Bart and May Welland respectively. An array of mythological references is peppered throughout both novels, not only through comparisons, but cunningly showing how these allusions might be read as examples of female empowerment. I will focus my attention on these two novels which, I believe, offer examples of the use of mythology as Wharton's fictional strategy to illustrate women's ability to empower themselves, thus alienating themselves from patriarchies. As Thorstein Veblen has rightfully pointed out, within the narrow confines of the leisure class, well illustrated by Wharton, there was a persistent trend to think of the woman as "she may be subject to her master and however inferior to the male members of the social stratum in which her birth has placed her [...] and will act to place her above the common slave" (35).<sup>4</sup> Considering Veblen's critical approach as the place to begin tracing the counter-history of New York's leisure class and the description of Wharton's conceptualization of femininity through divinities, this image seems to cast an unflattering light on a possible return to a matriarchal society.

Anthropologist Marija Gimbutas redefined the position of women as matriarchs of primitive societies constructing the myth of matriarchal prehistory. She claims the existence of a prehistorical social system in which women held primary power, political leadership and moral strength. This rediscovered matriarchy, namely the presence of female goddesses in spiritual history, to a large extent does not exclude masculine supremacy and god worshipping. Rather, it manifests the possibility of gender egalitarianism. Drawing heavily on the predominance of a woman-centered society based on female goddess worshipping, Gimbutas argues that divinities of the past were female heroines able to exercise their power through religious doctrine. In this way, Gimbutas also correlates this theory to the myth of the "Mother Goddess" (also known as the "Great Mother archetype"), a composite of female deities from past cultures that considered the presence of female divinities as matriarchs of female power. In this light, considering the figure of the "Mother Goddess" as the personification of fertility, nature, destruction

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<sup>4</sup> Wharton's novels powerfully delineate the rituals and mainstream economy of New York's high society of the early 1900s. Veblen's emphasis on "conspicuous consumption" is the main model from which to start interpreting the depiction of this world through the standards of taste, education and culture, which are at the core of Wharton's narratives. For a deeper understanding of the social and economic theory of leisure see Veblen.



and creation, Gimbutas sees this divinity as the first historic example of a matriarchal society that was later subverted into a patriarchal one.<sup>5</sup>

Without denying the importance of this debate, Cynthia Eller questioned Gimbutas' theory re-discussing what she defined as "feminist matriarchism" by analyzing the role of divinities in prehistory in relation to feminism.<sup>6</sup> This concept allows her to more closely consider how women in ancient mythology were honored and lived together peacefully with men. Therefore, societies have not always supported mere masculine domination. There was a time, in ancient Greece and Roman times, when women handled power through spiritual practice. With respect to this premise, Eller contends that

There is theory of sex and gender embedded in the myth of patriarchal prehistory [...]. Women are defined quite narrowly as those who give birth and nurture, who identify themselves in terms of their relationship, and who are closely allied with the body, nature and sex usually for unavoidable reasons of their biological makeup. This image of women is drastically revalued in feminist matriarchal myth, such that is not a mark of shame and subordination but of *pride and power*. (7, my emphasis)

In light of this statement, female deities, and women in general, occupied, at least in ancient history, a highly gendered universe in which values of sovereignty and glory were primarily associated with female figures. Matriarchs lived in a society in which their power was equal or superior to that of men. According to recent scholarship on matriarchies of power, or in its popular conception, mother-goddess worshipping, "matrifocal social order existed long before in ancient societies in which patriarchy superseded matriarchy and Greek mythology, and the emphasis on the female worshipping showed a typical transition from feminist universalism to masculinist pantheon" (Lundskow 59). Aligning Wharton with this theory, what lies beneath the recurrent motif of the social struggle of femininity is her ability to imagine an alternative place for women through mythology. This view may also reflect Judith Taylor's analysis which affirms that in Wharton's novels, "The men are seen as standing as mortals in relation to the *goddess-like female characters* whose self-sacrifice underlines the men's unworthiness" (31).

Wharton inaugurates the image of liberal women in her first masterpiece, *The House of Mirth* (1905). When she casts Lily Bart as angelic and naïve, as her

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<sup>5</sup> For a preliminary discussion on spiritual matriarchy and the cult of the "Mother Goddess" see Neumann. Neumann analyses this figure from a psychological perspective, considering it as an essential component in the primordial image of the psyche.

