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BOOK REVIEWS

Denise Mary MacNeil, *The Emergence of the American Frontier Hero 1682-1826: Gender, Action, and Emotion*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 226 p.

reviewed by ANDREEA MINGIUC ("Al. I. Cuza" University, Iași)

The American frontier hero was not the rough, self-reliant, solitary white man fighting his way through the wilderness as it has been often portrayed. Denise Mary Mac Neil¹ traces, in her book, the literary roots of the frontier hero by challenging and exposing this stereotypical image. She depicts the figures of Mary Rowlandson, Unca Eliza Winkfield, Edgar Huntly, Natty Bumppo, and Ethan Edward approaching literary, historical and cinematic sources. To both feminine and masculine characters she applies the model established by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* regarding the generic features of the mythical hero. In the process, the author highlights the aspects of the feminine prototype of the frontier hero (Mary Rowlandson) and their evolution in characters belonging to works following Rowlandson's *Narrative* by tackling issues related to the contact zone, wilderness and varieties in the cyclical journey pertaining to the spiritual pilgrimage undertaken in quest of a boon by the generic hero.

The first four parts of the book dwell on Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative as the writing which introduced the feminine perspective upon the New World and the challenges

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imposed by its wild territory. The trajectory call-adventure (the underworld) – return (to the familiar everyday world) is integrally present in Rowlandson’s captivity and her successful experience with danger which turns wilderness into a home. Denise MacNeil depicts the reasons which stood behind the popularity of the narrative by indicating the changes in the cultural dynamics of the Puritan society and the overt as well as covert message of the narrative. Distancing herself from critics like R.W.B Lewis and Kathryn Zabelle Derounian Stodolla, MacNeil ascertains the maternal parentage of the Adamic hero, presenting Rowlandson as the prototype of the American frontier hero.

In the fifth chapter the author brings into discussion *The Female American; or, the Adventures of Unca Eliza Winkfield* – a 1726 novel first addressed contemporarily by MacNeil in 1997 – which adds new features to the frontier hero by presenting a biracial, binational heroine embodying both the colonized and the colonizing. Winkfield is the American hero *within* the wilderness undertaking a journey different from the classical one. She does not come back from the wilderness (the mythical underworld) where she tries to create a hybridized society, but sends the boon from there nevertheless. The emphasis falls here on the transcendence of gender and race which makes Winkfield an androgynous hero. The story is contrasted with that of Mary Rowlandson regarding contextualizing savagery and the integration in the wilderness that result in different attitudes of the main characters but at the same time in making the profile of the frontier hero complete.

The disintegration of the characteristics embodied by the Rowlandson - Winkfield hero is followed in the two novels approached in the sixth and seventh chapters of the book. Both bring into the foreground male heroes who deny, in MacNeil’s view, their essentially feminine heroic structure. Edgar Huntley in Charles Brockden Brown’s novel *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* refuses the femininity inherent in the frontier hero and remains suspended between the worlds without seeking any boon. MacNeil demonstrates that even if

the character denies the feminine, the text is meta-grounded in it. The other mono-gendered, uni-racialized development of a heroic figure is James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo. The feminine roots of the hero are again obliterated and the male figure is placed in a wilderness in which women are captives of man; their agency is only accidentally permitted. The author argues that *The Last of the Mochicans* continues the decomposition of the frontier hero begun in *Edgar Huntly* reaching the point in which she speaks of "heroism of bafflement and defeat" (155) or even of the "failure of heroism" (154).

The closing chapter deals with John Ford's movie *The Searchers* (1956) because of its link to the texts already analyzed. The character of Ethan Edward (played by John Wayne) reveals ties to the evolution of the Rowlandson heroic prototype by his ability to integrate in the Native American world, but he is consigned to an interstitial wilderness between the everyday world of Native American and European American cultures. The mythical underworld disappears and the incomplete journey does not account for a complete frontier hero.

The detailed analysis and the creative reading of literary, historical and cinematic figures through the use of myth and symbol, make Denise Mary MacNeil's book a most valuable study instrument for students not only of literature, but also history and ethnic and gender studies.

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UNDERGRADUATE SECTION

Thermopylae Reimagined: Examining the Portrayal of Spartans and Persians in Zack Snyder's *300*

by DRAGOȘ MANEA (University of Bucharest)

Abstract:

Zack Snyder's epic blockbuster *300* fought its way into the hearts of many, with a twirl of the sword and a bucket of blood. This paper seeks to explore the myriad ways in which Sparta is recontextualized and reimagined in Zack Snyder's *300* so as to pander to modern western audiences, as well as to take a closer look at its neo-conservative, war-hawkish subtext.

The battle of Thermopylae has forever loomed large in western imagination; no sooner was the battle fought, that Greek men, at least that amorphous confederacy of peoples and city states refusing Persian rule, spoke highly of the bravery and might of those who were slain there. So strongly has the tale of Thermopylae reverberated through time, that it has become a powerful symbol of resistance and defiance, a symbol to be trotted out time and time again, whenever the need is felt for its particular cultural portent: its underlying cautionary tale of west versus east, and, perhaps more crucially, of us versus them. Like many symbols before them, the Spartans now exist to be imbued with our own cultural baggage, to be remade and recontextualised in our own image, so as to better serve our current purposes, whatever they may be.

Zack Snyder's *300* is the last in a long line of such cultural products – dating back as early as 1st century BC, when Diodorus first cast the Spartans as willing sacrificial lambs,

certain in the knowledge that their unavoidable defeat would revitalize Greece and drive the invaders out (cf. Marincola 117). The film, based on Frank Miller's 1998 comic book by the same name, retells the battle of Thermopylae, and the events surrounding it, in a manner palatable to American popular culture and current societal norms. Perhaps, though, what is of greater interest lies in the film's subtext: an apparent apologia and endorsement of American interventionism in the Middle East.

For his part, Frank Miller made his thoughts clear on the subject in an interview on NPR's *Talk of the Nation*, weeks before the film was released:

It seems to me quite obvious that our country and the entire Western World is up against an existential foe that knows exactly what it wants and we're behaving like a collapsing empire. [...] For some reason, nobody seems to be talking about who we're up against, and the sixth century barbarism that they actually represent. These people saw people's heads off. They enslave women, they genitally mutilate their daughters, they do not behave by any cultural norms that are sensible to us. (Kashani)

It's little wonder then that the film dovetails nicely with the recent American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, both as a call to arms – the values of western civilization must be protected – and as a partial allegorical retelling – a reluctant ruler must wage war against those who threaten his nation, despite the protests of politicians and other assorted ne'er do wells.

The film presents itself as an account of King Leonidas, his growth into manhood and the events surrounding the battle of Thermopylae, told by a soldier of his, Dilios, before an army of Spartan warriors, soon to face the Persians at Plataea. (Dilios does this at the behest of Leonidas, to spread word of their sacrifice and resistance – echoing Diodorus – although how he becomes privy to his king's love life remains for the audience to figure out.) The tale

is ostensibly meant to inspire the outnumbered Greek soldiers – and by proxy the modern-day spectator – by recounting the deeds of valour achieved by Leonidas and his men. At the same time, the narrative device seeks to justify its own exaggerations: we are witnessing the transformation of Thermopylae into myth – a clear aside to folk culture and the role it plays in shaping the shared imaginary.

The very existence of Dilios is an augur of things to come: not only has he no historical origin – he is a character invented whole cloth so as to bolster the narrative – but his sheer presence betrays a fundamental distortion of Spartan societal norms. The closest historical antecedent to Dilios is a Spartan by the name of Aristodemus (cf. Lendon 51), a Spartan soldier who had been sent away from battle due to an eye infection and who returned home in disgrace for having survived the day (he was surely not allowed to speak before a council of free citizens, nor assigned to lead men in battle).

