

INTRODUCTION

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The Custom of the Country, first published on 18 October 1913, has been described as Edith Wharton's 'most powerful' novel, 'her greatest book', her 'most ambitious masterpiece' and a 'tour de force'.¹ Charting the career of the American-branded Undine Spragg of Apex, Wharton presents her readers with the modern material girl, a young woman surrounded by dazzling lights and mirrors, her sights set firmly on the centre of the social gaze. While *The House of Mirth*'s precarious insider Lily Bart fatally spirals down the social scale, 'thrown out into the rubbish heap' and all its attendant horrors,² Undine Spragg, the outsider, indefatigably works her way up and forces a way in. At the novel's remarkably open-ended close, Undine has realized her dazzling success (while never recognizing its casualties) only to discover 'under all the dazzle a tiny black cloud remain[s]' (p. 594). Undine Spragg Moffatt Marvell de Chelles Moffatt's career of acquiring and discarding husbands debars her from the role of Ambassador's wife – the one part, she tells herself, for which she was really made.

While Wharton herself would come to regard *The Custom of the Country* as one of her finest works, its genesis proved the most protracted and disrupted of any novel in her long and prolific career. As the author toiled on the manuscript in fits and starts between 1907 and 1913, progress was regularly interrupted, and the novel intermittently set aside in favour of other writings. During the period in which *The Custom of the Country* took shape, Wharton – displaying her familiar dexterity across a gamut of literary genres – published two collections of short stories (*The Hermit and the Wild Woman and Other Stories*, *Tales of Men and Ghosts*), a travel book (*A Motor-Flight through France*) and a volume of poetry (*Artemis to Actaeon and Other Verse*) in addition to her novels *Ethan Frome* and *The Reef*. Yet, throughout, *The Custom of the Country* remained a work for which its creator had ambitious plans. In May 1908, Wharton wrote to her friend Sara (Sally) Norton of having 'taken up again [her] sadly neglected great American Novel'.³ By May 1911, she was 'working steadily at "The Custom,"' though 'still only revising': 'I can't tell any longer whether I'm really improving it, or only undergoing an attack of scrupulosis' she wrote to former lover turned

sometime-friend Morton Fullerton.⁴ The same month Wharton informed the art historian Bernard Berenson she was at work on 'a real magnum opus ... a vast novel ... piling up the words as if publishers paid by the syllable.'⁵ In August 1911 she continued 'digging away' at 'the Big Novel' with 'dogged obstinacy'.⁶ When *Scribner's Magazine* began its serialization of *The Custom of the Country* in January 1913 (the serial ran from January to November), the novel remained incomplete. By August 1913, the 'hard grind' at her last chapters had 'used [her] up', leaving Wharton 'simply dead tired, from having always, these last months, a little too much to do'.⁷

In fact, neither professional nor personal conditions had been propitious – with 1913 also marking the culmination of a dramatic, at times traumatic, period in the author's life. During the years she worked on *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton was attempting to cope with what she diplomatically described as her husband's 'nervous excitability'⁸ and the humiliations his behaviour inflicted, not least the use of his wife's money to support a mistress.⁹ This was the period in which Wharton embarked on a tumultuous affair with Morton Fullerton, only for it to end badly, and in which she separated permanently from America, selling the Mount, her home in Lenox, Massachusetts. There had been a rift with both Wharton's brother Harry and, painfully, with Henry James. Crucially, 1913 brought completion of *The Custom of the Country* but also Wharton's divorce decree, marking a very public end to her twenty-eight-year marriage. As reporters circled, she assured herself in a letter to Fullerton that 'the public' at least could not access the register of the French courts, where the decree had been lodged, and that those reporters would 'soon tire of their vain researches'. A comment in the same letter ironically underscored the dichotomy of Wharton as a woman fiercely protective of her privacy and a media-savvy writer always concerned to see the maximum publicity and exposure for her work: 'It's a tiresome moment to traverse – but no more ... I *must* get back to work! – Undine is already making the press ring – I hope she'll keep it up'.¹⁰ Though her letter dismissed the event as merely 'tiresome', a private notebook entry betrayed the year's heavy emotional toll. In a visceral recounting of a nightmare experienced in October, a 'horror struck' Wharton sees a 'Demon' throw before her from 'a great black trunk' a succession of shapeless 'Black Horrors', conjuring up the personal vicissitudes of the year ('I knew what they were: the hideous, the incredible things that had happened to me in this dreadful year, or were to happen to me before its close').¹¹