<sup>6</sup> Eller's work has been considered as a firm critique of Gimbutas' theory, questioning whether her archeological findings effectively admitted the existence of a prehistoric matrifocal or matriarchal society.

name rightfully confirms (Lily as the flower, fragile, symbolic, ornamental), Wharton rightfully constructs a character imbued with the social impositions of her time. If this is the conduit through which the narration flows, portraying Lily as the doomed victim of her own social milieu, beneath the lines of a seemingly weak character there is the image of an autonomous woman. Self-centered and determined to find a suitable husband, she refuses to be objectified by men who discourage her from her purposeful choice to marry for love. As the narrator reports: "There were moments when she longed blindly for anything different, anything strange, remote and untried [...], picturing her usual life in a new setting" (Wharton, *House of Mirth* 79). This vision casts Lily as a proto-feminist character in her attempt to preserve social status, while constantly refusing the possible income of marriage. As the novel's plot unfolds, we learn Lily shows her rejection of cultural expectations, choosing freedom instead of a financially secure marriage. In a more significant sense, recent criticism commented that "[g]ambling with her potential marriage options gives Lily the sense of having personal freedom in a society where these women were very few" (Fitzpatrick 7). Lily Bart is therefore caught in conflicting desires, between self-autonomy and social imposition, eventually opting for personal freedom. To view the novel in these terms one must recognize that Lily exercises her power and control over her own fate and in this way, despite her consequential downfall, she re-empowers her position within the social patriarchal elite (cf. *idem* 8). By taking into consideration the distinction between self-autonomy and female roles in perpetuation of patriarchal conceptions, Wharton uses these terms with a mutual significance. By equating her female characters with powerful mythological figures, she illustrates the reinforcement of their position as powerful women who are able to choose and impose their authority both on men and society.

What becomes increasingly apparent throughout the novel is Wharton's repetitive association of Lily to mythological archetypes. One of mythology's major icons of power, Diana, might be associated with Lily's figure.<sup>7</sup> Even without explicitly citing the myth, the descriptions of Lily Bart as ornamentally beautiful and strongly fierce form a parallel with this mythical divinity. In her study on the role of mythology in literature, Gil Haroian-Guerin contends that at the dawn of the nineteenth century authors were trying to reshape and re-evaluate, in their panoramic texts, the traditional representations of women to illustrate new dynamic female heroes (1). Far further, "one

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<sup>7</sup> Being associated with woodland and childbirth, Diana – Hellenic goddess of the hunt – was worshipped in ancient Rome as the Virgin protector of women and nature. Diana's symbolism is mainly associated with the naturalistic world. It includes a wreath, an arch with arrows (emblem of hunting), and a stag. She was also known as one of the three "maiden goddesses" (Diana, Minerva and Vesta) who declared under oath never to marry. Here again, a similar refusal to marry can be paralleled with that of Lily Bart's in Wharton's novel.

of the most potent models for this new heroic type was the goddess Diana [...] that became an ideal one for modern female heroes" (Haroian-Guerin 1). Drawing on this parallelism, the Diana-hero is thus achieved by Bart through the *hieros gamos*, in simplistic terms, the sacred marriage. Indeed, the novel centers on Lily's struggle to achieve her own *hieros gamos*. Following Wharton's description, Lily Bart inevitably fits the archetype of a Diana-like figure "taller than the other attendant Virgins" (169). This claim allows us to more closely consider the character of Lily Bart as a divinized figure to whom everyone pays homage to her as a superior being. By way of example: Trenor is obsessed by her divine qualities, Rosedale appreciates her noble directness and her ability to assume command at every situation rebelling against social impositions (Haroian-Guerin 170). In so doing, Lily Bart undoubtedly fits the pattern of a Diana-type.

Recently, critics have supported this statement claiming that "seemingly, Wharton knew quite well the myth of Diana" (Schiesari 16), as the reference to this divinity appears in other works, such as in the poem "Artemis to Actaeon" (1909) and a short story published in the Summer issue of *Scribner's Magazine* entitled "The Daunt Diana" (1909). The story alludes to the myth of the goddess in the protagonist's obsessive passion for Roman antiquities and his collection of a bronze dedicated to Diana. As the male protagonist observes, acknowledging the power of the goddess, "She rules there at last, she shines and hovers above him" (Wharton 60). She rules and shines as Diana did in ancient mythology.