Spartan society as a whole has been imbued with modern values so as not to offend audiences. The 1962 Hollywood Epic, *The 300 Spartans*, went through a similar process (although the East then more likely alluded to the USSR than to any perceived middle-eastern threat). As David Levene notes in his essay *Xerxes Goes to Hollywood*:

“[...] a more far-reaching strategy is to reconfigure Sparta itself to make it fit more closely with modern democratic ideals. [...] This was not done out of ignorance, but was a deliberate attempt to present a version of Sparta acceptable in American terms. The film accordingly omits entire areas of Spartan life. An obvious example is the helots, who are not mentioned in the entire film. [...] Likewise, while the film is full of anecdotes and aphorisms that distinguish the Spartans from other Greeks in their toughness and heroic devotion to the military life there is nothing about the distinctive social organization that made this possible.” (387)

Although Zack Snyder's film at least strives to portray the *agoge*, or the Spartan educational system, it does so in the shallowest manner possible: attention is only paid to martial training and physical exertion; nothing is shown of their instruction into writing or dancing, and Spartan pederasty – a practice by which an older soldier formed a pedagogical and sexual relationship with a pubescent boy, a practice common to many Greek city-states (cf. Kennell 124) – is never even alluded to.

More so, Leonidas at one point describes the Athenians as “boy lovers”. This absurd outburst of homophobia is clearly meant to assuage heterosexual anxiety – the Spartan warriors spend the rest of the film well-oiled and buff, wearing only a cape and a loincloth – as well as reinscribe the Spartans into normative patterns of masculinity. No mention is, of course, made of the Spartans singing or combing their hair-before battle into luxurious manes (cf. Bridges 411).

Heterosexual anxiety is itself toyed with in the scene in which Leonidas and Xerxes – a tall, bald man, fabulously bedecked in golden jewelry – first meet. As Xerxes tries to persuade the Spartan king into joining him, he almost seductively rests his hand on his chest and shoulders, before Leonidas manages to break free. The Persian king is shown to be a decadent ruler, lording it over orgiastic feasts right next to the battle field, and declaring himself a god. This is all presented in stark contrast to Leonidas – a man of few words and austere bearing, interested only in honour, reason and the nuclear family. And, of course, no mention is made of his wife being his half-niece and more than 20 years his junior (cf. Pomeroy 74).

The othering of the Persians is also performed through race: the first three emissaries we meet – one of which may well be a general – all have pronounced African features and black skin; of these three, two are murdered by the Spartans, all white and fair skinned (although the filters employed by the filmmakers make it hard to be sure at times). Most other

Persians are shown to have Middle Eastern features. Xerxes is as racially ambiguous as he is sexually. The film thus also seems to make a statement against multiculturalism: the many peoples of the Persian Empire are all shown to be venal and immoral in contrast to the homogenous, white and strictly mono-cultural Spartans.

The political philosophy that the Spartans espouse is best exemplified by queen Gorgo in her speech before the council assembly:

We must send the entire Spartan army to aid our king in the preservation of not just ourselves, but of our children. Send the army for the preservation of liberty. Send it for justice. Send it for law and order. Send it for reason. But most importantly, send our army for hope - hope that a king and his men have not been wasted to the pages of history - that their courage bonds us together, that we are made stronger by their actions, and that your choices today reflect their bravery. (300)

With its references to liberty and justice, the subtext verges on becoming text: one is reminded of Republican efforts in passing the Iraq Resolution through Congress, or of American diplomatic attempts at persuading the UN Security Council to sanction the invasion of Iraq. To further this agenda the film misrepresents the political situation in Sparta. The ephors – in reality, elected administrators who had supported Leonidas and even asked him to consider taking more men (cf. Marincola 115) – are presented as deformed mystics seeking only to quench their base desires – an unforgivable distortion of history, even given Dilios' unreliable narration (the Spartan soldiers would surely know of ephors' true nature). Of course, the allegory is far from perfect: Sparta is the one being invaded by a much stronger military force, that much is clear – but it's important to note that the allegory doesn't have to be perfect: it only needs to feed on and kindle American anxieties regarding some great

amorphous middle-eastern threat, a threat that is boundless in men and in hatred, and that has already struck at the heart of America: The Twin Towers and the Pentagon.

The film modernizes the Spartan discourse on freedom through omission: no mention is made of the Helots, Sparta's subject population. In reality, as Paul Cartledge notes in his book, *Sparta and Lakonia: A regional history 1300–362 BC*, the Spartans “were the ‘freest’ of the Greeks because they had taken the exploitation of slave labour to its logical limit and contrived to perform no productive labour themselves whatsoever” (140).

Instead, the film casts the Persians as seeking to enslave the entire Greek world. To further its agenda of portraying the Asian Other as a fundamental threat to the western way of life, *300* presents the Persian army as endless and, with few exceptions, faceless – a multicultural multitude hell-bent on crushing Greek resistance. The battle scenes are the most patently ridiculous, as well as the most outwardly informed and distorted by pulp fiction. The Persian elite units, the Immortals, are fancifully presented as faux-ninjas, wearing Japanese facial armour and sporting Wakizashi swords. As Dilios intones “our eyes bear witness to the grotesque spectacle coughed forth from the darkest corner of Xerxes' empire”, we witness men in African war paint in an absurd spectacle straight out of some 1940s serial. It seems almost pointless to state that their numbers are vastly exaggerated, or that the Spartans were in fact leading an army, both made large and made out of far more tribes than the film feels fit to mention (cf. Cartledge 175).

In the end, Zack Snyder's *300* leaves its Spartan characters bereft of anything more genuine than abs and wit. In these bled dry husks, it pours an ethos more modern than ancient Greek: an ethos born out of neo-conservative paranoia and gung-ho jingoism; an ethos that almost unconscionably seems to condemn all that is foreign, all that is different. Perhaps only in its reckless intransigence, has it managed to retain something of old Sparta.

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Unspeakable Conduct: Discretions, Imprudences, and the Impossible Bertha Dorset in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

by FELIX BRINKER (Leibniz University)

Abstract:

This paper examines the skillful, yet precarious imbrication of sentimental and realist voices in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. While the novel about the social decline of its heroine Lily Barth presents itself as a realist portrait of the upper class in turn-of-the-20th-America, its narrative structure adheres to a sentimental logic that puts the protagonist through a series of trials in order to demonstrate her moral character. As a result Wharton's novel needs to mediate the competing demands of sentimental and realist modes; and it does so by relying on a narration that hints at, alludes to, suggests and insinuates events, relationships between characters, and their actions instead of presenting them openly, directly, and in detail. In order to come to terms with the function of, as well as the rationale behind this way of storytelling, this article engages with the realist and sentimental aspects of Wharton's novel and considers several key scenes.

Appearances, and the heroine's efforts to maintain them under circumstances that get more and more precarious, are a central theme in Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905). Chronicling the journey of Lily Bart from her initial attempts to fashion herself as a "marriageable young woman" for potential husbands from the ranks of the affluent high society in turn-of-the-20th-century New York, to her social isolation and tragic death in a cheap boarding-house room in the city's dingier quarters, the novel presents characters

permanently occupied with judging, maintaining, manipulating, and threatening the appearances of themselves and others. The novel presents reputation and social status as inextricably bound up with each other and with the individual prowess to assert oneself within the contested realm of the upper-class by navigating its social codes and personal intrigues, and calculating every aspect of personal behavior towards this end. The abundance of such themes in *The House of Mirth* has its share in the association of Edith Wharton and her fiction with the literary tradition of realism, and, as Carol Singley notes, the author's own self-fashioning as a "novelist of manners" (2). The realist mode is, however, not all that operates within the novel. Although Wharton's novel has long been celebrated and subsequently been canonized as "a realist masterpiece," by "critics [who] have appreciated it almost exclusively for its satirical realism," Hildegard Hoeller reminds us that an "underlying sentimental logic" structures the narrative and stands opposed to its otherwise controlling "realist voice" (97, 106). Hoeller locates much of the novel's appeal in its "plasticity," its ability to sustain realist as well as sentimental readings, and problematizes critical discussions that focus on its "antisentimental surface narrative" alone (cf. 96, 106). For her, Lily Bart's journey from popularity to obscurity follows the schema of the sentimental novel, a tradition popular (and dismissed by critics) from its beginnings in 18th century British literature. Hoeller's argument is convincing, and I will return to it below – however, it sheds only little light on the way Wharton manages to combine these two different modes in *The House of Mirth* – as, after all, sentimentalist and realist modes may seem to embody opposed literary engagements with social reality.