Yet real life for Wharton would prove in many respects a series of 'adventures with books' – a phrase she employed twice as titles of fragmentary, abandoned reminiscences¹² – and, throughout, writing remained at its heart. Though she once described reading most reviews of her work as comparable to 'watching somebody in boxing-gloves trying to dissect a flower',¹³ the author took an

avid interest in her critical reception and sales – and among her papers at Yale's Beinecke Library are files of reviews of *The Custom of the Country* supplied by Scribner's and her British publishers Macmillan. The *New York Herald* promised 'a graphic picture of modern life both here and abroad', while a full page advertisement in the *Atlantic Monthly* opted for three punchlines: 'Recounts the Career of a Beautiful, Ambitious American Girl / Forms a Graphic Revelation of American Society To-Day / Already the Most Discussed Novel in America'. Sections of the British press, meanwhile, smugly distanced themselves from American social conduct, with the *Leeds Mercury* pronouncing the novel 'of American application ... deal[ing] with the "habit" of divorce which prevails across the Atlantic'.¹⁴ The *Saturday Review* concluded

Mrs. Wharton has assembled as many detestable people as it is possible to pack between the covers of a six-hundred page novel. It is a sordid society into which we are introduced – a set of vulgar Americans, blatant and pushing, whose only standard of values is the dollar.¹⁵

Wharton herself was no stranger to the value of the dollar, Scribner's paying a royalty advance of \$7,500 for *The Custom of the Country* and \$6,000 for serial rights, with half of the novel's 30,000 copies of the first American edition having sold in advance of official publication.¹⁶

Reviewers were both fascinated and repelled by the incessantly self-gratifying exploits of Undine Spragg. She was perceived as 'an ideal monster', 'sexless', 'absolutely unmoral [*sic*]', 'absolutely selfish, logical and repulsive', 'the most repellent heroine we have encountered in many a long time' and 'a mere monster of vulgarity'.¹⁷ In his essay 'Justice to Edith Wharton', Edmund Wilson would seal the deal, famously labelling Undine 'the prototype in fiction of the "gold-digger," of the international cocktail bitch'.¹⁸ More recent readings highlight Charles Bowen's observation to consider the character not as a monster *per se*, but as 'a monstrously perfect result of the system: the completest proof of its triumph' (p. 208). Readings with a greater social consciousness include those by Elizabeth Ammons, who perceives Undine as a 'naïf' revealing Wharton's 'criticism of leisure-class marriage'; Susan Goodman, who concludes 'Undine is tragically limited by a society that does not value intelligence or eloquence in women until after they are safely married'; and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, who regards her as a product of the reader's own misogyny.¹⁹

'If only everyone would do as she wished she would never be unreasonable' (p. 266), observes the narrator of the soulless Undine, the name inspiring both mythical water-nymph and hair-waver marketed by the Spraggs. Restless, relentless, four-times married, yet entirely lacking in desire or affection (she spectacularly fails the maternal litmus test by forgetting the birthday of her young son), Undine exists only for an audience. Wharton's fiction parades a cast of ver-

satire actresses, skilfully changing roles as the occasion demands. Undine lives for the limelight: 'she might have been some fabled creature whose home was in a beam of light' (p. 21). At the early Dagonet dinner,

she found that to seem very much in love, and a little confused and subdued by the newness and intensity of the sentiment, was, to the Dagonet mind, the becoming attitude for a young lady in her situation. *The part was not hard to play* (p. 91, my italics)

Wharton's hopes of a playwriting career may have been thwarted, but her fascination with the stage and with playwriting continued to reap rich rewards. Theatrical settings and motifs are pervasive in her fiction, the perfect venue for her female protagonists to display themselves and be displayed. As Undine's performance in the opera box will illustrate, elaborate social scenarios are frequently enacted in the auditorium rather than on stage.²⁰