Representing fertility, hunting and nature, thus being also the protector of womanhood, the mythical image of Diana is immediately referenced to a matriarchy of power. As such, Diana contains all the traits that Lily Bart exhibits. Moreover, Bart is also an excellent huntress - "a maiden of the chase" (Haroian-Guerin 197). As Diana was the goddess of the "hunt", in a similar way Lily "haunts" for the perfect husband, eventually refusing the option of a conventional marriage, and forcefully condemns herself through personal choices. The triumphant role of Lily as an authoritative figure of masculine admiration is captured in a memorable passage in which she impersonates the glorious figure of Mrs Lloyd in the *tableau vivant* of Joshua Reynolds's painting:

The audience must have felt a thrill of contrast as the curtain suddenly parted on a piece which was simply and undisguisedly the portrait of Miss Bart. Here there could be no mistaking the predominance of personality [...]. Her pale draperies, and the background foliage against which she stood, served only to relieve the long dryad-like curves that swept upward from her poised foot to her lifted arm. The noble buoyancy of her attitude, its suggestion of soaring grace, revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty that Selden always felt in her presence, yet lost the sense of when he was not with her. (Wharton, *House of Mirth* 106)

This scene highlights Lily's ability to dominate with her beauty, which "expanded like a flower in sunlight" (Wharton 108), and the supremacy of her personality, so strong to capture men's attention, and being eventually flattered and idolized as a goddess. In this passage, we are shown how Wharton sees Lily as a mythologized beauty. As divinities in matriarchal societies were worshipped for their appeal and power, this scene testifies Lily's ability to share connotations that belonged to ancient divinities. Her beauty and prestige, enriched by the foliage, framing her portrait recasts her as part of the natural entourage creating the victorious image of goddess Diana.<sup>8</sup> As Wharton subsequently writes, "the completeness of her *triumphs* gave her an intoxicating sense of recovered *power*" (107, my emphasis). Furthermore, her posture and the tunic, rigorously white, as well as her uplifted arm allude to the traditional image of the goddess holding the arch of triumphant victory. As such, Lily Bart gravitates toward a "Dianesque vigor" (Haroian-Guerin 196).

This vision with its emphasis on her celebratory sense of grace and allurement is well emphasized by Wharton in her description of Lily seeing herself reflected in the mirror while leaving Selden's house:

She paused before the mantelpiece, studying herself in the mirror while she adjusted her veil. The attitude revealed the long slope of her slender sides, which gave a kind of wild- wood grace to her outline – as though she were a captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing-room; and Selden reflected that it was the same streak of sylvan freedom in her nature that lent such savour to her artificiality. (Wharton, *House of Mirth* 12)

Empowering the character of Lily through her aesthetic appeal and independence, a mythological allusion can be detected as well. The "sylvan freedom" to whom Wharton refers in this scene reinforces the image of fairyland and the association of Lily Bart to Diana who "stands at the sylvan rites of marriage" (Haroian-Guerin 193). Nature, considered as a powerful force for the myth and being recurrently evoked in the narrative, contributes to solidify the role of Lily as the Diana-hero who is thus able to reaffirm her true powerful Self. This time, however, the comparison is made by Lawrence Selden, who equates himself with Perseus, rescuing Andromeda, who is being punished by the gods for her beauty. In the narrator's words, "He knew that Perseus's task is not done when he has loosed Andromeda's chains, for her limbs are numb with bondage, and she cannot rise and walk, and clings to him with dragging arms as he beats back to land with his burden" (Wharton,

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<sup>8</sup> Another symbolic comparison in this scene lies in the imitation of Mrs Lloyd who, in Reynold's painting, carves the name of her husband in the trunk of a tree. This image might be further interpreted as another connection with Diana's divinity and her relation to nature.

*House of Mirth* 125).<sup>9</sup> Selden wishes to save Lily, but he fails to do so. It is Lily who chooses her own fate, thus leaving no possibility for Selden to save her. The fact that Lily, as Andromeda, “cannot rise and walk” prefigures the novel’s ending, with Selden’s impossibility to rescue a woman who was determined to choose her own fate. Despite the quote’s reference to the traditional hierarchy of a patriarchal culture in which powerful heroes rescue weak maids, the novel’s conclusion insists on the tragic downfall of a woman who no one was able to spare. Lily’s death – she dies in poverty and with no husband – confirms her role as a passionate and powerful woman determined to refuse social impositions, thus becoming the victim of a society on the verge of female emancipation, which still left no space for free women. Selden’s imaginary sacrifice to save Lily remains an elusive utopia as he reaches her apartment, seemingly too late to save her, eventually leaning on her dead body to tell her “the word which made all clear” (256). This interpretation leads us to consider Lily as the symbolic portrayal of a Diana-type which corresponds to the ideal of “the goddess who was independent in her own free and green realm” (Haroian-Guerin 199).

In an arguably more evident way, mythological associations to female empowerment become even more prominent in *The Age of Innocence*. In a metaphor of purity and power, the supremacy of womanhood is well exemplified by the character of May Welland. In the opening scene she is described as “the young girl with lilies-of-the-valley.”<sup>10</sup> And he – Newland Archer – “contemplated her absorbed young face with a thrill of possessorship in which pride [...] was mingled with a tender reverence for her abysmal purity” (26). The delicacy with which the figure of May is recurrently drawn throughout the novel insists on portraying her as a symbol of innocence and virginal purity.

