



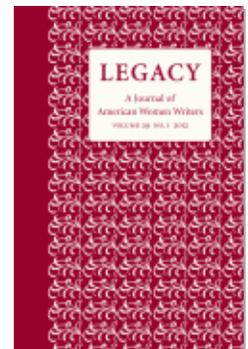
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“Other People’s Clothes”: Homosociality, Consumer Culture, and Affective Reading in Edith Wharton’s *Summer*

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For a novel typically viewed as the narrative of heroine Charity Royall’s illicit affair, pregnancy, and subsequent marriage, Edith Wharton’s *Summer* presents a wide range of homosocial encounters—between Charity and her North Dormer peers (some of whom appear in the novel and some of whom are only named), between Charity and women glimpsed in mirrors and on streets, and between Charity and women viewed as others to the norms of late-nineteenth-century “heteromaterial” femininity—spinsters, prostitutes, female professionals, and differently abled women (Kent 16).¹ Feminist scholarship on the novel has rotated around the question of Charity’s illicit affair with visiting architect Lucius Harney, her pregnancy, and her subsequent marriage to her guardian, Lawyer Royall, seen on the one hand as quasi-incestuous and “sick” (Ammons 133) and, on the other hand, as an act of generosity that restores Charity’s virtue.² More recently, critics have turned their attention to Wharton’s engagement with the racial thinking of the period, as witnessed through the novel’s representations of the ostensibly dysgenic Mountain community, its depiction of the possibilities of women’s reproductive choice, and Charity’s ultimate decision to keep Harney’s child, which Jennie A. Kassanoff reads as Wharton’s effort to perpetuate Harney’s patrician blood through the vessel of Charity’s working-class body (145–49).³ Despite the richness of these readings, however, both traditional feminist and contemporary racialized readings have tended to sidestep Charity’s relations with women, as well as the burgeoning rural middle class of which she is a part, viewing her quest for place in primarily heterosocial and non-class-specific terms.

On first glance, Charity’s identity seems almost completely determined by her relations with men: Separated from her birth mother as a child and

brought down from the Mountain by Lawyer Royall to the bleak New England town of North Dormer, she becomes pregnant with Harney's child during their summer affair but knows that marriage to him is impossible. After a brief return to the Mountain, where she learns that her mother is dead, she accepts a marriage proposal from Royall and returns to North Dormer to embark on an apparently bleak future.

This essay recasts Charity's narrative of limited mobility in light of her conflicts with women, showing how her efforts to appropriate a middle-class identity through consumer culture implicate her in a series of antagonistic homosocial relationships. Charity's interactions with these female others are dominated by emotions of envy, irritation, and frustration, feelings that recent scholarship on affect in nineteenth-century literature has identified as characteristic of middle-class identity formation. As Stephanie Foote has argued, class and gender are "affective positions," "deeply structural" while also "deeply personal" (66).⁴ Because *Summer* typically communicates women's anxieties over class and status through bodily reactions rather than open verbal expression, critics have yet to pay sufficient attention to the novel's depiction of tensions among women of different class positions.⁵ Reading for affect demonstrates how the struggles of class identity formation—especially for Charity, a lower-middle-class subject surrounded by characters at almost every level on the class spectrum—register in bodily and emotional terms, forming a part of the novel's depiction of everyday life of which characters, and even their creator, may be unconscious.⁶ Examining both inter- and intraclass homosocial tensions illuminates the effects of the unequal distribution of cultural and economic capital on working-class and middle-class subjects, who are typically held responsible for the hostile feelings they generate.⁷ *Summer* witnesses Charity's envious negotiation for place on a ladder of feminine status through her consumer practices; similarly, it demonstrates the implication of other women—particularly marginalized women of the working and lower-middle classes—in the new economies of desire that early-twentieth-century consumer culture made palpable.⁸

In the opening pages of *Summer*, Wharton makes clear that Charity's competition with more affluent women has long preceded her encounter with Harney. While her first sight of the visiting architect makes her feel "the shrinking that sometimes came over her when she saw people with holiday faces," it swiftly prompts her to "[wish] for the thousandth time that she had blue eyes like Annabel Balch," the Springfield debutante who preoccupies Charity's imagination (8). Charity's yearning for Annabel's blue eyes suggests her desire, as Lauren G. Berlant has argued of Irene Redfield, heroine of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, to "experience the privileges" of another woman's body, to move

through the world with the sense of ease accorded leisure-class femininity (111). Already identified as “swarthy,” with a racially ambiguous skin tone that even her “sunburnt hat” may be unable to protect, it is no wonder she envies Annabel’s shielded skin and Anglo-Saxon-identified eyes (8). After Charity’s first conversation with Harney, her mind returns to the image of Annabel and other sophisticated women: “[S]he shrivelled at the vision of vague metropolises, shining super-Nettletons, where girls in better clothes than Belle Balch’s talked fluently of architecture to young men with hands like Lucius Harney’s” (39). Almost physically diminished by her conversation with Harney, she contracts further by imagining empowered women, those with the economic and cultural capital she herself lacks.