In her article for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1907, Anna A. Rogers wondered 'Why American Marriages Fail'.²¹ It was a question Wharton was addressing in her own life, and Rogers's answers, examined by Susan Goodman in the opening essay of this collection (women's failure to realize that marriage is her work in the world; her growing individualism; her lost art of giving), would have offered any successful, professional, financially independent female writer little relief. As each of her husbands will discover to his cost, Undine Spragg simply has nothing to give. The status of divorced women had long intrigued Wharton in her writing: in her abandoned early novel, *Disintegration*, divorcee Alice Clephane is ostracized, only to remarry and buy her way back in as Alice Wing; in the 1904 short story 'The Other Two', twice-divorced Alice Haskett Varick simply moves on to husband number three. Wharton's unfinished play, *The Arch*, features a twenty-eight-year-old woman, Rose, who has scandalized society by divorcing her first husband and taking a second – the successful architect George Adrian. In the early scenes, Rose is presented as a woman adopting an individual, honourable moral code; by the end she is charged with causing all the miseries through her loose, corrupting standards, specifically her 'preaching the gospel of divorce' – a judgement Rose appears to accept: she is 'inwardly aghast at what she has done'.²² Undine Spragg, on the other hand, having no self can have no self-doubt, 'Wharton's deeply ironic novel prov[ing] that divorce is the logical mechanism for market expansion, providing women with the means to forge nuptial careers based not on a single liaison but on successive – and ever more successful – unions'.²³

Though part of the narrative is set in France, as Undine moves her marital campaign to Paris, Wharton regarded *The Custom of the Country* as an 'intensely American' tale.²⁴ No writer would prove more effective at capturing American society in transition, with Ralph Marvell memorably viewing his mother and grandfather as 'Aborigines,' 'vanishing denizens of the American continent

doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race' (pp. 73–4). As Emily J. Orlando astutely observes in her essay 'Crude Ascending the Staircase: Undine Spragg and the Armory Show', when Ralph in turn is left behind, the narrator fittingly places Undine aboard the iconic 'Twentieth Century' train (below, p. 83). Wharton locates most of the action of *The Custom of the Country* in an early twentieth-century world, her notes for the novel including a precise timing of important events, labelled the 'Undine Chronology'. (The author evidently laboured over the timings, making a series of painstaking corrections: 'Married in ~~March~~ <February> 1900/ Paul born ~~Feb.~~ <January> 1901/ Birthday scene ~~Feb~~ <January> 1903. / Goes abroad ~~for June~~ <May> 1903/ Goes off with Van D. in July 1903/ ~~January~~/ Goes to Dakota <to> gets divorce').²⁵ Indeed several contributors to this collection underline *The Custom of the Country*'s remarkably prescient concerns: 'the media's ability to shape human beings' perceptions of themselves and their societies', 'the rise of "image"', 'economic and business shifts to a society of spectacle', corporate corruption, the 'portent of a future as shaped by Undine and her sort – the society of spectacle, auguring late capitalism' (below, pp. 18, 103, 113). Read against our recent economic and banking freefall, the novel appears alarmingly prophetic. Carol J. Singley defines it as 'a contemporary jeremiad that rails against reckless materialism', while Robin Peel rephrases 'Orwell's account of his own dystopian novel' to label *The Custom of the Country* 'both a prophecy and a warning'.²⁶

In the years since publication, *The Custom of the Country* has attracted an array of critical readings. Elizabeth Ammons interprets the work as 'one of America's great business novels', throwing 'a brilliant, satiric light on the institution of marriage, stripping it of all sentiment and sentimentality'.²⁷ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Shari Benstock and Aaron Worth, among others, view it as a novel about 'energy', Wolff asserting 'One thing and only one is genuinely fixed; and that is a preoccupation with energy. Psychic energy – power, assertion, drive, ambition. This, more even than Undine herself, is the subject of the fiction'.²⁸ R. W. B. Lewis reads the novel biographically, seeing the author 'revealed, quite startlingly, in the characterization of Undine Spragg' which suggests her 'anti-self', 'what Edith Wharton might have been like if, by some dreadful miracle, all her best and most lovable and redeeming features had been suddenly cut away'.²⁹ Debra Ann MacComb defines *The Custom of the Country* as one of Wharton's 'divorce novels', positioning the text against the backdrop of a 'divorce industry' seen to function as an extension of the 'marriage economy' by 'recycling women back onto the marriage market after exacting from them both their time and money'.³⁰ Cecelia Tichi characterizes the work as 'arguably Wharton's most thoroughgoing socially Darwinian narrative'; Ticien Marie Sassoubre suggests it 'should be read as a novel about changing property relations and the ways in which those property relations are constitutive of personal identity', while Can-

