

### **Ghostly Desires in Edith Wharton's 'Miss Mary Pask'**

...it is in the warm darkness of the prenatal fluid far below our conscious reason that the faculty dwells with which we apprehend the ghosts we may not be endowed with the gift of seeing.

(Wharton 1968c)

Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That's because they need femininity to be associated with death; it's the jitters that gives them a hard-on! for themselves! They need to be afraid of us.

(Cixous 1976)

In her Preface to *Ghosts*, Edith Wharton not only dismisses the question 'Do you believe in ghosts?' as 'pointless' (1968c: 875) but also subverts it entirely in her story 'Miss Mary Pask'. As a tale of the (para)normal, a ghost story that isn't a ghost story, 'Miss Mary Pask' has received little attention within a niche of Wharton's work which itself has been treated largely as a collection of New Critical artefacts. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, for example, devotes scarce commentary to Wharton's ghost stories except to note that as a group they tend to centre on the theme of either 'the spectral double' who reveals aspects of a haunted protagonist or 'the interloper' spirit who disrupts the relationship of a happily married couple (1977: 300). Annette Zilversmit shows a more nuanced interest in Wharton's writing of the genre 'as a metaphor of internal fears' (1987: 296), however her reading is concerned less with situating the works in a larger context than with describing the general psychological features of its

protagonists. A notable exception is Jenni Dyman's thorough and critically comprehensive study of Wharton's ghost stories in which the broad contours of Wharton's personal life serve as points of reference for impulses running through the tales as a whole, though her analysis often reverts to self-contained readings of individual stories (1996). More to the point, the fixation on literal ghosts in these works comes at the expense of 'Miss Mary Pask' as the most quietly uncanny haunting of them all—and, as such, it invites an interpretation from a confluence of feminist, psychoanalytic, and biographical perspectives in which none is sufficient without the others and none holds a dominant position.

This invitation begins, in fact, with the story's title. While the prefix 'Miss' calls attention to Mary's status as an unmarried woman or spinster—an 'old maid' as the narrator repeatedly calls her in the first few pages—her first name may be understood as an allusion to the Virgin Mary, whose apparently sexless condition is evoked by numerous references to her white garments as well as an old villager's description of her as 'the American lady who always used to dress in white' (1968b: 375). The most suggestive component of her name, however, is 'Pask', which finds a homonym in 'Pasch', the word for Passover or Easter, hinting at her 'resurrection' when the narrator visits her. Her surname also finds correspondence in the pasqueflower or pasquefleur, a plant which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'blossom[s] in April, with bell-shaped purple flowers clothed with silky hairs', and according to *Webster's New World Dictionary* is 'of early spring' with flowers that are 'bluish' and 'solitary'. As a woman who sleeps in the corner of the garden and returns to life in an 'early spring' of her own, Mary may indeed be likened to this plant, whose 'bluish' and 'solitary' flowers are not unlike the finger tips the narrator describes as 'blue under the yellowing nails' (1968b: 378).

While both 'Pasch' and pasqueflower have a common lineage in the Old French 'pasche' (from which the modern French word for Easter, 'Pâques', is derived), an etymology that specifically connects Mary with the country in which she lives, she is also a resident of Brittany, where the predominant language, particularly during Wharton's lifetime, was Breton rather than French. Although this distinction is unmentioned in 'Miss Mary Pask', Wharton makes conspicuous use of it in 'Kerfol', a story in which the narrator's friend advises him to avoid asking peasants for directions to the estate because '[t]hey don't understand French, and they would pretend they did and mix you up' (1968a: 282). In this sense, the setting is removed both linguistically and geographically from the mainstream of society, suggesting that certain patriarchal assumptions about language and culture are no longer valid. Here Mary can invite the narrator to interact with her on her own terms.

Mary becomes, in fact, increasingly identified with—and, in some ways, indistinguishable from—this region whose landscape borders the ocean, which itself is a traditional female symbol, near the 'Baie des Trépassés' or 'Bay of the Dead.' Her house at Morgat—or Morgue—is discovered in the midst of an 'uncertain autumn weather, one day all blue and silver, the next shrieking gales or driving fog' (1968b: 373), signalling a blurring of boundaries, a breaking down of solid definition realized in Mary herself, who, like the weather, embodies a subversion of binaries in which differences or opposites are blended and intermixed. In this story that turns out to be not a ghost story, the narrator's terror arises from his inability to define and classify Mary, whom he later describes as having 'unnaturally red cheeks' (1968b: 179) even as he is convinced of her ghostliness—this woman who is dead *and* not dead—along with a 'cracked twittering voice which was at one moment like an old woman's quaver, at another like a boy's falsetto' (1968b: 377-8). In fact, she troubles the