Charity’s own class liminality, as a dependent ward of the town’s only lawyer, renders her resentment of women with greater social access particularly acute, and she correctly identifies the hypocrisy at the heart of her dismissal by the townsfolk. Considered inferior to her female peers on the basis of lineage, she nonetheless enjoys a position superior to her friends. When Charity fears she will be fired from her job at the library, she voices her resentment against the peers she believes undercut her:

I could understand Orma Fry’s doing it, because she’s always wanted to get me out of here ever since the first day. I can’t see why, when she’s got her own home, and her father to work for her; nor Ida Targatt, neither, when she got a legacy from her stepbrother on’y last year. But anyway we all live in the same place, and when it’s a place like North Dormer it’s enough to make people hate each other just to have to walk down the same street every day. (47)

Wharton’s introduction of characters like Orma and Ida, who do not speak in the course of the novel, is telling. In contrast to *The House of Mirth*, for example, in which almost every minor character who is mentioned briefly occupies the stage, *Summer* appears to narrow the field, leaving Charity to fight her quest for identity within the heterosocial contexts of marriage to Royall or her affair with Harney. However, Wharton’s glimpse into the homosocial contexts of Charity’s life reminds us that her daily conflicts revolve around female rivalry—competition for employment, social recognition, and male attention.

If Charity’s imagination is typically preoccupied by images of women more powerful than she, her visit with Harney to the nearby city of Nettleton for the Fourth of July celebration is haunted by specters of the woman she might become if she and Harney were to begin an affair. Throughout Harney and Charity’s tour of the town, Wharton underscores what she perceived as the threats to women that the emerging consumer culture of the twentieth century brought into play: the blurring of the individual identities of female consum-

ers with those of the mass, made up largely of commodified women.⁹ Even during her evening with Harney, though, Charity imagines a connection to her ostensible superior, Annabel: “[S]he wondered if, at this very moment, Annabel Balch, on the arm of as brilliant a young man, were threading her way through scenes as resplendent” (132).

Rachel Bowlby has argued that the shop window functions in realist fiction “as both barrier and transparent substance, representing freedom of view joined to suspension of access,” simultaneously offering “an ambivalent, powerful union of distance and desire. Unlike Narcissus’s reflection, the model in the window is something both real and other” (32, 33–34).¹⁰ Wharton uses the imagery of the show window as an inverted mirror in which Charity encounters a distorted reflection of the results of feminine consumption. This show window, in particular, advertises the ostensible opportunities consumerism offered the New Woman:

Even the shops that were closed offered, through wide expanses of plate-glass, hints of hidden riches. In some, waves of silk and ribbon broke over shores of imitation moss from which ravishing hats rose like tropical orchids. In others, the pink throats of gramophones opened their giant convolutions in a soundless chorus; or bicycles shining in neat ranks seemed to await the signal of an invisible starter; or tiers of fancy-goods in leatherette and paste and celluloid dangled their insidious graces; and, in one vast bay that seemed to project them into exciting contact with the public, wax ladies in daring dresses chatted elegantly, or, with gestures intimate yet blameless, pointed to their pink corsets and transparent hosiery. (133–34)

Symbols of feminine adornment, voice, and mobility, the hats, gramophones, and bicycles exaggerate Charity’s effort to appropriate freedoms associated with early-twentieth-century urban femininity.¹¹ The wax mannequins offer Charity an image of female consumerism as a form of sexual display she is implicitly invited to envy, mirroring the position of the shopper as the objects in the window closest to “contact with the public.” The mannequins gesture toward their own sexualized commodities—their lingerie and “daring” attire—but negate their own objectification through their genteelly classed, ostensibly “blameless” manner (134). In contrast, Charity, who has been forced to conceal her date with Harney from Lawyer Royall, knows that her own actions will not be viewed as generously if they are discovered.

Charity’s survey of the fashionable women, actresses, and prostitutes of Nettleton causes her considerable anxiety. Even when Harney buys the pin reminiscent of a mountain lake—what will come to be a “talisman” not only of their relationship, but also of her education in good taste—Charity fears

she has inadvertently posed as a kept woman, as she wonders whether Harney had “imagined that she had leaned over the pretty things in the glass case in the hope of” receiving one as a present (288, 135). The couple first stops at a restaurant whose mirrored bathroom recalls the shop window, and Charity “[finds] herself in a dressing-room all looking-glass and lustrous surfaces, where a party of showy-looking girls were dabbing on powder and straightening immense plumed hats” (135–36). The “showy-looking girls” emphasize Charity’s own sense of intimidation, and their “immense plumed hats” make Charity’s insecurity in the face of Nettleton’s consumer economy even more palpable. The diners presage the photographs of actresses that line the hall of the movie theatre and the prostitute Julia Hawes, evoking the link that many turn-of-the-century Americans still perceived between actresses and prostitutes (224, 150).