dace Waid contends it 'is about the destruction of the writer who is seduced by the siren song of a false muse.'³¹ As the *New York Times Review of Books* had promised in October 1913, '*The Custom of the Country* is a book which will arouse some dissension and much discussion.'³²

Dissension and discussion have also been aroused regarding the novel's form. Robin Peel reads *The Custom of the Country* as 'a disguised eighteenth-century novel of sensibility, designed to show what happens when those without empathy or the semblance of virtue inherit the earth.'³³ Hermione Lee, on the other hand, observes that '*Custom* looks expansive, like a nineteenth-century novel. Balzac, Thackeray, Trollope, even Dickens, come to mind.'³⁴ Recent scholarship has debated the degree of Wharton's engagement with the modernist aesthetic³⁵ – a debate Hildegard Hoeller applies to *The Custom of the Country* in the final essay of this collection, "'Lost in Translation": Financial Plots and the Modernist Reader in *The Custom of the Country*'. The years from 1907 to 1913 may have been among the most difficult in Wharton's personal and professional life, but they were also among the most innovative, prompting one to wonder whether the writer divorced not only her husband in this period, but also her customary narrative techniques. Of the two other novels produced in the gestation years of *The Custom of the Country*, much has been written on the ambitious and ambiguous framing structure of *Ethan Frome* (1911),³⁶ which ensures – in Margaret Murray's apt summation in her essay 'Landscape with the Fall of Undine' (below, p. 117) – that narrative veracity hangs by a thread. (In her memoir *A Backward Glance*, Wharton expressed exasperation at having been 'severely criticized by the reviewers for what was considered the clumsy structure of the tale'.³⁷ Others have commented on experiments with perspective in *The Reef* (1912), notably the withholding of Sophy Viner's point of view, the narrative refusing throughout to present her directly to the reader.³⁸ While Peel views *The Custom of the Country* as a return to form, its 'rhetoric' suggesting 'the triumph of orthodoxy', others have focused on the novel's 'difficult and disorienting' qualities.³⁹ In 1915 Percy Lubbock searched vainly for 'a controlling and unifying center' in a book that was 'all too good for Undine'.⁴⁰ Wolff writes of the novel's 'insistent contradiction', its 'deliberate unsettling of every comfortable conviction', Wharton 'toss[ing] the narrative vantage about with a virtuoso's nonchalance', 'shifting the focus of our gaze'. 'Nothing is fixed', '[t]here are no clarifying summations', 'no fixed set of principles according to which we may systematically evaluate [the novel's] characters'.⁴¹ This is a novel in which important events are delayed or withheld from the reader – not least a first marriage and past life in Apex. In a world of change, uncertainty and false muses, omniscience and authority are often denied. In the final scenes of the text, the reader views Undine's youngest casualty, her son Paul, piecing together his family narrative from Mrs Heeny's

clippings – a series of sibylline fragments that he, like the reader, must interpret for himself.