As the novel’s plot unfolds, Wharton’s allusions to the sacred find more emphasis in clear references to divinities. In *The Age of Innocence* the image of May as a symbol of grace and innocence is repeatedly compared, once more, to the powerful myth of Diana. Allusions to the godliness of this symbol find explanation in Diana’s desire to protect her family, which is equated here with May’s wish to create a permanent family unit. In addition, her name, May, expresses the rejuvenation of Spring and Diana’s control over nature.

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<sup>9</sup> In Greek mythology, the hero Perseus rescues Andromeda, who is chained naked to a sacrificial rock. Beheading the monster and saving Andromeda, who has fainted into the sea, he carries her to the altar as his wife. Given the novel’s tragic ending, this image is a mere projection of Selden’s seeing himself as the male hero who saves the vulnerable woman.

<sup>10</sup> Lilies are the flowers that always accompany May throughout the novel as an epitome of her innocence. In his daily routine Newland purposefully stops at the florist to send May a fresh bouquet of lilies-from-the-valley. As already mentioned for Lily before her, this flower is another image of goddess Diana as it spiritually represents this exemplar of mythology.

In May's triumphant entrance in one of New York's social and cultural gatherings, Newland Archer is inevitably overwhelmed by the "aura of divinity" embodied by his fiancée as she appears on the threshold of the drawing-room: "Archer saw May Welland entering with her mother. In her dress of white and silver, with a wreath of silver blossoms in her hair, the tall girl looked like a Diana just alighting from the chase" (71). May's performance as a mere display, as were most women of the same higher social milieu, is correlated with the figure of Diana (also wearing the wreath of flowers) in order to provide a sense of personal force to a seemingly fragile character. Among the numerous depictions of May, in which she often appears "tall and silver shining like a young Diana" (259), there is one which confirms her role as the leading lady of this novel. At the end of an archery competition May, the winner, receives as a gift a brooch in the form of a bow with arrows. Her posture and the description of her figure are inevitably contemplated as those of a victorious Diana.

May Welland was just coming out of the tent. In her white dress, with a pale green ribbon about the waist and a wreath of ivy on her hat, she had the same Diana-like aloofness as when she had entered the Beaufort ball-room on the night of her engagement [...] She had her bow and arrow in her hand, the attitude was so full of classic grace that a murmur of appreciation followed her appearance, and Archer felt the glow of proprietorship [...]. No one had the Nymph-like ease of his wife, when, with tense muscles and happy frown, she bent her soul upon some feat of strength. (184)

The sense of proprietorship illustrated in the passage clearly expresses May's control over her husband, Newland. May wins the competition, as she is also able to keep her husband and secure her matrimony plotting against her cousin, as triumphant Diana who hunts and imposes her power as a female goddess. The reinforcement of this image of divinity implies a connection with the episode, described by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* between Diana and Actaeon, who is punished by the goddess for having provocatively surprised her while bathing nude in a pond.<sup>11</sup> In Ovid's words,

Would that he watched, not felt, the hounds' fierce savagery! Now they are all around him, tearing deep their master's flesh, the stag that is no stag; and not until so many countless wounds had drained away his lifeblood, was the wrath, it's said, of chaste Diana satisfied. (in Knox and McKeown 270)

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<sup>11</sup> This famous episode is well described by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*. When the young hunter Actaeon accidentally surprises Diana and other nymphs bathing naked in a pond, she punishes him by transforming him into a stag. This episode was rewritten by Ovid. Wharton also published a poem dedicated to the figure of Actaeon entitled "Artemis to Actaeon" (1909). Artemis was the Roman name for the Greek goddess Diana.

Just as Actaeon in the legend is punished by Diana, May eventually acts in a similar way with Newland, sending her cousin Ellen back to Europe, and then getting pregnant, “punishing” him, in the very moment he ultimately refuses marriage. May’s ability to plot against Newland’s affair with her cousin offers a comparison to this mythological episode. As Diana punishes Actaeon, May, discovering the love affair between her fiancée and her cousin, forces her husband to marry her and eventually keeps him tied to herself through an unexpected pregnancy. When Newland finally decides to leave May to follow Ellen, May’s firm voice exercises her punishment, as if “each syllable tapped like a little hammer on his brain”, and she states, “I’m afraid you can’t dear, unless you bring me with you...” (Wharton, *Age of Innocence* 288).