Charity’s encounter with Julia, the North Dormer woman who has had an abortion and then become a Nettleton prostitute, suggests that conflicts between women can be played out through manipulation of the symbols of consumerism. Forbidden to see Harney, Charity must spend her money and make her plans in secrecy, even concealing the new hat she has had made for the occasion. Though a sex worker, Julia is an independent wage earner who can flaunt her acquisitions as easily as she can the men on her arm. At the Fourth of July fireworks that culminate Charity’s evening with Harney, Julia arrives with Charity’s drunken guardian in tow. Julia’s recognition of Charity foils her illicit visit to Nettleton, putting her sexual virtue into doubt and questioning her passing as a member of the bourgeoisie. Wharton signals the difference between the two young women’s ability to participate in the marketplace through an important commodity for turn-of-the-century women, the hat: Julia is identified by her “large hat with a long white feather” whenever she appears; Charity’s hat, white with a cherry red lining, has already been “indented” by “the parasols” in the busy streets by the time she arrives at the fireworks display and is lost after she and Harney kiss later that evening (145, 136). This sexual symbolism suggests not only Charity’s vulnerability, but also how her consumer agency has been damaged by other women with their parasols, signs of phallic prowess in a market economy. An embarrassment in the marketplace sets the stage for Charity’s humiliation by a sexually commodified woman.

Wharton’s choice of this image bespeaks the symbolism of hats and other forms of adornment in working-women’s culture of the time. As cultural historian Nan Enstad argues, hats “signaled [young immigrant] women’s status as workers who earned their own money” (9).¹² Big hats like Julia’s with their *outré* decoration let them flaunt their purchasing power. Enstad characterizes

the excessive aspect of working-class women's fashion as a kind of camp that allowed working women to mock middle-class fashions and norms through exaggeration (78). Even when Charity first sees Julia at the Fourth of July celebration, she notes Julia's ability to deride her own confidence simply through her appearance: She had "the same cold mocking smile, as if there were some secret absurdity in the person she was looking at, and she had instantly detected it" (145). Viewed from this perspective, Julia, with her "white feather" triumphantly "askew," retains her visible symbol of participation in the consumer economy, while Charity, bereft of the symbol of her virgin sexuality, is now cast not only as a "bare-headed whore," in Royall's words, but also as a failed consumer (150, 151). When Charity returns home that night, her eyes are drawn to the "paper bag" under the bed "in which she had hidden her new hat from inquisitive eyes" (155). The empty bag suggests both her lost prowess and a strangely envious relationship between Charity and Julia forged around acquisition and possession. The similarity between prostitutes and Nettleton's other female consumers blurs the line between sex work and other forms of wage-earning labor, emphasizing Charity's sense of relative inadequacy.

While mass consumer culture serves as a medium for homosocial conflict, Charity also finds such tensions operating much closer to home. In her depiction of Charity's relationship with Ally Hawes, Julia's sister and a local seamstress, Wharton explores the unexpected intimacies between women afforded by consumer culture even in the semi-rural milieu of North Dormer. Although late-nineteenth-century rural women enjoyed limited access to the pleasures of mass-produced consumer culture, historian Wendy Gamber explains that hand tailoring allowed them to indulge in luxury items that would otherwise be difficult for them to obtain. While this period is often seen as a moment in which department stores and mass-produced goods began to replace the cottage industries of the nineteenth century, the culture of custom production persisted through the early decades of the twentieth century.¹³ The extended fitting process built an intimate relationship between dressmakers and their clients; while fitting the customer's body, the dressmaker might often learn her secrets (99). Class tensions could be explored and class positions solidified in this environment: Female consumers could imagine themselves superior to the producers of the goods they purchased, just as female producers could claim an enviable economic independence in contrast to a clientele dependent on their husbands or fathers.

The intimacy of hand tailoring, as represented in *Summer*, also serves as a medium for the circulation of female desire. The character of Ally Hawes allows Wharton to explore a divide between the homosocial and the homoerotic that, as Kathryn R. Kent has claimed, may have been less pronounced for

women than it was for men in the late nineteenth century (15). The relationship between the seamstress and her client was inherently eroticized: Dress-making afforded women access to each others' bodies, which could be seen and touched as well as fitted and measured. In *Summer*, as the seamstress brings the economics and erotics of consumption into the private space of the middle-class home, she exercises an uneasy form of power.

From the first episode of the novel, we see not only Charity's resentment of Annabel's fashionable clothes, but her envy of Ally Hawes's considerable talents. As Charity struggles to make lace during her library shift, the narrative notes that "[s]he was not an expert workwoman, and it had taken her many weeks to make the half-yard of narrow lace. . . . But there was no other way of getting any lace to trim her summer blouse, and since Ally Hawes, the poorest girl in the village, had shown herself in church with enviable transparencies about the shoulders, Charity's hook had travelled faster" (14). Ally demonstrates her own talent for display, forcing Charity into needlework not out of talent, but out of competitive desperation. Although Charity may well wish to display herself at church to attract men and solidify her class position, her lace-making also serves as an effort to beautify herself with respect to other women, implicating her in a homosocial competition from the very beginning.

Wharton uses the pairing of Ally and Charity, like that of Gerty and Lily in *The House of Mirth*, to underscore both women's investments in a homosocial economy. Ally's class, appearance, and health exempt her from the possibility of becoming a fashionable woman herself. As Ally and Charity gaze into the mirror together, Ally's face registers all she cannot have: her "pale face look[s] over her [friend's] shoulder [in the mirror] like the ghost of wasted opportunities."¹⁴ However, Charity's awareness of her own good looks—enhanced by Ally's millinery—allows her to dismiss her friend: "'I look awful, don't I?' she said at last with a happy sigh" (124). Where Charity's imagining of Annabel instantly provokes her anxiety, here she achieves contentment at her friend's expense.