In this paper, I will take Hoeller's discussion of *The House of Mirth* as a starting point to examine the way Wharton manages to imbricate these seemingly conflicting literary traditions in her novel. I argue that *The House of Mirth* manages to negotiate the conflicting demands of each mode through a narration that time and again hints at, alludes to, suggests

and insinuates events, relationships between characters, and their actions instead of presenting them openly, directly, and in detail. The novel reveals a central aspect of its story – more precisely, the particularities of Bertha Dorset’s extra-marital affairs – only vaguely, and prompts the reader to draw her own conclusions. Through this, the narration manages to suspend the growing tension between the realist and sentimental voices for long stretches of the novel. Bertha, who conspires against Lily Bart’s attempts to assert her position within high society, is set up as a counter-figure to Wharton’s protagonist, as she manages to attain all the things that the novel denies to the latter. Where Lily’s decline is presented as the result of her failure to balance her emotional needs with the need to secure her position within the upper-class, Bertha’s immoral behavior allows her to easily satisfy both; she thus becomes a threat to the plausibility of Lily’s decline, a threat that Wharton tries to contain by rendering the alternative solution to the problems of her protagonist – embodied by Bertha – unspeakable.

The recurring theme of ‘keeping up appearance’ is thus replicated on a formal level: just as its characters are repeatedly portrayed in attempts to rescue their reputations through calculated, planned behavior and the controlled withholding and circulation of information about others, the narration repeatedly tries to gloss over its own implausibilities and contradictions by relying on its own “discretions.” In order to prove my point, I will begin with a discussion of the origins and demands of realist and sentimental modes. I will afterwards examine Wharton’s reliance on elements from both traditions in her novel, and then offer a reading of scenes in which *The House of Mirth* keeps the discussion of Bertha’s actions vague or ambiguous in order to sustain the precarious balance between the competing demands of realism and sentimental fiction.

Sentimental and Realist Voices in *The House of Mirth*

For Hildegard Hoeller, the "sentimental logic" of *The House of Mirth* structures the book from the first page onwards, where Wharton introduces her protagonist Lily Bart as "different and superior" to other characters (106). Introduced from the perspective of Lawrence Selden, her love interest for the rest of the novel, Lily is portrayed as standing out against a crowd of other women at Grand Central Station. From the very start, Wharton "prepares her for her role as a sentimental heroine," who will afterwards journey through what Amy Kaplan terms a "plot of decline" (Hoeller 107, cf. 106-107, Kaplan 103). Lily, grown up in a wealthy upper-class family, orphaned and taken into the care of her well-situated but frugal aunt Julia before the start of the narrative, is introduced as a beautiful young woman accustomed to a luxurious lifestyle, which can not be sustained by her small allowance alone. Economically dependent on her aunt (and on generous tips from wealthier friends), Lily somewhat reluctantly sets out to find a suitable husband, an endeavor that is complicated by a developing love for Selden, who – as a financially less well situated lawyer – does not fall into this category. It is this "impossible" love for Selden that, in a number of ways, and after a number of plot twists, time and again stands in the way of Lily's engagement to wealthier (albeit apparently less than ideal) suitors. With each missed opportunity to marry into money, Lily descends further down the social ladder, eventually dying in isolation. For Hoeller, it is Lily's inability to marry for purely economic reasons, her inability to disavow her love to Selden, which ultimately marks her as a sentimental character (cf. 110).²

Viewed from this angle, Lily becomes the tragic heroine of a love story, whose happy ending is denied by social conventions, necessities, actors, and circumstances that conspire against it. Along these lines, Hoeller reads the novel's ending (and Lily's death) "as the

²Interestingly, as Hoeller points out, the novel does not provide an explanation for this romantic streak in Lily's character: "There cannot be a source or language for Lily's sentimental self in Wharton's realist vision. Lily's otherness is rooted in something outside of this vision and outside of this book – not in Wharton's realist vision, but in a two-hundred-year tradition of sentimental fiction". Just as in the instances I will discuss below, the novel makes several hints about this "vein of sentiment," – by hinting at "[h]er father's vague poetic interest," and making frequent references to her reading of romantic poetry and literature – but does not deliver more direct explanations for Lily's behavior in order to not interfere with its realist aspirations (110-111).

culmination of the sentimental subtext: “Lily, unwilling or unable to give up her love to Selden for the economically rational decision to marry, eventually finds peace, and the end of her troubles, in death (124). Hoeller’s reading coincides with J.A. Cuddon’s characterization of the sentimental novel as a tale that “concentrate[s] on the distresses of the virtuous,” and stresses the importance of “honour and moral behavior” (Cuddon 858). Like such narratives, Hoeller points out, “Wharton’s novel operates not on a realistic statistical scale but on moral logic” (108). And, accordingly, the novel puts Lily Bart in more and more precarious circumstances, economically as well as emotionally, with the plot driven forward by fateful chance encounters, only to offer her several „exits” through marriage afterwards – solutions that Lily must decline in order to remain “innocent and morally untainted” (Hoeller 106).

Exactly such “unrealistic” qualities have been the basis for the dismissal of sentimental fiction, by both authors and critics indebted to a realist tradition. As Hoeller summarizes:

Sentimental fiction is the mark of excess when viewed through the eyes of a realist. It employs overdetermination, unlikely plots, powerfully one-dimensional characters, spending (of words, tears, lives of characters), and a way of taking itself seriously that disregards verisimilitude. The realist narrative by comparison is almost understated, economical, rational, engaged in an impossible effort to be true to life. (31)

Additionally, the “failure of sentimental fiction,” Hoeller continues, “has been defined ... also in ideological terms. Sentimental fiction often has been dismissed both as shallow and as overly conservative ...” (33). For her, such biases are the reason why Wharton’s indebtedness to sentimental fiction has been largely ignored or downplayed in more contemporary discussions of her oeuvre: critics who appreciated her realism, if they took issue with her engagement with sentimental fiction at all, were usually quick to label her use of such conventions as ironic commentary on the earlier mode (cf. 9-25, see Kaplan 13).

Such dismissals of sentimental fiction, however, as Hoeller continues, make sense only from a realist vantage point. Building on Jane Tompkins' work on 19th century sentimental fiction, she stresses the historically constructed character of such criticism, as, in Tompkins words, "the sense of the real that this criticism takes for granted is not one that the readers of the sentimental novels had" (8, cf. 8-9). Tompkins sees the sentimental tradition as grounded in a world-view fundamentally different from that of literary realism, and stresses its origins in a 19th century context heavily influenced by the rhetoric of the evangelical reform movement (cf. 34). For her, "sentimental novelists wrote to educate her readers in Christian perfection," an effort whose underlying conception of reality maintains that "the arena of human action ... has been defined not as the world but as the human soul" (35). According to Tompkins, sentimental fiction puts forward "a theory of power that stipulates that all true action is not material but spiritual" a view that privileges an emphasis on spiritual and moral matters – and increasingly contrived scenarios to play these out– over an attempt to minutely describe the social aspects of reality (38).

Tompkins stresses the fact that readers and writers of 19th century sentimental fiction would not have deemed such an approach as "unrealistic," as literature engages with "reality itself" as it appears to people at a given time" (38). "What people will accept as an 'accurate description' of reality" therefore hinges upon historically situated "'order[s] of things' to which both readers and fiction belong....," and which are, in turn, "structured by narratives" (38). Along these lines, the understanding of reality may vary between 19th century sentimental fiction and the American realism Wharton considered herself to be part of – the fundamental relationship between the complexities of reality and the literary engagement with it, however, might not be so different after all. Nevertheless, American realists like William Dean Howells, to whose "theory of realism ... Wharton ... subscribed," were decidedly vocal in their critique of sentimental fiction of their own day (Kaplan 89). What is the difference

between the sentimental and realist "order of things" then, and how can we account for Wharton's reliance on a sentimental structure without prematurely dismissing it as polemic and ironical?