narrator's dualistic, either/or mode of consciousness from the outset of the story: he believes Mary has refused to join Grace in the United States, for example, because *either* she dislikes Horace *or* she likes him too much. As he approaches Mary's house he is further confounded by an increasing blindness, an obscuring of vision that forces him to notice the 'endless modulations of the ocean's voice, so familiar in every corner of the Breton land that one gets to measure distances by them rather than by visual means' (1968b: 375). While the oceanic/female voice presages Mary's later speech, his decidedly male gaze is rendered useless in a darkness and mist that descends '[a]s suddenly as a pair of hands clapped over one's eyes' (1968b: 374). He becomes anxious as he is 'enveloped' in 'the densest night' and a 'veil' of sea fog, forced to confront, in a telling phrase, 'a wet blackness impenetrable' (1968b: 375).

Janet Beer and Avril Horner emphasize the parodic effect of these details, associating the exaggerated descriptions and Gothic tropes with moments 'when the sexual appetite of women is at the heart of Wharton's concern in the narrative' (2003: 270). They go on to establish specific links between 'Miss Mary Pask' and *Wuthering Heights*, culminating in what they describe as a 'challenge [to] the *grand récit* of gender difference, transforming the stuff of Gothic nightmare into fictions that offer a wry critique of conventional attitudes to desire' (2003: 274). Parody aside, the story's language becomes especially revealing in light of Jane Gallop's discussion of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, most particularly in *The Daughter's Seduction* as she examines the relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis by bringing them into a 'provocative contact [that] opens each to what is not encompassed by the limits of its identity' (1982: xii). In doing so Gallop rearticulates Luce Irigaray's notion that psychoanalysis privileges solids over fluids and that the predominant theory of

sexuality is 'phallic.' This 'phallic sexual theory, [or] male sexual science', Gallop writes,

is homosexual, a sexuality of sames, of identities, excluding otherness. Heterosexuality, once it is exposed as an exchange of women between men, reveals itself as a mediated form of homosexuality. All penetration, considered to be sadistic penetration of the body's defensive envelope, is thought according to the model of anal penetration. The dry anus suffers pain; the penetrated is a humiliated man. But the vagina (unknown in the phallic phase, says Freud) has a juicy receptivity which makes penetration not painful, but a free-flowing exchange, leaving no solid borders to be violated. The vagina flows before penetration. It does not wait for man to break its seal, but hospitably prepares a welcome for his entry. (1982: 84)

The narrator becomes a participant in this system of 'exchange of women between men' when he reveals his acquaintance with Mary Pask through her sister, whom he knows through his friend Horace. 'Even Grace would not have interested me particularly', he remarks, 'if she hadn't happened to marry one of my oldest friends...' (1968b: 374). This system of exchange (i.e., marriage) has placed the two sisters on separate continents and prevented them from being together since Grace's wedding day. Furthermore, by describing the Breton setting—and, by extension, Mary herself—as 'impenetrable', the narrator exhibits the sort of homosexual impulse Gallop describes, in which interaction is a probing, a forcing open of a rigidly-defined identity. He is unable to recognize the mist and darkness as precursors to the 'juicy receptivity' of Mary's desire for the type of 'free-flowing exchange' which

characterizes female sexual experience. In such an encounter both parties must be active participants; 'dominance' no longer applies.

Hélène Cixous also addresses this tendency to project male sexual standards onto all aspects of human interaction in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', arguing that the male point of view conceptualizes interaction as a 'power relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a "dark continent" to penetrate and to "pacify."' After '[c]onquering her', she adds, the male agent makes 'haste to depart from her borders, to get out of sight, out of body' (1976: 877). As an incorporeal ghost, Mary has literally 'no solid borders to be violated' (a confluent phrase from both Gallop and Cixous), making it increasingly difficult for the narrator to imagine himself as conqueror. As Cixous remarks, '[o]ne can understand how man [the narrator], confusing himself with his penis and rushing in for the attack, might feel resentment and fear of being 'taken' by the woman, of being lost in her, absorbed, or alone' (1976: 877). She begins to envelop him in the very moment she becomes impossible to penetrate, and his subsequent panic at becoming 'absorbed' in her causes him to bolt.