Indeed Wharton's own composition methods assumed a layered, patchwork, piecemeal design. Work would customarily begin with handwritten sheets in pencil or pen (sometimes both on the same page), often heavily corrected and revised in pen, pencil and even, on occasion, coloured crayon. In a very physical process, the author proved an early advocate of cut and paste, with many manuscript sheets having strips of paper pasted on the original; or an original page might be cut up before being reattached to additional segments to remake a 'whole'. On occasion, a reader of Wharton's manuscripts can only marvel that her lyricism survived the patchwork, layered composition. The processes may have involved cutting and pasting (and the writer wryly makes Abner Spragg the inventor of 'Goliath Glue'), but there is nothing rough or unpolished about *The Custom of the Country's* design. The author's keen attention to detail is everywhere in evidence; even under the immense pressure of completing the novel when its serialization was well under way, Wharton made a series of 'minute, but continual' revisions noted by Lee as 'all in the interests of toning-down any romantic magazine-touches and making the whole thing drier.'⁴² Lack of sentiment remained the order of the day for a writer who, as Peel keenly observes 'could conduct a devastating critique of the marketplace while eagerly monitoring its sales.'⁴³

The purpose of this new collection of critical essays is to provide a focused, single-volume, twenty-first-century reassessment of Wharton's 1913 novel. *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* have both attracted numerous volumes of criticism in recent years. To list only a selection: on *The House of Mirth*, these include the Norton Critical Edition (1990), Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism (St Martin's, 1994), New Essays (Cambridge, 2001), Casebooks in Criticism (Oxford, 2003) and Routledge Guides to Literature (2008); while *The Age of Innocence* has seen essays collections in the New Riverside Edition (Houghton Mifflin, 2000), the Norton Critical Edition (2003), and Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations (Chelsea House, 2005). *The Custom of the Country*, by contrast – though increasingly acknowledged as arguably Wharton's finest work – has not until now been the subject of a collection of critical essays. Contributors to this volume write from a variety of national and transnational perspectives, and they draw upon modern critical approaches that demonstrate recent scholarship in areas such as cultural theory, narratology, book history and the visual arts. The editor has solicited contributors to write essays that will be accessible to a wide but mainly academic audience (from junior undergraduates upwards), while taking into account new paradigms in Wharton studies that are developing in the twenty-first century. Writers include: the authors of *Edith Wharton's Women: Friends and Rivals*, *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts*, *Edith Wharton's Writings from*

the Great War, *The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton*, *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction*; the editors of *The Unpublished Writings of Edith Wharton*, *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews*, *The Correspondence of Edith Wharton and Macmillan, 1901–1930*; and members of the executive and editorial boards of the Edith Wharton Society and the international journal the *Edith Wharton Review*.

The opening essays address a wide range of literary, cultural and periodical contexts for the protracted development of Wharton's novel. Susan Goodman begins with '*The Custom of the Country*: Edith Wharton's Conversation with the *Atlantic Monthly*', an exploration of the author's dialogue with the magazine which continued to play a Promethean role as a monthly messenger of culture during the years that Wharton struggled with the manuscript of *The Custom of the Country*. As constructed from a mosaic of *Atlantic Monthly* issues from 1907 to 1913, the world can be characterized as increasingly preoccupied with definitions of cultures and national identities, and Wharton's 'conversation' with the magazine, posits Goodman, took place within her own, larger (often prescient) anxieties about culture itself. Goodman's research illuminates the engagement of both novel and magazine in contemporary debates about nationalism, race, class and globalization, and illustrates Wharton's own at times conflicted sense of loyalties to particular parties and positions. Expertly charting the evolving 'process of cultural transmission when the notion of culture is itself changing' (below, p. 25), *The Custom of the Country*, when read against the *Atlantic Monthly*, becomes 'a Cassandra's cry to a country [Wharton] both loved and disdained' (below, p. 28).

While Wharton may have echoed Rebecca Harding Davis's sentiment in considering 'being read by the *Atlantic* audience part of the pay',⁴⁴ the ever-astute businesswoman, notes Shafquat Towheed in 'When the Reading Had to Stop: Readers, Reading and the Circulation of Texts in *The Custom of the Country*', was 'relentless in pressing her publishers to advertise [the novel] as widely as possible in the popular press' (below, p. 40). In a detailed examination of both reading material and the material acts of reading in the text, Towheed presents *The Custom of the Country* as insistently 'self-referential in its consciousness of the power of mass journalism to shape its readers' (below, p. 39), recreating the American world of print in the first decade of the twentieth century. The plot of this serialized work is shown to be dependent upon the reading of periodicals and newspapers in a country where the most important customs are played out on the pages of the popular press. Examined as Wharton's 'most self-conscious exercise in engaging with the marketplace' and 'her most explicit musing on the proliferation of print (and its consequences)', *The Custom of the Country* becomes in Towheed's study 'a work of rare, sociological, even anthropological

insight into the complex and multifaceted reading universe of early twentieth-century America' (below, p. 41).