In her discussion of works by Howells, Wharton and Theodore Dreiser in *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Amy Kaplan sees realism as an attempt to come to terms with broader social and cultural changes, namely "the urban-industrial transformation of nineteenth-century society:"

This realism that develops in American fiction in the 1880s and 1890s ...an anxious and contradictory mode which both articulates and combats the growing sense of unreality at the heart of middle-class life. This unreal quality comes from two major sources for the novelist ... : intense and violent class conflicts which produced fragmented and competing social realities, and the simultaneous development of a mass culture which dictated an equally threatening homogeneous reality. (9)

For Kaplan, this "anxious and contradictory" character of the realism put forward by authors like Wharton is due to "a sense of the world changing under the realist pens that makes the social world ... elusive to representation" (9). Society thus did to present itself as "a ready-made setting which the realistic novel reflects, but ... these changes radically challenged the accessibility of an emergent modern world to literary representation" (9). For the realists, the complimentary processes of democratization, industrialization, scientific rationalization and the related social and cultural transformations called for a new literary language; sentimental fiction's emphasis on spiritual matters and individual morality no longer seemed adequate to account for a reality in which the role and status of the individual seemed to be diminished. In order to find this new voice, Kaplan emphasizes, "realists had to draw from and compete with other cultural practices that had the same goal," namely the "older residual conventions" of

sentimental fiction, as well as “the growing dominance of a mass culture ... of newspapers, magazines, advertising, and book publishing” (13). In addition, Wharton and her realist contemporaries turned to contemporary ‘scientific’ theories of social determinism, like psychology and social Darwinism.³ Kaplan characterizes the resulting mode as an attempt to “juggle competing visions of social reality, ... [that] encompasses conflicting forms and narratives” (13). The conventions of sentimental fiction were thus not simply replaced by those of realism, but “went underground,” and manifested themselves in *The House of Mirth* as the “underlying sentimental logic” noted by Hoeller.

Discretions and Imprudences, Blunders and Appearances

Continuing her argument about American realism as an engagement with social change, Kaplan sees the realist merit of Wharton’s novel in its portrayal of high society life during a period in which a “rapid growth of wealth destabilized the upper classes” (89):

When the huge influx of wealth turned New York into the finance and trust center of the country in the late nineteenth century, the older families lost their authority to control the admission to an elite coterie. With fewer guarantees of social status, the wealthy focused more on competing for power with one another than on acknowledging their common interests. If the old guard had tried to cement its membership through exclusive rituals in a private setting, both new and old money now competed for status through extravagant public spectacles. ... Social life was thus gradually moving out of the private dining hall ... to the public stage of the hotel and restaurant where anyone with wealth could come to see and be seen. (92-93)

³Donald Pizer’s assessment of social determinism in *The House of Mirth*, for example, leads with him to assess the novel as an example of naturalism (albeit not without noting elements of the narrative that seem to transcend this classification) (cf. Pizer). Similarly, Jennie Kassanoff discusses the relationship between Spencerian Social Darwinism and Wharton’s treatment of race and class in the novel (cf. Kassanoff). Finally, Lynne Tilman identifies parallels between Wharton’s novel and Freudian psychoanalytic theory (cf. Tilman).

This "public stage," Kaplan points out, eventually expanded into the domestic sphere, and redefined the roles of upper-class women:

For the lady of leisure, domesticity was subordinated to publicity as the home became a stage setting for the gala social events orchestrated and acted out by women. The upper-class home functioned less as a private haven from the competition of the marketplace than as the public stage for the competition. (93)

The House of Mirth presents the members of high society as engaged in a constant competition for positive publicity. The novel's newly rich characters (most prominently Simon Rosedale, Lily's Jewish suitor, and the Wellington Brys) try to establish themselves as members of the "smart set" by staging expensive and spectacular social events, by building or buying representative houses and art collections, and appearing in public with illustrious members of the old elite, among which Lily Bart figures prominently.⁴ This need to make an impact, to distinguish oneself from other women of her set, and to make herself visible as a member of the cultured elite is what informs Lily's actions throughout most of the novel. High society life is public life in *The House of Mirth*, a stage for the display and legitimation of social and economic power – a spectacle put on not only for the members of the upper class themselves, but also for the lower classes (cf. 91-96).

The House of Mirth chronicles Lily's attempts to assert her status within this illustrious setting. As a 'lady of leisure' without significant income, her position among the wealthy is precarious from the very beginning, and Lily, blessed with beauty, youth, exquisite taste, and good manners, tries to make use of these "assets" to improve her situation. Accordingly, much of the first book depicts Lily's attempts to fashion herself as a "*jeune fille à marier*" for potential husbands – most prominently the boring but affluent Percy Gryce –

⁴Aside from the staging of such events, the impression of a 'realistic' portrayal of high society life is strengthened to numerous references to 'cultured' activities enjoyed by Lily and her friends, usually mentioned in passing in conversation between the characters: from dinners at stylish restaurants, the reading of poetry, the program at the opera, popular painters and dressmakers, to vacations in posh Swiss holiday resorts.

that could sustain her expensive lifestyle (Wharton 56). Wai-Chee Dimock frames this endeavor in rigorously economic terms: “A self-acknowledged ‘human merchandise,’ [Lily] is busy marketing herself throughout most of the book, worried only about the price she would fetch” (124).

Indeed, Wharton presents her protagonist as constantly concerned with her appearance, planning and calculating her appearances towards this end. Selden, who invites Lily into his apartment for a cup of tea after their initial encounter at New York’s Grand Central Station, views all of her behavior as the result of more or less exhaustive “calculations” (6,7); consequently, Lily uses their shared tea-time to question him about his collection of antique books, only to use the knowledge gathered in this conversation to impress Percy Gryce later (cf. Hoeller 108). In her first conversation with Gryce, Wharton presents Lily as “a skillful operator” (19) who attunes her behavior and conversation skills to the moods and interests of her opposite. Eager to make a good impression, Lily strategically runs into Gryce on the train to Bellomont to start a conversation, prepares tea for him to “impart a gently domestic air to the scene” (18), engages him to speak about his collection of Americana, and forbids herself to smoke in his presence (19-22). Lily’s skills to strategically present herself as a marriageable commodity turn up again later in the novel when she makes a stunning impression as part of a spectacular *tableau vivant* at a ball given by the Wellington Brys.

Lily’s role as a sentimental heroine, however, keeps her from securing her status within the upper-class community; Lily also exhibits what Hoeller sees as an “[i]mpulsive and spontaneous” streak that threatens the success of her otherwise planned and calculated behavior (107). In decisive moments, this trait, as well as her developing crush on Selden, leads her to commit “blunders” that threaten her carefully constructed image. These blunders, together with several chance encounters, create the novel’s main conflicts and thus provide

the narrative's main forward thrust. Lily's spontaneous decision to accompany Selden to his apartment constitutes the first of these blunders, and Wharton is quick to allude to the possible outcome of her impulsive behavior (cf. Hoeller 107). After her cup of tea, Lily leaves Selden's flat and encounters Mrs. Haffen, the charwoman who is cleaning the staircase of Selden's building; this encounter will become relevant later in the novel, but Lily's thoughts about the situation already foreshadow the coming complications:

The woman ...continued to stare as Miss Bart swept by with a murmur of silken linings. Lily felt herself flushing under the look. What did the creature suppose? Could one never do the simplest, the most harmless thing, without subjecting one's self to some odious conjecture? Half way down the next flight, she smiled to think that a char-woman's stare should so perturb her. The poor thing was probably dazzled by such an unwonted apparition. But *were* such apparitions unwonted on Selden's stairs? Miss Bart was not familiar with the moral code of bachelor's flat-houses, and her colour rose again as it occurred to her that the woman's persistent gaze implied a groping among past associations. (Wharton 13)

The reference to "the moral code of bachelor's flat-houses" suggests that Lily's appearance on Selden's stairs might indicate an affair between herself and Selden, an insinuation that could severely damage her attempts to find a suitable husband in Percy Gryce. The situation is complicated when Lily runs into her acquaintance Simon Rosedale, the owner of the building, on her way out. Not wanting to appear in a bad light, Lily explains her presence with a visit to her dressmaker – a lie that Rosedale promptly discerns, as no dressmakers reside in his house. The shady implications of the situation put Lily at the mercy of both Rosedale and the charwoman, and both characters will afterwards try to use their knowledge about the incident to their own advantage.