Beer and Horner recognize a fairly broad biographical context for Wharton's parodic urges in her ghost stories, noting generally that she 'most exercises the parodic strain in her later work' (2003: 279) and, further, 'Wharton chose to use parody at this late stage of her career to raise subversive questions about the sexual politics of early twentieth-century Europe and America' (2003: 274), acknowledging in addition that this phase of Wharton's writing coincided with the upheaval of the First World War and its subsequent disillusionment with Victorian value systems. They neglect to note, however, sharper personal concerns such as her unhappy marriage to Teddy Wharton, the conclusion of her affair with Morton Fullerton, and

indeed the deeper matrix of her upbringing. In *A Feast of Words*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff studies Wharton's fiction as a therapeutic activity in which she attempts to erase the 'solid borders' between herself and the emotions that her society—and her mother—had taught her to deny (1977). At a young age, in fact, Wharton was socialized to become a paragon of 'niceness', taught to fear the intensity of longings considered contrary to the cool composure expected of young ladies of her station. Wolff associates this fear with the 'formless' horror Wharton describes in the original manuscript version of *A Backward Glance* (published, appropriately enough, as 'An Autobiographical Postscript' in *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*), a fear which manifested itself most strongly at the end of her daily walks:

During the last few yards, and while I waited on the door-step for the door to be opened, I could feel it behind me, upon me; and if there was any delay in the opening of the door I was seized by a choking agony of terror. It did not matter who was with me, for no one could protect me; but, oh, the rapture of relief if my companion had a latch-key, and we could get in at once, before It caught me! (1973: 276)

Wolff reads this episode as evidence of the psychological conflict generated by Wharton's upbringing; the house, she argues, represented for Wharton 'Mother's realm', while the outside world stood for 'freedom and independence.' Pausing on the threshold allowed Wharton to sense the tension between these two regions because 'being away from Mother offered the chance to feel freely and to grow self-sufficient; nevertheless, being away from Mother's control opened her to the risk of some terrible danger—being thrown to the Wolf or to some fate even worse' (1977: 39).

'The Wolf' was the potential (and forbidden) outbreak of unrestrained emotion which, at least in Wharton's mind, threatened to devour her if it was allowed to rear its ugly head. The Wolf had to be held in check.

Mary Pask commits the social taboo of letting the Wolf escape from her when the narrator signals his intention to leave. She begins to cry and, in a climactic monologue, begs him to stay with her, confessing that she is

Lonely, lonely! If you *knew* how lonely! It was a lie when I told you I wasn't. And now you come, and your face looks friendly... and you say you're going to leave me! No-no-no—you shan't! Or else, why did you come? It's cruel...' (1968b: 380-1).

Unlike Wharton, who is caught only momentarily (and terrifyingly) in limbo before she evades the Wolf and reenters her mother's regimented world, Mary quickly dispenses with her 'coquetry' for unmediated emotion, exhibiting a fluidity, an immediacy and insatiability echoed in 'the sea whose hungry voice I heard asking and asking. . .' (1968b: 376). It is exactly this 'wet' voice that, issuing from Mary herself, paralyzes the narrator's phallic pleasure and renders him incapable of speaking in her presence.

The act of speaking may be understood further in the context of Wharton's childhood when, according to Wolff, her imagination began a lifelong association of her emotions with the ability to communicate. Wharton believed that

words, even 'the sound of words apart from their meaning', [could] offer the promise of an escape from loneliness and helplessness. The will to survive, to

take what Mother would not give, becomes in very little girlhood identical with the compulsion to manipulate language. Language is the link to other human beings, human beings more responsive than Mother; language allows for the articulation of demands and thus for a mastery over the inarticulate passivity of earliest childhood. (1977: 25-6)

It is exactly this 'articulation of demands', this profusion of words and emotion, that constitutes the climax of the story. 'Oh, stay with me, stay with me', Mary cries, 'just tonight . . . . It's so sweet and quiet here . . . . No one need know . . . no one will ever come and trouble us' (1968b: 381). The aloof narrator, fittingly enough, is silenced; his one line to Mary during his entire visit, 'You live here alone?' (1968b: 379) simply confirms Mary's status as an autonomous and self-sufficient human being. Not only is each of his subsequent attempts at speech aborted ('I stammered something inarticulate', etc.), but he also finds himself unable to write a letter informing Grace about his experience afterward despite the apparent safety and distance such a medium would provide.