The complex dynamics of the homosocial producer-consumer relationship provide a forum in which the two women struggle for control. Ally plays a crucial role in both producing Charity's fantasies and accelerating the competition between Charity and Annabel to the point of initiating the public exposure of Charity's pregnancy. We remember that Ally has displayed Charity's dress for the Old Home Week celebration, which she has sewn by hand:

When [Charity] opened her door a wonder arrested her. Before going out she had closed her shutters against the afternoon heat, but they had swung partly open, and a bar of moonlight, crossing the room, rested on her bed and showed a dress of China silk laid out on it in virgin whiteness. Charity had spent more than she

could afford on the dress, which was to surpass those of all the other girls; she had wanted to let North Dormer see that she was worthy of Harney's admiration. Above the dress, folded on the pillow, was the white veil which the young women who took part in the exercises were to wear under a wreath of asters; and beside the veil a pair of slim white satin shoes that Ally had produced from an old trunk in which she stored mysterious treasures.

Charity stood gazing at all the outspread whiteness. It recalled a vision that had come to her in the night after her first meeting with Harney. She no longer had such visions . . . warmer splendours had displaced them . . . but it was stupid of Ally to have paraded all those white things on her bed, exactly as Hattie Targatt's wedding dress from Springfield had been spread out for the neighbours to see when she married Tom Fry. (187)

In this episode, Wharton underscores the circular nature of the heterosocial and homosocial consumer economies. Charity's dress is intended not only to please Harney, but also to show "all the other girls" "that she was worthy of Harney's admiration." Even as Charity revels in the beauty of the dress, she implicates herself in competition with Hattie Targatt Fry, an absent female character who is responsible for the gossip about Charity and Harney that forces their relationship underground. Her excitement fades as she realizes that this scene replicates one designed for another woman's wedding. Even worse, Charity soon becomes aware that the "slim white satin shoes" come from Annabel, who occasionally gives her castoffs to Ally (187, 188). Thus, even as Ally has designed the gown for Charity to help her best the other girls, she positions Charity as a consumer who must compete with other women for authenticity.

Ally demonstrates her own ability to manipulate consumer desire in this episode. The deliberate staging of the scene also recalls the Nettleton window displays: The bedroom serves as a show window, "parad[ing]" the dress across Charity's bed and bathing it in moonlight. I would argue that Ally displays the dress in an ironic and deliberate counterpoint to Charity's sexuality and that she has guessed the secret of Charity's pregnancy. The multiple fittings required to complete Charity's dress allow Ally to observe her friend's physique, and having witnessed the effects of Julia's unwanted pregnancy, she would be particularly sensitive to the changes in Charity's body. The dressmaker's intimate knowledge of Charity's body ironically parallels the abortionist's; as she stages the *tableau* on the bed, Ally signals that Charity is neither a virgin nor a bride.¹⁵

The interaction between Ally and Charity demonstrates how the seamstress's handiwork mediates between working-class and leisure-class femininity. I quote these passages at length because they reveal, more thoroughly than has previously been supposed, the nuanced nature of Charity and Ally's

conflict. Ally's affective behavior throughout this section of the novel suggests her awareness of the competitive bond that yokes together women of different classes, including herself and Charity:

"It was my idea running a ribbon through the gauging," she said proudly. . . . "It's for Miss Balch: she was awfully pleased." She paused and then added, with a queer tremor in her piping voice: "I darsn't have told her I got the idea from one I saw on Julia."

Charity raised her eyes listlessly. "Do you still see Julia sometimes?"

Ally reddened, as if the allusion had escaped her unintentionally. (216)

Ally ironically points out the similarities between prostitute and debutante, both of whom depend on wealthy men to keep them in stylish apparel.¹⁶ In Wharton's world, verbal wounds are never accidental, but Ally's poverty and disability cause Charity to overlook the possibility of her agency. Charity ignores Ally's engagement in her own homosocial network: Although Ally continues to communicate with her sister, Charity never considers that she may already know of, or even may have instigated, Charity's public humiliation by Royall. Readers of this scene might assume that the "queer tremor" in Ally's voice arises from the shame of mentioning Julia; however, just before it, Ally has been marketing herself, alerting Charity that she has other, more affluent, customers. Given her carefully chosen words, there is no reason to believe her reference to Julia arises "unintentionally." I wish to argue that the "queer tremor" in her voice masks aggression, and her blush—misread by Charity as embarrassment—could signal a host of negative emotions. Like Charity's hostility toward Annabel, Ally's anger toward Charity exposes the inequities of their relationship; Charity's health, beauty, and paternal name give her options denied her poorer, less attractive friend.