It will later be revealed that “apparitions” such as Lily’s are not at all “unwonted” on Selden’s stairs, as the latter seems to have had an affair with Bertha Dorset, another (married) member of Lily’s high society clique. After her encounter with Rosedale, Lily leaves for Bellomont, the summer retreat of the fashionable Gus and Judy Trenor, to present herself to Percy Gryce. At Bellomont, a conversation between Lily and her hostess reveals the first of several hints about a “flirtation” between Selden and Bertha, which will play a significant role for the rest of the novel; the exact character of their relationship, however, remains obscure at this point (cf. 36). Not until a few pages later another discrete hint is given to the reader: Selden eventually decides to visit Bellomont after all, albeit, apparently, not to meet Bertha, but Lily. After a spent Saturday afternoon with Selden, Lily skips church the next morning (another of her blunders that will negatively affect Gryce’s view of her) in order to see him again. When she finds him in the library of the house, engaged in a conversation with Bertha, the scene is presented in a way that is suggestive, but remains vague about the character of their relationship:

The library at Bellomont was in fact never used for reading, though it had a certain popularity as a smoking-room or a quiet retreat for flirtation. It had occurred to Lily, however, that it might on this occasion have been resorted to by the only member of the party in the least likely to put it to its original use. She advanced noiselessly over the dense old rug scattered with easy-chairs, and before she reached the middle of the room she saw that she had not been mistaken. Lawrence Selden was in fact seated at its farther end; but though a book lay on his knee, his attention was not engaged with it, but directed to a lady whose lace-clad figure, as she leaned back in an adjoining chair, detached itself with exaggerated slimness against the dusky leather of the upholstery. (48)

The presence of Bertha, the “lace-clad figure” talking to Selden, suggests that the library might rather be in use for flirtation than for smoking or reading. Indeed, Bertha seems to be so displeased by the disturbance that she afterwards tells Percy Gryce about Lily’s smoking and gambling habits, which leads to his abrupt departure from Bellomont and the thwarting of her plans for marriage.

Threats to Lily’s reputation remain integral for the further developments of the plot. In another unlikely development, the charwoman from Selden’s building takes a job at Lily’s own residence, the house of her aunt Julia. While working at Mrs. Peniston’s, the charwoman confronts Lily and tries to blackmail her with the threat of revealing a stack of love-letters addressed to Selden to the public. Having identified Lily as a visitor to Selden’s apartment, Haffen takes her to be the author of the implicating letters, not realizing that the letters were actually written by Bertha. While reading the letters, the facts of Bertha’s and Selden’s affair are revealed to Lily, but not to the reader, as the narration again discretely stays away from more concrete details:

The letter before her was short, but its few words, which had leapt into her brain before she was conscious of reading them, told a long history—a history over which, for the last four years, the friends of the writer had smiled and shrugged, viewing it merely as one among the countless “good situations” of the mundane comedy. Now the other side presented itself to Lily, the volcanic nether side of the surface over which conjecture and innuendo glide so lightly till the first fissure turns their whisper into a shriek. (82)

Significantly, the nature of Bertha’s and Selden’s relationship remains vague, and different readings of the situation are possible: one might be under the impression that the earlier love relationship between Bertha and Selden was one-sided, and that Bertha’s crush on Selden might have been unrequited; one might also read the relationship between the two as a mutual

love affair. Unambiguous, however, is the fact that by acquiring the letters from Mrs. Haffen, Lily purchases a powerful tool to control Bertha:

The code of Lily's world decreed that a woman's husband should be the only judge of her conduct: she was technically above suspicion while she had the shelter of his approval, or even of his indifference. But with a man of George Dorset's temper there could be no thought of condonation—the possessor of his wife's letters could overthrow with a touch the whole structure of her existence. (82)

Lily's possession of this powerful tool underscores her role as a sentimental heroine: although Lily will repeatedly be put into situations in which pressuring or blackmailing Bertha might advance her own social status, she refrains from doing so, and can thus remain a sentimental heroine. Lily's morality is, however, not all that keeps her from exerting her power over Bertha. Towards the end of the second book, in a conversation between Lily and Rosedale, it appears that Lily does not make use of the letters because she seeks to protect Selden's reputation (cf. Wharton 203). Lily's decision to keep the letters to herself lends a tragic dimension to her fate, as it is ultimately her unfulfilled love for Selden that prevents her escape from poverty and social isolation. The whole constellation between Bertha, Selden and Lily is staged primarily to serve the novel's sentimental logic, providing a love interest for the protagonist, an antagonist who conspires against her, and a trial for her morality. At the same time, it allows Wharton to make a statement about the role of upper-class women in a manner compatible with a realist project. To maintain their status as ladies of leisure, both Bertha and Lily are ultimately economically dependent on those men to whom they can make themselves useful by acting as a symbol of wealth and social status.

In *The House of Mirth*, marriage becomes a business arrangement that secures this relationship between the partners; and accordingly, Bertha, in her conflict with Lily, resorts to weapons that damage Lily's reputation, the only thing that enables her to exist (if

precariously) as a member of the upper class. Romantic love seems to be impossible for Lily in a world where, as Dimock puts it, “even the most private affairs take on the essence of business transactions” (124). Similarly, Kaplan reads Wharton’s sober portrait of upper-class life as a “reject[ion of] marriage as the narrative teleology of the domestic novel, [which] implicitly calls attention to her own narrative as realistic” (94).

The Impossible Bertha Dorset

It appears as if Wharton’s combination of a realistic voice and a structuring sentimental logic complement each other rather well – why then, does the novel repeatedly create ambiguities in its discussion of Bertha’s love affairs, and in how far can this be seen as integral to the combination of the two modes? The answer lies in the novel’s presentation of Bertha’s actions. As a fellow lady of leisure, Bertha is faced with the same basic dilemma as Lily: her marriage to George Dorset provides her with the financial security to lead a good life among the smart set of the elite (as would a marriage to Gryce, Rosedale, or, later, Dorset, for Lily), but the purely utilitarian relationship to her husband does not satisfy her sexual and emotional needs. However, other than Lily – who surrenders before the impossible choice between romantic fulfillment (and life in relative poverty; obtainable through marrying Selden), and economic power (without the fulfillment of her desires; obtainable by marrying somebody else) – Bertha seems to have come to an arrangement with the circumstances, as she compensates for her unhappy marriage by having love affairs with Selden and Ned Silverton (another penniless member of their set). Bertha has her cake, and eats it, too – and she does so seemingly without negative consequences for herself. As George suffers strongly from her infidelity (which he only suspects), Bertha is presented as an ultimately selfish and immoral character, and this selfishness and immorality are what set her apart from other female characters in the novel.

Bertha thus becomes a problematic presence within *The House of Mirth*: on the one hand, her role as immoral antagonist to Wharton's untainted protagonist is integral to the novel's tragic constellation; on the other hand, her outrageous behavior offers a realistic alternative solution to Lily's dilemmas. Bertha's shamelessness thus becomes a threat for the plausibility of Wharton's construction, a threat the novel tries to contain by leaving the details of her exploits as vague as possible. Lily's dilemma hinges on the dismissal of adultery as immoral; her decline can only remain plausible if this alternative solution to her problems – which is lived and enjoyed by Bertha – is kept at bay, silenced, or otherwise rendered impossible. The novel thus continues to present Bertha's adulterous actions in a similar manner, even when her careless actions threaten to expose her secret affair with Ned Silverton to the public in a dramatic turn of events during the first chapters of the second book.

The beginning of the novel's second part is set on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea (more precisely Monte Carlo), where, by sheer coincidence, Selden (who is on a business trip to Europe) meets his some of his New Yorker society friends who are on an extended stay abroad. Soon, George and Bertha Dorset, who are on a luxury cruise aboard their own yacht accompanied by Lily and Ned Silverton, arrive as well, and reunite with the others. Bertha, as it will later be revealed, has invited Lily to come along with them to draw her husband's attention away from her affair with Ned, and the first indications of her selfish actions are presented to the reader early on. During an overnight stay at Nice, where the whole party has gathered to see a spectacular "water-fête" that is taking place at the harbor, Selden watches Bertha and Ned – who have separated from their crowd – disappear after suspiciously entering a cab together (cf. Wharton 151). The next day, after everybody except Selden has returned to Monte Carlo, it is revealed that Ned and Bertha spent the night together, which prompts George to become suspicious of his wife's fidelity. Lily, who meets George in the

city after an early solitary sojourn by herself, tries to console her elderly friend's sorrows in a conversation that leaves the exact character of George's suspicions about Bertha unspoken:

“Why didn't you call on me to share your vigil?” ... “I don't think you would have cared for its *dénouement*,” he said with sudden grimness. Again she was disconcerted by the abrupt change in his tone, and as in one flash she saw the peril of the moment, and the need of keeping her sense of it out of her eyes. “*Dénouement*—isn't that too big a word for such a small incident? The worse of it, after all, is the fatigue which Bertha has probably slept off by this time.” She clung to the note bravely, though its futility was now plain to her in the glare of his miserable eyes. “Don't—don't—!” he broke out with the hurt cry of a child (158)

Wharton's choice of words is revealing here, as Lily's “need of keeping her sense of it out of her eyes” mirrors the author's need to keep Bertha's actions concealed from the eyes of the skeptical reader. Accordingly, the next time Bertha and Ned's nightly adventure is discussed in conversation between characters, Wharton makes use of the same, by now well established, strategy of addressing the subject without really discussing its particularities. This time, Lily turns to Bertha to hear her version of the story – an endeavor that fails, as the latter prefers to raise unfounded charges against her friend in order to keep the situation under control.