The act of writing, in fact, haunts this story in other ways as well. Though Wolff carefully analyses the horror that assailed Wharton at the end of her daily walks, she neglects the broader context in which these episodes occurred. Wharton had recently recovered from an illness, during which time she had been reading a great deal—in particular a 'super-natural tale' which she singles out as 'perilous reading' (1973: 275). Allyson Stack emphasizes this element of Wharton's experience, particularly as the tale triggered a relapse, such was the affective power of it (2005: 63-4). Stack goes on to discuss the role of Laplanche's enigmatic signifier—i.e., a message which 'signifies *to*' someone without necessarily 'signifying *of*'

anything in particular—in order to reformulate the act of interpretation as an opportunity for psychic development, primarily because 'these communication situations have the power to reactivate the primal scene' (2005: 66-7). In this respect, Wharton's work as an author may be understood as a productive response to the enigmatic signifiers of her own psyche, no longer tormented by them as 'formless horrors' but instead, according to her memoir, *A Backward Glance*, shaping them into characters to suit her fiction (1933: 202).

Cixous devotes much of her work in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' to describing—and enacting—writing of this type as an expression of female power, 'writing through [her] body' to explode the rationality and detached 'objectivity' of male discourse. Her most vivid metaphor is, of course, the Medusa, who as an embodiment of female sexual power cannot be held directly by the male gaze. She must be decapitated; she must be severed from her body. As a Medusa-figure herself, Cixous articulates the 'waves', the 'floods', the 'luminous torrents' of passion that went unspoken in her youth because she 'was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a . . . divine composure' (1976: 876). For Cixous, writing (which includes verbal articulation) is the necessary act, the praxis that allows female desire to exist as a palpable condition of human relationships. And like Cixous, Wharton also came to writing later in her lifetime and used it to reinscribe within herself her own feelings from which she was separated (in a typical Medusa-like 'beheading') at an early age. As a 'nice' girl Wharton was as inarticulate, as mute—as alienated from her own feelings—as the narrator reveals himself to be. 'And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing', Cixous declares as if she were comparing her youth with Wharton's. 'I didn't open my mouth' (1976: 876). Mary, however, does open her mouth, her status as a 'ghost' allowing her to cry out to the narrator 'the unuttered

loneliness of a lifetime, to express at last what the living woman had always had to keep dumb and hidden.' Only when the narrator is a safe distance away from Mary does he contemplate the depth of her sadness, unconsciously identifying with her and confessing that '[t]he thought [of her loneliness] moved me curiously—in my weakness I lay and wept over it' (1968b: 382). In the one moment he allows himself to shed tears (to make water) as Mary did he finds it 'curious' and attributes it to his 'weakness.'

When he attempts to regain his former composure, however, the narrator relapses into the fever he contracted during his travels, mimicking Wharton's response to her 'perilous reading' as a child. It also parallels some of the ailments Wharton suffered during the first twelve years of her marriage, for which by all accounts she was entirely unprepared. Hermione Lee sums up the prevailing view amongst Wharton's biographers that her 'psychosomatic reaction' to the marriage included 'asthma, hay fever, frequent heavy colds and 'flu, bronchitis and lung-congestion . . . . She also suffered from exhaustion, persistent nausea, and anaemia' (2007: 77-8). Wolff similarly notes that almost immediately after her wedding Wharton began to suffer from neurasthenia accompanied by episodes of intense nausea—Wharton's way of 'talking with her body' (an unhealthy talk, Cixous might add, occasioned by repression). By discouraging her from taking the nourishment that would assuage her 'hunger', Wharton's nausea physically enacted her self-denial: 'I want too much; I will annihilate everyone I care about; I will be consumed by my own appetites; I will be alone and starving' (1977: 52-3). Along similar lines, the narrator comes down with a self-censoring 'fever'—the heat, the passion he represses in his daily life—from which he can recover only by avoiding further contact with the woman who has exposed him to the power of his own emotions. We discover at the

end of the story that illness has played an integral role in Mary's character as well; her fervent condition has been occasioned by a cataleptic trance, an ailment which causes its sufferer to experience a total loss of consciousness and feeling. It seems that she has awakened from this seizure (not unlike the cultural 'trance' which held Wharton and Cixous) to a new consciousness, and for the first time—at least to the narrator's knowledge—Mary expresses her desire. She has recovered from the silence and inhibition of her own passion; but her 'cure' disturbs the narrator's *modus operandi*.