Although Ally's hostility toward Charity can be read primarily in class terms, she also functions as representative of a queer female character type that, as Kent has argued, figured prominently in postbellum American literature. As Kent explains, the type of the "spinster" in late-nineteenth-century fiction "functions as 'other' to bourgeois heteromaternity and thus as a kind of protolesbian identity" (16). We might view Ally in similar terms: As the seamstress works to transform Charity into the type of virgin bride for the Old Home Week celebration, she emphasizes her own distance from the norms of able-bodied, heterosexually desirable femininity necessary to this display of local pride. Arguably, Ally's "queer tremor" reflects not only choked aggression, but a kind of frustrated desire: She may wish, just as Charity does of Annabel, to have her friend's body—to wear the body that would wear that dress. Continuing this line of thinking, we might recall that Nettleton has more than its share

of disabled spinsters, including Ally, who has a lame leg; Miss Hatchard, who walks with crutches; and the deaf Verena Marsh. Very few of the minor characters in the town of North Dormer are married women, and those unhappily (like Rose Coles, who had been hastily married “to make things right” [234]). Charity is in fact surrounded by queer old maids rather than conventional maternal figures.

If Ally has tried to undercut Charity by manipulating the codes of homo-social consumer desire and envy, Charity ultimately asserts her power as a consumer by striking a blow against Ally’s productivity. Frustrated by Ally’s repeated references to Annabel, Charity attacks her surrogate, the blouse that Ally is making by hand:

“Well, I guess she won’t dance in this either,” she said with sudden violence; and grasping the blouse in her strong young hands she tore it in two and flung the tattered bits to the floor.

“Oh, Charity—” Ally cried, springing up. For a long interval the two girls faced each other across the ruined garment. Ally burst into tears.

“Oh, what’ll I say to her? What’ll I do? It was real lace!” she wailed between her piping sobs.

Charity glared at her unrelentingly. “You’d oughtn’t to have brought it here,” she said, breathing quickly. “I hate other people’s clothes—it’s just as if they was there themselves.” The two stared at each other again over this avowal, till Charity brought out, in a gasp of anguish: “Oh, go—go—go—or I’ll hate you too.” (218–19)

For Charity, “other people’s clothes” are more than metonymies; they represent the presence of those benefactors, like Annabel, whose generosity she is supposed to appreciate. Charity ultimately dismisses her behavior in this scene as “childish savagery.” Her “shame” over her act of violence encourages readers to overlook the economic inequities that structure Charity’s feelings, fueling her sense of class injury (221).

The one moment in the novel in which Charity’s hostility against other women actually erupts, this episode is largely occluded from the novel’s criticism. However, reading it as a central event helps reinstate the novel’s minor female characters in its narrative economy. Shortly beforehand, Charity has observed Annabel and Harney together at the Old Home Week celebration and realized that “[b]ehind the frail screen of her lover’s caresses was the whole inscrutable mystery of his life: his relations with other people—with *other women*—his opinions, his prejudices, his principles, the net of influences and interests and ambitions in which every man’s life is entangled” (197; emphasis added). As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued, homosocial encounters between men are often negotiated through the figure of the woman (25–26); here, imag-

inative homosocial encounters between women are effected through a man, whose embraces offer a “frail screen” to Charity’s curiosity about women of his class. Wharton has made Charity’s preoccupation with Annabel clear from the first pages of the novel; unlike Julia, however, who mocks the bourgeoisie who might despise her, Charity is unable to act in any direct relation to Annabel, suggesting the thwarted relation of middle-class women to their ostensible betters. Where Charity’s resentment usually runs below the surface of her character, homosocial enmity appears to be too much for the novel to absorb, as the scene’s elliptical conclusion suggests. Charity can hate Annabel’s clothes—she can, in fact, “hate everything,” as her first words in the novel make clear—but she cannot hate the wealthy woman who is to marry her lover (9). I would suggest that it is Charity’s inability to truly hate Annabel—her internalized idealization of leisure-class femininity—that enables her to renounce Harney in her rival’s favor. Her guilt about the destruction of another woman’s property causes her to transfer Harney to that other woman, as well as to repay the producer of that object.

Charity’s visit to the abortionist, Dr. Merkle, resuscitates her anxieties about participation in a homosocial economy driven by conspicuous display. The doctor’s waiting room recalls Nettleton’s culture of female *tableaux*: When Charity enters, she waits in a “handsomely furnished room, with plush sofas surmounted by large gold-framed photographs of showy young women”; after her examination, she is led “into another room, smaller, and still more crowded with plush and gold frames” (224). Dr. Merkle’s décor evokes Nettleton’s cinema with its “immense pictures of yellow-haired beauties” and “velvet” curtains, and Wharton calls attention to the signifiers of Dr. Merkle’s prosperity—her “rich black dress” bedecked with “gold chains and charms” and her “unnaturally white and even teeth” (139, 224). The doctor gains the upper hand in the economic exchange that follows when Charity realizes she has insufficient money to pay for the appointment and Dr. Merkle takes the blue brooch instead. Charity is not shocked by her pregnancy, which she has come to the doctor primarily to confirm, but she is horrified to learn that the doctor has “taken her for a miserable creature like Julia” (225). Charity’s intimidation in the face of “showy . . . women” informs her fear of the abortionist, as well as her revulsion against the doctor’s other clients (224). The worst aspect of being mistaken for a woman who would choose abortion is that Charity’s picture might ultimately go on the waiting room wall; commodified like the mannequins, prostitutes, and display-driven women of Nettleton, she might ultimately serve as advertising.