Implicitly, Bertha charges Lily with having an affair with George, but again the conversation remains characteristically ambiguous about this:

Mrs. Dorset smiled on her reproachfully. “Lecture you—I? Heaven forbid! I was merely trying to give you a friendly hint. But it's usually the other way round, isn't it? I'm expected to take hints, not to give them: I've positively lived on them all these last months.” “Hints—from me to you?” Lily repeated. “Oh, negative ones merely, what not to be and to do and to see. And I think I've taken them to admiration. Only, my

dear, if you'll let me say so, I didn't understand that one of my negative duties was *not* to warn you when you carried your imprudence too far." (162)

In order to maintain the plausibility of Lily's decline, Wharton here has to mute the possibility of an alternative lifestyle – which is embodied by Bertha – for Lily, in order to not threaten the plausibility of her status as a sentimental heroine (and the plausibility of her social decline which guarantees this status). Wharton cannot allow an open discussion of adultery, since this could offer a solution to Lily's problems. Lily could after all, just marry Rosedale (or George, an opportunity which is offered to her later in the novel) and still entertain a romantic relationship with the self-fashioned libertine Selden who, as the narrative has already established, does not seem to be opposed to such arrangements. In order to contain this threat to her construction, Wharton renders this possible alternative – and even the charges against Lily that Bertha implies in the quote above – unspeakable. *The House of Mirth* therefore continues to operate with ambiguities, vagueness, and silences whenever extramarital affairs are discussed. This modus soon becomes precarious, as it also threatens to render Selden's behavior implausible.

After his encounter with Lily mentioned above, George decides to meet up with Selden for legal counseling about the delicate situation. Before their meeting, Selden reflects upon his involvement in the affair:

On the whole he was surprised; for though he had perceived that the situation contained all the elements of an explosion, he had often enough, in the range of his personal experience, seen just such combinations subside into harmlessness. Still, Dorset's spasmodic temper, and his wife's reckless disregard of appearances, gave the situation a peculiar insecurity; and it was less from the sense of any special relation to the case than from a purely professional zeal, that Selden resolved to guide the pair

into safety. ...[H]e had only, on general principles, to think of averting a scandal, and his desire to avert it was increased by his fear of its involving Miss Bart. (163)

In the light of my reading developed so far, Selden's stance towards the affair might strike one as implausible. How could Selden, who was himself the object of (and possibly also an active participant in the satisfaction of) Bertha's desires, remain so calm and distanced towards the impossible situation he finds himself in? After all, an unsuspecting husband seeks his counsel about the infidelity of his wife, when Selden himself has fostered such behavior on her part over a period of several years. Even more surprisingly, his only concerns about a possible negative outcome of the affair are about Lily, and not about a possible uncovering of his own role in this delicate constellation. His resolution to urge Dorset to behave "as usual" could have been more plausibly motivated by a concern about himself; this, however, would call attention to his fling with Bertha, present a possible alternative solution to Lily's problems, and also render his role as the object of Lily's romantic love precarious (163). Selden's behavior here has to remain in line with Wharton's greater construction, even if the skeptical reader might harbor doubts about its plausibility.⁵

After his meeting with George, Selden reflects further about the situation; he does so in a manner that almost programmatically proclaims Wharton's method of compensating demands of her realist ambitions (for lifelikeness and plausibility) and her sentimental logic (for Lily's untainted morality):

... [N]othing should come out; and happily for his side of the case, the dirty rags, however pieced together, could not, without considerable difficulty, be turned into a homogeneous grievance. The torn edges did not always fit—there were missing bits, there were disparities of colour, all of which it was naturally Selden's business to

⁵Selden's strong reaction to his encounter of Lily and Gus alone on the stairs of the Trenor residence – for which Wharton's narration does not explicitly offer an explanation to the reader – also serves this purpose. Wharton cannot allow Selden to condone Lily's actions, because the threat of an immoral lifestyle for Lily (as a possible solution for her problems) must be contained.

make the most of in putting them under his client's eye. But to a man in Dorset's mood the completest demonstration could not carry conviction, and Selden saw that for the moment all he could do was to soothe and temporize, to offer sympathy and to counsel prudence. (163)

The "torn bits" of Wharton's narrative do not go together without "soothing" her skeptical reader by adopting a narrative voice that keeps the particularities of Bertha's exploits as vague and ambiguous as possible; and yet these "missing bits" and "disparities of colour" make it clear that just as Selden "counsel[s] prudence," her narrative ultimately takes a conservative stance towards the institution of marriage. Although the novel features several characters that are divorced (like Norma Hatch and Carry Fisher), who seem to get along well without husbands, and although Wharton portrays upper-class marriage as merely a business arrangement, her construction cannot allow her to present marital infidelity and adultery as possible solutions to Lily's problems. Consequently, her critique of the restrictions that high society puts on the lives of its ladies of leisure must close without offering a possible way out for its protagonist. Marriage in *The House of Mirth*, it seems, might be ended, but the immoral possibility of adultery must not be discussed.

Conclusion

Examining *House of Mirth's* apparent conservative stance towards the institutions of marriage is revealing, as it aligns closely with other readings of her work that identify other essentially conservative themes and undercurrents in the novel.⁶ Critical of her own social environment, Wharton's perspective nevertheless remained shaped by its values. Yet, her unique blend of sentimentalist and realist voices seems to be particularly suited to a literary engagement with her own milieu, as it allows Wharton to paint a convincing portrait of high

⁶Dimock, for example, identifies a romanticized view on working-class life in her discussion Wharton's depiction of Nettie Struther, the novel's only major working-class character; Kassanoff identifies racist undertones in her discussion of race and class in the book (cf. Dimock 136-137, and Kassanoff).

society life around the turn of the 20th century without neglecting moral issues. The morality that underlies this picture is a conservative one; and the competing demands of sentimental logic and realist voice threaten to tear the canvas apart at its seams. It is only by burying possible alternative solutions to Lily's plight under a layer of vagueness that *The House of Mirth* manages to paint its colorful portrait.

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The Struggle to Create Nationalism in *Bride & Prejudice*

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Abstract:

The DVD cover of Gurinda Chadha's 2004 film *Bride & Prejudice* encourages the audience to "celebrate a new twist on a timeless classic." While this quote accurately points to the movie's modernization or revision of Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, it does not come close to indicating the layers of complexity that exist within the movie. As a relatively new nation, India is trying to create (or recreate) a national identity in reaction against the imperial western world. But at the same time, it is also allowing for communication and commerce with the West in order to participate in a global marketplace. By using theories of nation and language from Benedict Anderson and Pascale Casanova as well as analyzing the language, landscape, costume, and the character of Lalita, I will argue that Chadha's movie exemplifies these important, and sometimes contradictory, aims. Ultimately, however, while the film gives the impression of a hopeful future with a strong, independent India participating in a global economy, each aspect I discuss points to an India that is being left behind – even by its own people.

Lalita: "I thought we got rid of imperialists like you."

Darcy: "I'm not British. I'm American."

Lalita: "Exactly!"