Wharton first came to international recognition through her short stories. They remained at the core of her writings throughout her career, a commercial hub of her 'business'. In *The Writing of Fiction* she would famously characterize the short story, at its finest, as 'a shaft driven straight into the heart of human experience'.⁴⁵ Wharton confessed to Robert Grant in November 1907 that she 'always obscurely felt ... [she] didn't know how to write a novel', that in approaching a longer work she lacked 'the sense of authority' with which she took hold of a short story.⁴⁶ As *The Custom of the Country* stalled, the short story genre continued to serve its author well. In "'Don't Cry – it ain't that Kind of a Story": Wharton's Business of Fiction, 1908–12', Bonnie Shannon McMullen reads the eighteen short stories Wharton wrote between 1908 and 1912 as a map of the evolution of the author's creative progress towards *The Custom of the Country*. Through an examination of the individual stories, their chronology and motifs, McMullen concludes that: 'With its containment and concentration, the story form provided the shaft, or column of light ... illuminating the twisting path to the realization of her 1913 novel' (below, p. 58).

The next set of essays is focused on readings and representations of the figure of Undine Spragg and the systems that produced her. In 'Worst Parents Ever: Cultures of Childhood in *The Custom of the Country*', Carol J. Singley directs attention to family dynamics, reading the text as the story of the early twentieth-century child in family life. This novel, more than any other by the writer who had a lifelong interest in the welfare of the young, illustrates the effects of parenting on childhood, contends Singley, with Undine the 'most conspicuously parented of all Wharton's characters'. Undine 'can be no more and no less than the culture that produced her', and in *The Custom of the Country* the author 'explores social and moral disintegration in the modern American family and voices concern that the direction parenting was taking boded ill for the nation as a whole' (below, p. 60). Wharton joins the wider cultural dialogue regarding the place of the child in early twentieth-century American society, while simultaneously presenting 'a fantasy of childhood that runs counter to [her] own experience' (below, p. 64). In Singley's reading, the 'custom of the country ... refers not only to social conventions but to changing customs in parenting' – the results manifested in the figure of Undine and her subsequent mistreatment of her own son Paul.

Emily J. Orlando and Jessica Schubert McCarthy consider the novel and its central female protagonist within a context of visual arts and representation. In her essay 'Crude Ascending the Staircase: Undine Spragg and the Armory Show' Orlando illuminates the compelling correspondences between *The Custom of the Country* and modernism in the visual arts, specifically by positioning its central

female protagonist against the backdrop of the 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art, better known as the Armory Show. Exhaustively covered in the press, the Armory Show exhibits attracted epithets of 'monstrous', 'child-like', 'immoral', 'unconventional' and 'depraved' – the very adjectives, observes Orlando, that were hurled at the heroine of *The Custom of the Country* 'unveiled (or *unleashed*) the same year: the social-climbing, gold-digging, reliably vulgar Undine Spragg ... clawing her way up ... the hallowed staircases of old New York' (below, p. 71). While much has been made of Wharton's interest in, and impressively vast knowledge of art, notably her allusions to the Italian Renaissance and neoclassical and nineteenth-century painting, Orlando redirects attention to Wharton's interventions in *modern* visual culture, through a character who mirrors in 'compelling and perhaps unintentional ways, the crude, invasive, vulgar, unwelcome, unsettling, monstrous flavour of modern art', a heroine both setting the stage for the modern woman and reflecting 'our own discomfort with change' (below, p. 85).