The character of Dr. Merkle warrants further consideration in relation to North Dormer’s queer spinsters. Her work as an abortionist marks her opposi-

tion to maternal norms; her marital status is deliberately unclear; and her level of professional independence is the highest a woman achieves in the novel. The abortionist's role as an ambiguous support figure to Charity resembles what Kent has identified as the roles of female mentors like "teachers, supervisors, and coworkers" as objects of queer identification in late-nineteenth-century American culture, unsettling the primacy of the mother-daughter dyad (6). In this light, Dr. Merkle offers Charity an intriguing work opportunity in the aftermath of her proposed abortion: "Afterwards—if there's been any talk at home, and you want to get away for a while . . . I have a lady friend in Boston who's looking for a companion . . . you're the very one to suit her, my dear" (226). The role of "companion" to a Boston spinster, immortalized in James's *The Bostonians*, offered an association with lesbianism that would not have escaped Wharton's early-twentieth-century readers. Charity's horrified flight from Dr. Merkle's office suggests the newly charged status she would occupy in a number of homosocial networks were she to agree to the abortion—as a member of a coterie of urban women like Julia or as another symbol of female deviance, a potential partner in a Boston marriage.

Charity's retreat to the Mountain, then, initially offers relief from the disquieting identifications offered her by Nettleton consumer culture. Hoping to meet her mother, whom she believes "could hardly help remembering the past, and receiving a daughter who was facing the trouble she had known," she arrives at the Mountain to find the woman dead (240). The body of Mary Hyatt offers an eerie repetition of Nettleton's culture of feminine display: "A woman lay on [the mattress], but she did not look like a dead woman; she seemed to have fallen across her squalid bed in a drunken sleep, and to have been left lying where she fell, in her ragged disordered clothes. One arm was flung above her head, one leg drawn up under a torn skirt that left the other bare to the knee: a swollen glistening leg with a ragged stocking rolled down about the ankle" (248). Charged with the task of preparing the body for a Christian burial, Charity finds "no sign . . . of anything human" in the grotesque display of her mother's sexuality (250).

The Mountain offers none of the imagined communion Charity seeks with her mother. While there, Charity briefly encounters a woman she learns is her sister, who is "healthier and robuster looking than the others," whose "weather-beaten face had a certain sullen beauty" (249). This encounter points to the possibility—if a fleeting one—of a relationship between women mediated through consumer behavior that avoids the pitfalls of commodification and competition. In contrast to Wharton's other depictions of minor female characters, this young woman is never identified by name: When the preacher refers to Charity as "Mary Hyatt's daughter," her response is, "What? Her too?"

(249). While her “sneer” upon meeting Charity echoes Julia’s manner during the Fourth of July encounter, Charity later imagines a deeper connection to this woman, realizing that she shares a “secret affinity” with the “fierce bewildered creature . . . who had apostrophized her in such strange words” (260, 259). The anonymity of Charity’s sister bespeaks her alienation from the novel’s consumer and marital economies.

As Walter Benn Michaels points out, the Mountain community is less divorced from consumer culture than its derelict setting would suggest (519). Yet Charity constructs an alternative space within that community for the dispersal of feminine commodities. In return for the bread she has taken the morning after her mother’s funeral, Charity leaves “one of the pretty chemises that Ally had made for her, with a blue ribbon run through its edging” on the table; “[i]t was one of the dainty things on which she had squandered her savings, and as she looked at it the blood rushed to her forehead” (262). Charity’s overdetermined affect—which evokes her fatigue, hunger, and pregnancy, as well as her response to the death of her mother—suggests the ambiguous, ephemeral nature of this moment of identification. While Charity first seems to share a moment of potential equality with another one of Mary Hyatt’s daughters, she also steps into the shoes of both Annabel and Ally, transmitting refined tastes to the working classes and cultivating the next line of potentially envious consumers.

As the novel moves Charity toward marriage, it releases her from the series of homosocial networks that the novel has presented as possible alternatives. For example, before encountering Royall on her trip back down the Mountain, Charity still contemplates moving to Nettleton and making a life for her child through prostitution: “She knew that girls of that kind sometimes made enough to have their children nicely cared for; and every other consideration disappeared in the vision of her baby, cleaned and combed and rosy, and hidden away somewhere where she could run in and kiss it, and bring it pretty things to wear” (261). Here, Charity’s optimistic vision transforms sex work into another form of female employment, which, like other forms of labor, affords women entry into the marketplace as consumers.¹⁷ To embrace this possibility, however, would resituate Charity as part of a homosocial network, a community of urban “girls of that kind” (261).