This exchange between the two main protagonists of Gurinda Chadha's film *Bride & Prejudice* perfectly encompasses the underlying conflict in the movie: the struggle India and its people are experiencing in trying to create a new kind of nationalism in the face of (or in conjunction with) a post-colonial identity and globalization. The DVD cover for the film encourages the audience to "celebrate a new twist on a timeless classic." While this quote accurately points to the movie's revision of Jane Austen's novel famous novel, *Pride and*

Prejudice, it does not come close to indicating the layers of complexity that exist within the movie. *Bride and Prejudice* is a 2004 film directed by Gurinder Chadha, whose previous credits include *Bend it Like Beckham*. The plot follows the basic storyline of Austen's novel, with a family of four daughters whose mother is trying desperately to get them married. However, rather than taking place in England, the story takes place primarily in a small town in India. The Elizabeth Bennet character is the Indian Lalita (Aishwarya Rai) and Mr. Darcy (Martin Henderson) is a rich American, while Mr. Bingley's character is transformed into Balraj (Naveen Andrews) a rich British Indian lawyer. The genre of Bollywood itself consists of a colorful mix of singing, dancing, and strict adherence to certain rules of propriety (for example, no one kisses in the movie). However, *Bride & Prejudice* is not just a tacky Bollywood musical but reveals India's negotiation with continued ties to England and its vexed relationship with America and Indian-American culture. In an interview in 2004, Chadha explained that for her "*Bride and Prejudice* is a multi-national, multi-cultural crowd-pleaser that touches on American imperialism, the way the West looks at India and what people regard as backward or progressive. In a populist, entertaining movie, the drama is questioning the audience's Eurocentric attitude" (37). As a relatively new nation, India is trying to create (or recreate) a national identity in reaction against the imperial western world. But at the same time, it is also allowing for communication and commerce with the West in order to participate in a global marketplace. Through language, landscape, costume, and the characters of Lalita, Darcy, and Kohli, Chadha's movie exemplifies these important, and sometimes contradictory, aims.

India has been the site of imperial expansion and commerce for nearly three hundred years, and until 1947 India was officially a colony of England for close to a century. Inevitably, part of India's national identity is caught up in the fact that it has only been independent for sixty years, as well as the knowledge that most of its recent history involves

colonization by the West. As a postcolonial nation, India is struggling to define itself as unique but is unable to deny the influence of British culture. As Benedict Anderson explains in his book *Imagined Communities*, India was the recipient of England's imposed educational system that specifically aimed to turn Indians into cultural Englishmen (90-92). As a result, much of India's notion of itself is a blend of distinctive Indian tradition and imposed Western values. Anderson's definition of nation is "an imagined community ...both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). So for India to create a national identity, it must have beliefs or customs that imaginatively link its people together while retaining its individuality and power among other nations, which is extremely difficult when modernization is often indistinguishable from Western. Anderson also connects the nation with the importance of capitalism, and India's struggle epitomizes this because it wants to improve its own economy by becoming part of a global marketplace but not get lost among or taken over by other nations.

Bride & Prejudice represents a site where India's struggle for nationalism is occurring, and language is one of the most interesting and problematic aspects of the movie. Anderson, among others, claims that a common language is one of the major foundations for an imagined community or nation. However, *Bride & Prejudice* implies that for India there is not simply a single national language. The majority of the movie is actually in English, but there are a number of places where Punjabi is spoken or sung in order to remind the audience that the setting is India. The Punjabi is neither translated nor is it offered in subtitles, which might suggest that the movie expects its audience to know the language in addition to unwillingness to cater to non-Punjabi speaking peoples. On the other hand, it might suggest that the Punjabi is not important enough to translate. Pascale Casanova suggests that "translation...is a process of establishing value," and if it is not translated then it will not be shared with a wider audience (23); Punjabi, therefore, will be left in India without gaining any international importance. Because of it being multilingual, the assumed audience for this

movie is an international one, from India to America to Britain. Even the actors represent a multinational audience, with the Indian Aishwarya Rai, American Martin Henderson, and British Naveen Andrews. With the use of Punjabi, Indians are obviously part of the audience, but they must know English as well. Therefore, it is international only insofar as it is an English-speaking audience, implicitly prioritizing the importance of the English language. Situating English as the preferred language could be a result of England's colonial rule of India, but it could also respond to the fact that within a global marketplace, English is one of the most used languages. So bilingualism could be purely a commercial maneuver. Another example of bilingualism is when the American pop star Ashanti performs a song entitled "Take me to Love." She sings in both English and Punjabi, with lyrics like "India's the place for me. India sets you free." Moreover, the American Ashanti is wearing Indian dress and promoting the individuality of India (i.e. it will set you free), while at the same time exhibiting a much more Western sexualized appearance. This blend of East and West within the language is also representative of the struggle to blend post-colonialism and globalization with the uniqueness of India.

In the film, along with the use of the English language, there are also gestures to American slang and popular culture. The Bakshi family's cousin, Mr. Kohli, is the Mr. Collins character who visits them with the intention of marrying one of the daughters. Kohli (Nitin Ganatra) is a green-card holder living in Los Angeles, and he proudly embraces American culture. One of the ways he demonstrates his mastery of the language is his use of slang. For example, he refers to his \$900,000 house as his "crib" and declares that it is "the bomb." While this corresponds to his statement later in the film that he prefers American hip-hop to Indian music, his choice of words also reveal to the audience that he is unaware that such phrasing is both outdated and usually only used by teenagers. As a result, his attempt to take on a more American identity is hindered by his reliance on stereotypes. Yet, one cannot truly

abhor Kohli, because he is only trying to fit into his new country, where he is inevitably and always seen as a foreign immigrant (Lowe 5).

Embedded in the language of the movie is also the fact that the plot originates in Jane Austen's nineteenth-century novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane Austen is the epitome of the classic British author, emphasizing England's own national identity by laying claim to a tradition of literary production. Austen and her novels reflect Britishness, British history and British accomplishment. The movie, by using such a classic British novel, is revealing India's colonial roots and the imperialist effect English reproduces. Austen has become a part of popular and literary culture, occupying a high position in the Western literary hierarchy of value, or as Pascale Casanova would say – she has huge cultural capital. *Bride & Prejudice* (and India) is complicit in this literary economy by using and perpetuating the idea that Austen is 'good' literature. However, the very popularity of Austen throughout the world involves India (in its use of the story) in a kind of global imagined community, consisting of all the people familiar with Jane Austen or *Pride and Prejudice*. Casanova claims that classic pieces of literature can detach from nationhood and become part of a "world republic of letters," an international literary space. Thereby, Austen's novel could be freely available to everyone without attaching any ideas of imperialism. What I find particularly compelling is the possible combination of these ideas of national and international literature, or the potential for both to exist simultaneously in connection with the novel. The movie ultimately appropriates this Western story and changes it to fit India's culture, including setting, dress, music/dance, and marriage customs. As a result, the use of Austen's story thus represents India's postcolonial and global identity while also attempting to retain some of the unique characteristics of Indian culture.

The international or global aspect of the movie is further reinforced and complicated by the landscape. In the course of the movie, the characters travel from India to England to

America and back again. In the editorial choices concerning the setting, there is a marked contrast between the scenes of each country's landscape. *Bride & Prejudice* opens with a panoramic view of fields of swaying grass – presumably farmland – in Amritsar, India. It then changes to a very quick shot of a cityscape dominated by a domed temple, before moving on to scenes of the town where livestock fill the streets and a tractor delivers luggage. These examples give the audience an impression of India as a country caught in the past, with its rural farming, religion/temple as center of the city, and want of modern conveniences. When the characters arrive in Las Angeles, the scenes concentrate on emblems of wealth and newness, like the rows of similar million dollar houses within a newly built subdivision and the song "Must be the money" by hip-hop artist Nelly playing in the background. As he gives the Bakshi family a tour of his house, Kohli points out the luxurious conveniences wealth in America can buy, such as a "hot tub with super jets" and a walk-in closet to hold his fiancé's 51 bridal suits. Inderpal Grewal argues, "The 'American dream' was a search for a future in which the desire for consumption, for liberal citizenship, and for work came together to produce a specific subject of migration" (5). Mr. Kohli is exactly that subject, with his focus on "savings and bonds" and other material wealth he has gained as a result of his immigration to America. While the superficiality and excess of America may not be completely desirable, modernity and its benefits (technology, money, position in global marketplace) are. America seems to represent the next step for India, with England occupying the ideal position at the top of the ladder. For when the characters stop in London, England, the audience is presented with shots of famous landmarks such as the British Parliament and Big Ben and the enormous London Eye Ferris wheel. These examples impress the audience with both England's history and its modernity, suggesting that as a nation it has been very successful in maintaining a sense of its history while moving forward into a technologically advanced world. Like Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, London represents simultaneously both a national and

international presence. The significance of these distinctions is that India is placed in the rear position, and the ideal national identity would be a blend of unique traditions and history with participation in a modern global market.