Wharton tellingly writes of Undine, 'Over a nature so insensible to the spells of memory, the visible and tangible would always prevail' (p. 235). Indeed, displaying a 'compulsive desire to be visually engaged', Undine, observes Jessica Schubert McCarthy, is a ruthless modern 'celebutante' whose 'most amorous relationship is not with any individual but with the society that takes her in with its eyes' (below, p. 96). Like Lily Bart before her, Undine demonstrates a compulsive awareness of herself as a visual object 'by repeatedly posing and performing' in society's 'house of mirrors' (below, pp. 91, 94). In her essay "'It's Better to Watch': Compulsive Voyeurism in *The Custom of the Country* and *The House of Mirth*", McCarthy aligns the two novels to trace 'Wharton's perception of visual culture's evolution in the early twentieth century' (below, p. 100). By employing multiple references to sight and seeing, Wharton is shown to implicate readers in the culture that destroys Lily but nurtures Undine, while the narrative design of *The Custom of the Country* lures readers into the role of voyeur, forced to confront a reflection of their own complicity in Undine's creation. In both cases, Wharton ensures all are compelled to keep watching.

In 'A "Mist of Opopanax": Mapping the Scentscape of *The Custom of the Country*', Pamela Knights redirects attention from visual to non-visual sensation in the novel, specifically by charting its osmographical terrain. Through her engagement with the languages of olfaction in the early years of the twentieth century, Wharton is shown to anticipate 'features only now being systematized in modern cultural studies' (below, p. 101). '[S]mells and scents – deployed selectively, according to her own prescription – would be crucial to structure and to character' throughout the author's career, posits Knights, so that 'the operations of smell can heighten for the reader the significant histories of Wharton's major characters, and help to calibrate her representation of larger sociocultural

territory, and the dynamics of change' (below, pp. 102, 101). With reference to *The House of Mirth* and the Vance Weston novels establishing coordinates for the variants the author uses across many of her writings, Knights presents *The Custom of the Country* as 'a supreme example of Wharton's precision and nuance across a broad olfactory spectrum' (below, p. 104). Marking the stages of characters' trajectories in *The Custom of the Country* 'through spatial olfactory tropes', 'osmic topography' is depicted as underpinning the novel's 'ambitious narrative structure' (below, p. 109).

Moving from scentscape to landscape, Margaret Murray and Julie Olin-Ammentorp address the novel anew in relation to literary genre. In 'Landscape with the Fall of Undine', Murray challenges generic definitions of both *The Custom of the Country* as a picaresque novel and of Undine Spragg as the requisite picaroon. Murray counters: 'Ultimately, the picaroon is a charming rogue who succeeds; however, Undine is witless, vicious in her narcissism, careers from one tier of upper-class society to another, completely disingenuous, ruthless, distasteful to the reader and, ultimately, a failure. She is not the subject of *The Custom of the Country*' (below, p. 115). After charting the means by which Undine entered 'the "critical imaginary"' as a picaroon (below, p. 116), via Blake Nevius and successive generations of Wharton scholars, Murray eliminates Undine as the primary focus and proceeds to explore the text outside the paradigms of the picaresque novel. Choosing instead 'to focus on the title [the author] gave the book, what is left is the conduct of Edith Wharton's peers', 'the panorama of detail', the 'crevasse that separates the manners of modernism and Romanticism', the world in which the character is immersed (below, pp. 125, 115, 121). While many remain preoccupied with Undine Spragg, in Murray's reading *The Custom of the Country* is revealed to be 'a masterful study in misdirection' (below, p. 117).

In 'Girls from the Provinces: Wharton's Undine Spragg and Cather's Thea Kronborg', Julie Olin-Ammentorp takes as her starting point a 1948 essay by Lionel Trilling in which he identifies "a great line of novels which runs through the nineteenth century as ... the very backbone of its fiction", that is, the novel about "the Young Man from the Provinces'" (below, p. 127). Sadly neglected, observes Olin-Ammentorp, is the subgenre's 'younger sister', 'the novel about the girl from the provinces' (below, p. 127) – an epithet applied in her essay to *The Custom of the Country* and its near contemporary, Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915). The author links the ways in which both texts 'play variations on the theme of the young man from the provinces, chronicling the careers of ambitious young women who leave the provinces of their childhood to try for success in the sophisticated, confusing, and morally complex world of the great city' (below, p. 127). Dealing 'with "the modern actuality" of their own time and with the perennially fascinating narrative of the young person leaving the provinces' to seek a fortune in the city, such stories, it is suggested, retain their appeal,

appearing in both 'literary' and 'popular' forms across the twentieth century and beyond (below, p. 141). In *The Custom of the Country* and *The Song of the Lark*, one protagonist transcends her origins; the other 'is limited by her egocentricity and her provincial blinders, learning very little. Yet, 'both draw readers in' (below, p. 141).