Immediately after their encounter the narrator dwells upon the 'dead Mary Pask who was so much more real to me than ever the living one had been' (1968b: 382) and resolves to return to Morgat at a later date. Although his impulse suggests a possible recognition of Mary as a subject and perhaps a movement towards reconnecting himself with his own emotions and thereby erasing the borders that define his stolid personality, the terms of his resolution reveal an urge to hold her at the distance afforded by her apparent death. 'I made up my mind', he states, 'when I was up again, to drive back to the place (*in broad daylight*, this time), to hunt out the *grave* in the garden' (1968b: 382, emphasis added). He plans to return in the rational daylight that he knows will prevent her from reappearing, seeking not her but her grave in order to 'appease the poor ghost with some flowers' (1968b: 382). Comfortable only at the site of her dead body, he intends to offer her a trivialized symbol (*pasqueflowers*, perhaps) of her own emotional vivacity rather than a gesture that might constitute the beginnings of a genuine relationship.

The narrator's unwillingness to reach out to Mary or even acknowledge her advances calls attention to a recurrent theme in Wharton's fiction: the inability to interact with another living being. This motif figures prominently in works such as 'Kerfol', in which another nameless male narrator becomes fascinated with a dead

woman named Anne de Cornault. This story, which also takes place during a Breton autumn, shows a 'solitary-minded' and 'unsociable' narrator inclined to express more feeling for Anne than for either of his living friends (1968a: 282). Like many male characters inhabiting Wharton's fiction, he prefers a woman who has been silenced and quite literally made into an object of his amusement rather than the troublesome reality of a thinking and feeling individual. Perhaps the most significant indicator of the narrator's character is the behavior of Anne's ghostly dogs at the beginning of the story (1968a: 284-6). Though previously they have manifested her passion by killing her husband, they now reflect the narrator's condition by remaining silent and keeping their distance from him. They are as determined to avoid contact with him as they were to kill the man who tormented Anne, impassively 'observing' him much in the way he does the human characters in the story (1968a: 286).

Other works such as *The House of Mirth* contain characters like Selden, who finds it impossible to break from his role as an outside observer, preferring to remain aloof from people in the New York society to which he feels superior. His fear of participating in a physically intimate and committed relationship with Lily Bart is one of the most significant factors contributing to her death. Like the narrator of 'Miss Mary Pask' who resolves to meet Mary only through the mediated distance of her grave, Selden kneels by Lily's dead body with the feeling that 'the real Lily was still there, close to him, yet invisible and inaccessible; and the tenuity of the barrier between them mocked him with a sense of helplessness' (1984: 314). Selden can relate to Lily *only* when the 'barrier between them' is intact; the border of death allows him to be physically close to her while at the same time preventing her from violating his idealization of her. He is comfortable with Lily only through the

objectification of death. Unlike Mary's brief demise, however, Lily's death (as her name suggests) is quite permanent; she is not resurrected.

When the narrator of 'Miss Mary Pask' discovers that Mary is, in fact, alive, he reacts as Selden or 'Kerfol's' narrator probably would do, stating (with the ghost of a double-entendre) that 'I couldn't get up any real interest in what [Grace] said [about Mary]. I felt I should never again be interested in Mary Pask, or in anything concerning her' (1968b: 384). He loses interest ('He loses his hard-on!' Cixous would say) precisely because she has made irrelevant the boundaries of the grave and passed into a realm in which she can make emotional demands of him in return. He refuses to consider the possibility of meeting with her again—this woman who does not conform to his culture's standards of 'niceness'—and re-asserts his detachment from his own emotions, slipping back into the callous attitude that has kept Mary isolated from—and 'dead' to—society. Although Mary and the narrator may be posed as single counterparts for, respectively, Wharton's emotional needs and her social (or authorial) persona, such a correspondence neglects Wharton's writing as precisely the activity capable of bringing together these two aspects of herself into a confluence and free-flowing exchange in which one may not exist without the other.

Beer and Horner describe the story as 'a portrait of the older woman who has taken charge of her own space and her own language in order finally to realize her autonomy' (2003: 284). More crucially, we see that in 'Miss Mary Pask', as in much of her fiction, Wharton inscribes (or transcribes) her internal struggles—her struggles which become, through text, internal *and* external. The unnamed narrator of 'Miss Mary Pask' relapses into a fever, much as Wharton herself did, after encountering an enigmatic signifier in the form of Mary herself. For him it is a disruptive event which becomes more, rather than less, disturbing after it receives a natural explanation.

Unable or perhaps unwilling to write about it, he remains haunted. Wharton, however, responds ultimately with an enigmatic signifier of her own, recasting her textual encounter in the 'flesh' of an affective character who enables a meaningful transformation. In her efforts to reintegrate the woman cast solid and splintered by those who would use her for their own interests, she does, as Cixous might say, the 'not-nice', the forbidden. She writes herself.

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