One of the most eye-catching aspects of *Bride & Prejudice* is the stunning use of color, and the distinct differences in dress and color worn by the characters act as markers of their national identities. On the other hand, they also allow for blurring across national lines when characters hybridize their sartorial choices. The bright reds and oranges and yellows of the traditional Indian dress are a wonderful complement to the energetic dancing and singing that break out periodically throughout the movie. The beautiful saris and the traditional dancing, especially at the wedding celebrations, are perfect examples of the ways in which India is trying to maintain parts of its culture in the face of imperialism and globalization. In particular, when the main characters are sitting poolside at a hotel in Goa, Lalita wears a multicolored conservative one-piece swimming suit with a wrap skirt while Kiran (Balraj's sister) wears a tiny Burberry (British plaid) bikini. In addition, Darcy is unable to wear the traditional Indian male dress in the beginning, because he cannot keep the drawstring tied. This seems ridiculous, but it points to the idea that dress is a defining line between India and the West; it represents a tradition that is part of India's national identity, something that is India. Towards the end of the movie, when Catherine Darcy presents Will's "girlfriend" Ann to Lalita, she deliberately points out that Ann is wearing a sari. The effect of this statement is intended to be offensive, and it is. The imperialist appropriation of Indian dress by a blonde, white woman is another way for Catherine to repeat the idea that India is not unique because the West can take anything it wants regardless of its meaning.⁷ At the end, Balraj and Darcy

⁷ Catherine Darcy is the epitome of the greedy American imperialist. Earlier in the movie, Catherine makes a statement indicating there is no need to visit India because of the availability of Indian products everywhere in LA. At the same time, she argues for the necessity of buying a hotel in India in order to get a piece of the pie, so to speak. She says, "Everyone has their hand on India these days," implying they (she and her hotels) should as well.

are allowed to wear Indian dress without any assumption of imperialism because supposedly they have embraced the Indian culture for itself.

Nevertheless, such a blend becomes infinitely more complicated when taking into consideration individual character's actions. *Bride & Prejudice's* heroine, Lalita, initially seems to represent the ideal fusion of Indian tradition and international communication, for she loves her country and shares that love with a rich businessman from the West. But her actions imply a more problematic result than the surface reveals. Lalita is adamant about defending India's traditional culture against imperialism as well as supporting its future potential. For example, she declares to Darcy, who is considering buying a luxury hotel in India, "I don't want you turning India into a theme park, I thought we got rid of imperialists like you." These clear indications of Lalita's national pride and feminism stand in stark contrast to her dreams and eventual marriage, however. Each of the two men that Lalita is attracted to within the course of the movie are Western white men, one British and one American. In a dream sequence, Lalita imagines marrying Wickham in a very idyllic English countryside (a windmill, a maypole, Morris dancers, and little blond girls are some of the props). She is wearing a traditional Western white wedding gown and they are getting married in a small Christian church. Moreover, she is singing "dream what it would be like to have a little house in the country and live in the land of her Majesty." That her perfect dream involves the trappings of Western society and a British husband suggest that she wants to get away from India, despite her proclaimed tie to her country. Just as she is set to exchange vows at the altar, however, Wickham transforms into Darcy and the dream turns dark and stormy, revealing Darcy, and perhaps America, to be both a nightmare and secret desire. Of course, Lalita ultimately marries Darcy, a rich white American, and her sister marries a rich British Indian. While they have large traditional Indian weddings at the end of the movie (both couples ride away on elephants), it can be assumed that neither couple will live in India

but rather in America or England. Both Darcy and Balraj are associated with the West not just because of their place of residence but because of their wealth and success. Darcy's family owns a huge international chain of hotels, and Balraj is a barrister whose family lives in Windsor near the Queen. The multiple references to the Queen of England are yet another example of the vestiges of British culture remaining in India's consciousness. Thus, despite a stated resistance to imperialism and the West taking over India and its culture, the female Indian characters reveal a preference for the lifestyle offered by the West – a rich husband in an economically successful country.

Not just the female characters prove to be contradictions, though. The story's hero, Mr. Darcy, becomes much more open to Indian culture by the close of the film, but it seems as if he only does so because of his love for Lalita and not because of any revelation about the good qualities of India. Throughout the film, he and his actions are continually steeped in stereotypes and tropes of American identity. When the audience is first introduced to Darcy, he emphasizes the arrogant, workaholic American who looks down on anywhere that is not New York City. His fear of Delhi belly and disgust at the inconsistent internet connection seem to go hand in hand with his job as a hotel owner, in which he offers modern American conveniences to tourists travelling the world. Moreover, when he and Lalita finally connect (in LA), he first takes her to a Mexican restaurant with a mariachi band. The audience assumes that Darcy is trying to prove he is just a normal guy with this date to an inexpensive restaurant, which also serves to emphasize America's multiculturalism. Yet at the same time, the faux-Mexican restaurant provides another example of America's appropriation and bastardization of other cultures. The next two dates Darcy and Lalita have include a helicopter tour of the Grand Canyon and a walk on the beach. The helicopter ride reminds us that Darcy is by no means an average man; he has money and lots of it. The beach presents a romantic setting for Lalita and Darcy to walk lovingly hand-in-hand, but the background serves up two

more American stereotypes - a black choir and Baywatch-style surfers. By the end of the film, Darcy shows up to Balraj and Jaya's engagement party playing a drum with an Indian marching band. Lalita forgets her earlier conviction that Darcy represents a new imperialism and instead is overjoyed to see that he has "gone native" and they are happily united.

Just as Darcy represents the American trying to accept India, Mr. Kohli represents the Indian who has left his country to pursue success in the West, or perhaps more accurately the "American Dream." During a Bakshi family dinner, Mr. Kohli, claims that America is better than corrupt India, because money can be made in America and the Indian community there is very professional. In response, Lolita and her father remind him that "India is still a young country" and question "What was the US like sixty years after independence?" Kohli's unwillingness or inability to respond positions the audience to feel sympathetic to India's plight. Moreover, Kohli shows himself to be oblivious to the contradictions he represents when he states that Indian-American girls have "lost their roots" and are too outspoken, career oriented, and potentially lesbians. His trip to India to acquire a traditional Indian wife is contrasted with his own revelry in American culture and denial of his native country. His repeated assertions that India is decades behind (presumably America) and LA has everything, including opportunity for smart Indians to make money, demonstrates his denial of tradition at the same time he makes it a requirement in his wife.

In conclusion, I find that *Bride & Prejudice* represents an India that is attempting to create a unique national identity while dealing with post-colonialism and globalization. India wants to move forward and take advantage of the technology and money to be had within international commerce, but at the same time it does not want to lose its traditions and what sets it apart from other nations. The examples I have analyzed regarding language, landscape, costume, and characters have demonstrated this struggle. Just as the word "struggle" suggests, sometimes it seems to be working and other times it seems impossible to achieve. I

think this is why I find this movie so interesting and, ultimately, disturbing. Cheryl Wilson argues in her 2006 article in *Literature Film Quarterly*, that the film closes the gap between Amritsar and the UK. What we find in the middle, however, is the Indian-American, represented by both the obnoxious Mr. Kohli and presumably our heroine after she marries Darcy. Inderpal Grewal builds on Anderson's idea of nationalism as a powerful imaginary by discussing its "ability to move, change, spread across different kinds of boundaries" (13), and I think that India's national identity is stretching these limits as it tries to encompass its people in a global, consumer culture. Despite the film's stated goal of challenging eurocentrism, however, the film seems to forget itself and plays into stereotypes and projects a narrative of nation that is conflicted and unsure. For me, while the film ostensibly gives the impression of a hopeful future with a strong, independent India participating in a global economy, each aspect I discussed points to an India that is in danger of being left behind – even by its own people.

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