Charity’s final restoration in the heterosocial economy requires her to turn her back on the tensions produced by immersion in a world of gendered urban consumerism. Royall offers her forty dollars to “beat all the other girls . . . beat ’em all hollow,” but Charity sacrifices the money to retrieve the brooch from Dr. Merkle (285, 286). Although the doctor threatens blackmail if Charity does not give her the full amount, the multiple hints of Charity’s pregnancy, the

couple's celibate wedding night, and Royall's seeming capacity to forgive suggest that her threat would be an empty one, and Charity imagines "abandoning the brooch and letting Dr. Merkle do her worst" (288). In relinquishing the forty dollars, Wharton's heroine excises herself from Nettleton's homosocial economy. The young woman resists the opportunity to "beat all the other girls," rejecting "the tempting display of dresses and dress-materials that had fired her imagination" on her visit to Nettleton with Harney (289). Telling Royall that she would "rather let Ally Hawes make the few things [she] want[s]," Charity ensures the persistence of an intimate, local female economy but enhances its legitimacy through the imprimatur that she can provide as a married middle-class patron (290).

To recuperate the role of minor female characters might appear to contradict Wharton's own intention for the novel, as implied by her famous remark to Bernard Berenson, "I'm so glad you like Royall—of course, *he's* the book!" (qtd. in Lewis and Lewis 398). To say that Royall constitutes "the book" suggests that *Summer* would end very differently without his last-minute intervention into Charity's negotiations of class, gender, and sexuality. Before Royall's arrival at the base of the Mountain, Charity has envisioned her only possibilities for the future as those of an unwed mother or an urban prostitute (235). In identifying Royall as "the book," Wharton hints at the ways in which his marriage to Charity serves as a vehicle of closure, bringing Charity's negotiation of homosocial and heterosexual relations to a forced conclusion. The marriage plot, then, offers women like Charity a place within what she calls "the established order of things" (235).

Summer offers a provocative entry point into several new readings of Wharton's fiction. First, it demonstrates the extension of Wharton's concerns with fashion and consumer culture into her New England fiction, traversing boundaries of class and region.¹⁸ Through its depiction of how consumer culture generates homosocial conflicts and compromises, it complicates our understanding of women's partnerships in Wharton's fiction—here, mediated by the exchange of and competition over material goods, elsewhere forged through the exchange of lovers, husbands, and children. Even Wharton's more canonical work is fraught with homosocial conflict, whose role as a plot motivator is rarely acknowledged: For example, it is arguable that Lily Bart dies, not because of her rejection by Selden, but because of her refusal to live with Gerty Farish, who offers her economic support when no one else will (*House of Mirth* 218). *Summer*, with its broad range of homosocial negotiations, provides a bridge between Wharton's early and later works, many of which probe the nature of relations between women, particularly "Bunner Sisters," "The Old Maid," *The Mother's Recompense*, "Her Son," and "Roman Fever."¹⁹

Highlighting the queerness of homosocial relations in *Summer* also illuminates Wharton's efforts to distance herself from her female regionalist precursors. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton voiced her desire to disavow the "rose-coloured spectacles of [her] predecessors, Mary Wilkins [Freeman] and Sarah Orne Jewett" in her New England fiction (293). Although Candace Waid, among others, has noted that Wharton protested too much, pointing out the similarities between her New England fiction and that of Freeman and Jewett (90–125), scholars of Wharton's relation to the nineteenth-century American feminine canon have not yet considered that both Freeman and Jewett were involved in long-term queer relationships and that the fiction of both offered multiple portrayals of spinsterism.²⁰ Charity's marriage to Royall, then, might serve as a defense against the homosocial community of old maids of the women's regionalist tradition. *Summer* fuses the demands of the marriage plot with the legacy of women's regionalism, making for a curious generic instability. But through its embrace of the local, homosocial economy, *Summer* perpetuates the spinster as a queer regionalist trope: As Charity settles into a life of marriage and motherhood, her child's baby clothes will be made by a spinster down the road who will likely command high prices for her creations.

Summer demonstrates the complexity of lower-middle-class female emotional life, refracted in the multiple positions women occupied around consumer culture in the early twentieth century and enacted in relations with women as well as those with men. Examining such emotions as envy, frustration, and shame—this novel's affective barometers of class injury—reveals the depth and breadth of middle-class, lower-middle-class, and working-class women's subject positions. As critics, we should remember that analyzing the subtler emotions can provide rich insight into the interaction between social and psychological forms of identity formation. We should also not hesitate to probe our own supposedly instinctive reactions to characters—affective responses that often stimulate, even guide, our own interpretations. If feeling is a form of knowing, the many bad feelings elaborated in *Summer* bear witness to its characters' awareness, inchoate though it may be, of their precarious status in the complex economic, gendered, and sexual social networks of early-twentieth-century America.

NOTES

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1. Influential feminist readings of the novel include those of Ammons and Gilbert.

Both Comins and Elbert characterize the novel as a story of a romance. Comins terms it a narrative of “seduction and abandonment” (20); Elbert reads it as a text whose heroine is alternately a “fallen woman” and “seductress/siren” (“Bourgeois Sexuality” 261).

2. For a positive reading of the marriage between Royall and Charity, see Makowsky and Bloom.

3. See Bauer and Kassanoff for contrasting discussions of the role of race in the novel.

4. Foote and Higgins offer rich discussions of affect as a tool of bourgeois identity formation in the works of Alcott and H. G. Wells, respectively.