The remaining two essays examine the business and financial worlds reflected in the novel, one linked to the consequences for gender relations, the other to narrative form. In his study, 'Men at Work in *The Custom of the Country*', William Blazek identifies Undine's consumer desires as being 'generously gratified by American men's productivity' – an arrangement shown to expose 'the shortcomings of a society built on imbalanced gender roles and endlessly repeated market cycles of success and failure, abundance and scarcity, hope and unhappiness' (below, p. 145). While others have approached this critical territory with a focus on American women, Blazek specifically targets the depiction of American men in the novel. Two dominant themes emerge from the analysis: 'an expression of the vibrancy as well as the volatility of American business culture, and the ways in which men whose minds are sharpened by the parry and thrust of commercial politics can transfer that public experience to the private sphere' (below, pp. 145–6). In *The Custom of the Country*, observes Blazek, it is the male protagonists who 'exhibit aesthetic sensibilities and an underlying desire for social harmony and more balanced gender relations' (below, p. 146). While Undine remains 'insensible to the touch of the heart', the men of *The Custom of the Country* 'largely value variety over sameness, originality over replication, and often aspire to if not fully achieve what Ralph Marvell imagines: "mergings of the personal with the general life"' (below, p. 146).

In the final essay, "Lost in Translation": Financial Plots and the Modernist Reader in *The Custom of the Country*, Hildegard Hoeller enhances recent discussions concerning the extent of Wharton's participation in modernist scenarios through her reading of the fully fledged, yet obscured financial schemes within the novel. The author 'chooses as her theme the levels of incomprehension that surround her characters, and the ways in which the world they live in can no longer be understood fully but only vaguely and in fragments' (below, p. 158). Such fragmentation and loss in translation, contends Hoeller, is particularly linked to the underlying epic financial narrative – that of the Ararat investigation and the Apex consolidation. 'Wharton – abandoning the narrative conventions of the nineteenth century – stands back and lets us see how her characters and thus we ourselves are lost in translation, unable to read with clarity the epic plots that determine their and our modern lives' (below, p. 158). In a debate that resonates through the current climate of economic instability, *The Custom of the Country* 'focuses on the way in which finance capitalism changes the foundations

of our lives, the very way of reading and being' (below, p. 167) – a change, argues Hoeller, that prompted Wharton to turn to a modernist aesthetic.

Of all of Wharton's novels, *The Custom of the Country* is the work for which one most readily imagines a sequel. Indeed it is indicative of its open-endedness that a number of contributors foresee Undine's assault – successful or otherwise – on the social barrier to her next career promotion, that of an Ambassador's wife. There are no indications that Wharton ever envisaged a sequel (although she delighted in the exploits of Lorelei Lee, the comically amoral diarist of Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925) who moves across America and Europe in search of love, but particularly money ('kissing your hand may make you feel very good but a diamond and safire bracelet lasts forever').⁴⁷ Wharton pronounced *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* 'the great American novel' – a gift to Loos's advertisers and a mirror epithet of Wharton's description to Sara Norton of *The Custom of the Country* as a work in progress in 1908).⁴⁸ The year after publication of *The Custom of the Country*, however, the personal 'Black Horrors' of Wharton's nightmare would metamorphose into global terrors with the onset of the First World War. The author immersed herself in her extraordinary relief work, yet writing continued to occupy her life's core. Further literary successes stood out in the remaining twenty-four years of Wharton's career trajectory – not least her Pulitzer-winning novel, *The Age of Innocence*, published in 1920, and *The Buccaneers*, left unfinished on her death in 1937. Yet her 1913 novel – complex, profound and compelling – always invites its readers to return. Customs may have changed irrevocably, but *The Custom of the Country* continues to stand as a remarkable milestone in Edith Wharton's series of 'adventures with books'.