We might consequently draw an easy conclusion, considering May playing pure innocence while acting cunning intelligence. The emphasis on her strength is increasingly expressed as she gradually dismantles the love affair between her fiancée, Newland Archer, and her cousin Ellen Olenska. But here, again, it is necessary to insist upon the mythological correspondence between May and Ellen, who can be considered as two similar and yet quite different examples of womanhood. As Tonya F. Stansberry recently pointed out, “[i]n *The Age of Innocence* the heroine, countess Ellen Olenska, challenges the social mores that confine women” (33), refusing children and matrimony, two of the greatest entanglements of women in Victorian America. “Wharton makes us see Helen of Troy in Ellen Olenska” (Dekker 56). She may in fact have chosen the name as a reference to Helen, known for her beauty and often associated with passion and the ideal of aesthetic appeal, as Ellen appears on the scene as the scandalous independent wife divorced from a Polish husband. By causing the collapse of two worlds, marriage and love, she personifies seduction and lust, whereas May offers the sense of both innocence and security. Ellen generates a fracture and tension similar to that provided by the Helen of Greek mythology. The narrator rightfully juxtaposes these two epitomes of femininity: “Ellen Olenska was no other woman [...] and then there was May, and habit, and honor, and all the old decencies that he – Newland – and his people had always believed in...” (Wharton, *Age of Innocence* 259).

As Wharton dwells upon the faithful portrayal of women following the ethos of social duty, the female force in the novel is May who, by way of grace and naivety, manipulates society on her own terms to achieve her goals: a suitable husband and a solid marriage. Despite the fact that the nature of marriage at the time presumed that a wife was submitted to her husband, May reverses this conception as she represents the dominant aspect of the couple placing the husband in a position of extreme subordination. May hunts for a husband, as Lily Bart tries to do with the *hieros gamos*, as she wins the archery contest, a metaphor for her life victory with Newland. Even though both May and Ellen, through the allusions to mythological archetypes, might represent

two examples of women who are free to choose and make their own choices, May's manipulation and "victory", if we might call it so, comes at the cost of ruining Ellen Olenska, eventually securing her own position within New York's social elite. May is much more than a mere embodiment of traditional conventions and stereotypes: she encapsulates female self-autonomy through the imposition of her will on others.

Both examples show how Wharton's women have been able to express their self-autonomy and their female roles in perpetuation of patriarchal conceptions, exercising their force upon vulnerable disempowered men and sometimes women, given May's exercise of will upon Countess Olenska. Whether they are determined to secure their marriage, refuse it for personal freedom, or to endure being scorned by society for their choice and eventually condemned to death, Wharton's women are exemplars of self-autonomy. These unusual characterizations might, on the one hand, reinforce femininity, and on the other, disempower masculinity. As shown, in Wharton's novels men rarely personify the authority of patriarchy. As exemplified by both Lawrence Selden and Newland Archer, they eventually become submitted to women's choices, lacking the force and the courage to impose their wills on either society or feminist attitudes. Masculinity becomes for Wharton disempowered by the force of women, well exemplified by the strategy of mythological tropes. The role of social reformism is undoubtedly taken by women who shape, reframe, and envision their potential, outside of their roles. As such, the masculine presence displays passivism and succumbs to the female personality.

In the persistent format of the "trapped female" (Stansberry 35), Wharton uses mythology to channel gender subordination and hierarchical imposition. Yet, we might draw the conclusion that mythology is, indeed, one effective literary trope used to run parallel with the myth of female autonomy and with a sense of empowerment. Borrowing Stansberry's recent appraisal: "Mythology in Wharton aimed to uplift and embrace the power of the feminine" (36). In this sense, the woman becomes the mythological "Other" representing femininity through a sense of non-stereotypical empowerment.

Following Wharton's construction of female roles, we see a move toward modernity, a shift from the persistent ostracism that excluded women from social activism. She emphasizes the vulnerability of an elitist world through her literary critiques of an upper class whose gender roles are threatened by women's incessant need for autonomy. Her protagonists, often enveloped in the illusions of a world as fascinating as its conventions, are able to envision their potentiality outside of social impositions. In a time of rethinking gender issues, there emerged a need to combine social criticism with female emancipation. Simply put, the modern origins of literary feminism begin with Wharton's usage of mythology employed as a narrative strategy to represent the American society of the early twentieth century, well on its



way to producing a metamorphosis of sexes and a return to egalitarianism from a matriarchal perspective, re-evaluating the traditional representation of women. Here is one of the main tropes of her work, providing a purely feminist stylistic signature that helps to include Wharton among those American writers who illustrated new traits of liberal femininity.

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