5. Charity’s negative affect has caused her to elicit particularly hostile reactions from some critics: Blackall labels her a “limited character” (116); Hutchinson calls her “vacant” and “undeveloped” (227, 229); and Elbert identifies her as “spoiled” and “empt[y] within” (“Politics” 8).

6. For a discussion of how emotion mediates between mind and body in American realist fiction, see Thraillkill.

7. My argument draws on the work of Ngai, who asserts that negative emotions like envy, typically shameful for those who experience them, are “stripped of [their] potential critical agency—as an ability to recognize, and antagonistically respond to, potentially real and institutionalized forms of inequality” (129).

8. See Matt’s *Keeping Up with the Joneses*, which demonstrates how working-class women, subject to the envy of wealthier women due to the proliferation of new goods in the late nineteenth century, were encouraged by moralists of the period to curb their dangerous emotions.

9. For a reading of the Nettleton episode that articulates the threats Wharton saw in mass democratic culture more generally, see Morgan 157–58.

10. On the move toward theatricality in early-twentieth-century window design, which Wharton’s description reflects, see Leach 55–56. In *Fanny Herself*, published the same year as *Summer*, Edna Ferber references these changes in department store marketing culture through the character of Aloysius, an Irish window trimmer who updates the Jewish matriarch Molly Brandeis’s outdated window displays.

11. At the turn of the century, as Garvey reports, bicycles were seen as a key symbol of the threats and the possibilities of female mobility (106–34). The bicycle operates in just this way in *Summer*, as Charity’s library earnings allow her to rent a bicycle, which in turn facilitates her affair with Harney.

12. Wharton knew that hats could be seen as an aggressive form of female display: After the publication of *The House of Mirth*, an unhappy reader chastised her for “shamelessly parading the streets in a red hat” after having been “heartless” enough to kill her heroine (qtd. in Benstock 155).

13. For a comparison to the occasionally affirming, but often manipulative and exploitative, relations between customers and saleswomen in early-twentieth-century department stores, see Benson 263–64.

14. This phrase recalls a conventional representation of Victorian seamstresses, that

of “the ghost in the looking glass.” Walkley cites a *Punch* cartoon from 1863, in which a fashionable lady gazes into the mirror, only to discover her seamstress dead of exhaustion. The cartoon makes the seamstress the other to her customer, providing the work that enhances her seemingly effortless beauty (49).

15. This scene foreshadows a moment in *The Mother’s Recompense* in which Kate Clephane observes her daughter kissing her fiancé—also Kate’s former lover—as Anne’s wedding dress is displayed on the bed. This episode marks the first time that Kate fully acknowledges both her jealousy of her daughter and the incestuous implications of Anne’s impending marriage. In both cases, the cultural fetish of virginity—symbolized in the display of a white gown—portends the violation of a sexual taboo.

16. Ally’s mediation of working-class fashions to the elite recalls the observation of German sociologist Georg Simmel, a contemporary of Wharton’s, that “the demi-monde is so frequently a pioneer in matters of fashion . . . due to its peculiarly uprooted form of life. The pariah existence to which society condemns the demi-monde, produces an open or latent hatred against everything that has the sanction of law, of every permanent institution, a hatred that finds its relatively most innocent and aesthetic expression in the striving for ever new forms of appearance” (311). Where Julia, as a member of the demi-monde, can express her hatred of socially sanctioned life openly, Charity’s middle-class status prevents her from doing so.

17. The heroines of both Stephen Crane’s *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets* and David Graham Phillips’s *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise*, a novel Wharton viewed as an “unjustly forgotten masterpiece,” trade a degrading job on the factory floor for sex work (*Backward Glance* 147). Although Phillips’s protagonist survives while Crane’s does not, both novels stage the dramatic lack of opportunities for working-class women of the period, embodied in their heroines’ choice between the factory and the streets.

18. In Wharton’s major New York novels, fashion registers the possibility of homo-social, cross-class imitation and masquerade. In *The House of Mirth*, Madame Regina’s milliners both imitate and produce the fashions of the New York City aristocracy, while Undine Spragg of *The Custom of the Country* imagines “‘artistic’ dresses” as signs of marriage to a successful author (250). Fashion can also reference moments of cross-class allegiance: For example, in *The Age of Innocence*, when Ellen Olenska sends her maid into the street to deliver flowers to an ill neighbor, she demands that her maid put on her “velvet opera cloak” for warmth, divesting it of its class specificity (163).

19. For a rich reading of “The Old Maid,” “Her Son,” and “Roman Fever,” see Hoeller 140–72. My argument complements the productive direction taken by Hoeller, who argues that “Wharton shows women competing for the role of the ‘real’ mother and exploiting each other in the process” (141).

20. On Jewett’s Boston marriage to Annie Fields, see Faderman 197; Wharton wrote to Annie Fields about meeting her and Jewett while on a trip to Boston in 1902 (*Letters* 65–66). For a discussion of Freeman’s relationship with Mary Wales, see Glasser 154–62. Interestingly, Wharton describes Freeman in *A Backward Glance* as “Mary Wilkins” although she

was widely referred to by her married name at that time. Dismissing Freeman's marital status, Wharton reads her within the framework of the queer spinster stereotype.

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