



Faculty Forum



You Cannot Conceive The Many Without The One
-Plato-

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ON THE PRAYER-WORN FLOOR:

EDITH WHARTON'S POETIC CELEBRATION OF THE SPIRITUAL FEMININE

By

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Phaedre
by Edith Wharton

II.
The crimson panes like blood-drops stigmatize
The western floor. The aisles are mute and cold.
A rigid fetish in her robe of gold
The Virgin of the Pillar, with blank eyes,
Enthroned beneath her votive canopies,
Gathers a meagre remnant to her fold.
The rest is solitude; the church, grown old,
Stands stark and gray beneath the burning skies.
Wellnigh again its mighty frame-work grows
To be a part of nature's self, withdrawn
From hot humanity's impatient woes;
The floor is ridged like some rude mountain
lawn,
And in the east one giant window shows
The roseate coldness of an Alp at dawn.

NOT that on me the Cyprian fury fell,
Last martyr of my love-ensanguined race;
Not that my children drop the averted face
When my name shames the silence; not that hell
Holds me where nevermore his glance shall
dwell
Nightlong between my lids, my pulses race
Through flying pines the tempest of the chase,
Nor my heart rest with him beside the well.

Not that he hates me; not, O baffled gods --
Not that I slew him! -- yet, because your goal
Is always reached, nor your rejoicing rods
Fell ever yet upon insensate clods,
Know, the one pang that makes your triumph
whole
Is, that he knows the baseness of my soul.

Chartres
by Edith Wharton

I
IMMENSE, august, like some Titanic bloom,
The mighty choir unfolds its lithic core,
Petalled with panes of azure, gules and or,
Splendidly lambent in the Gothic gloom,
And stamened with keen flamelets that illumine
The pale high-altar. On the prayer-worn floor,
By surging worshippers thick-thronged of yore,
A few brown crones, familiars of the tomb,
The stranded driftwood of Faith's ebbing sea --
For these alone the finials fret the skies,
The topmost bosses shake their blossoms free,
While from the triple portals, with grave eyes,
Tranquil, and fixed upon eternity,
The cloud of witnesses still testifies.

Pulitzer Prize Winner, Edith Wharton, author of two volumes of poetry, *Artemis to Actaeon* (1909) and *Twelve Poems* (1926), published poetry in such places as *Atlantic Monthly* and *Scribner's* long before she earned fame and considerable recognition for her fiction with novels such as *Age of Innocence* (1920) and *Ethan Frome* (1912). While her fiction often depicts wealthy upper-class families and explores the romance and sexual awakenings of women of the nineteenth century, Wharton's poetry addresses such topics as the representation of women in myth, religion and history, often utilizing historical and/or mythical figures in order to reshape and re-define the role of the feminine.

While Wharton received the most recognition for her fiction, few scholars have taken note of her poetry and particularly the internal and psychological aspects of it. Her poetry explores not merely feminist themes and figures, but also themes representative of her own life. Infamous seducer and betrayer, Phaedra, speaks to the gods from her perspective beyond the grave. Phaedra, well known from the story of Hippolytus in both Seneca's *Phaedra* and Euripides's *Hippolytus* and later treated by French dramatist Jean Racine in *Phèdre* (1677), is the wife of Theseus and sister of Ariadne who, during Theseus's absence, falls in love with her step-son, Hippolytus. As a devotee of the goddess Artemis, however, Hippolytus rejects her advances (Artemis is a virgin goddess). Phaedra consequently hangs herself for shame, but only after writing a letter to Theseus which condemns Hippolytus as her seducer.

Though Euripides constructs Phaedra as a tragic and sympathetic character, subjected to her own passions and the fates, Wharton reaches beyond constructing the figure as one to be scorned or pitied by

asserting her perspective as a passionate woman, unwilling to admit shame or anger for her natural desire. Phaedra announces herself as the "Last martyr of [her] love-ensanguined race" (2), emphasizing that instead of characterizing herself as victim or villain, she identifies herself as a "martyr," dying by choice and for passion. Wharton's examination of Phaedra, a traditionally tragic character in mythology, is characteristic of the author's attention to the roles of women in religion. While Phaedra may not be a religious figure, per se, Wharton recasts the classical figure as a martyr as well as a feminine figure of strength. Wharton's choice to use the word "martyr" characterizes Phaedra as well as her devotion and faith in her beliefs. "Martyr," or "person who undergoes death or great suffering for a faith, belief, or cause...through devotion to some object" (*OED*), implies Phaedra's spirituality as well as her strength, particularly as Wharton is clear to point out that Phaedra is the "Last martyr" of her "love-ensanguined race." Wharton's choice to use the word "ensanguined" or "blood stained" to describe her "race" suggests that she is the last of her kind to view passion as an entity worthy of fatal devotion.

Phaedra, furthermore, describes the gods as "baffled" as to what, exactly, makes their triumph and her pain. The gods, in other words, misunderstand why Phaedra is angry. Wharton's Phaedra, consequently, forms a rhythmic list of common, though erroneous, perceptions of her state, answering the gods' query with an assertive repetition of "Not":

Not that he hates me; not, O baffled gods --
 Not that I slew him! -- yet, because your
 goal
 Is always reached, nor your rejoicing rods
 Fell ever yet upon insensate clods,
 Know, the one pang that makes your triumph
 whole

Is, that he knows the baseness of my soul.
(9-13)

Her repetition of the word “not” conveys not only that the commonly held perceptions of Phaedra are wrong, but also her steadfast devotion to passion and her right to be passionate is misunderstood: “Not that my children drop and averted face / When my name shames the silence,” (3-4) she asserts, disclosing how her allegiance to passion surpasses even her own children’s shame.

Phaedra continues by asserting that not even the death of Hippolytus, the man who she was in love with, causes her grief; “Not that I slew him!—yet, because your goal / Is always reached” (10-11). Via Wharton’s repetition of “Not,” the sonnet unfolds as a rhythmic declaration in which she firmly, definitely, and in staccato statements, disowns the perceptions held by others toward her.

The sonnet concludes by answering at last the gods’ query and emphasizing that she feels no shame for what she has done, but that her “one pang that makes [the gods’] triumph whole / Is, that [Hippolytus] knows the baseness of [her] soul” (13-14). Or, in other words, according to Wharton, Phaedra’s “one pang” is that she was found out.

This Phaedra conveys pointedly one element of Wharton’s consistent examination of feminine spirituality. Her attention to the feminine continues in still more of her poetry, particularly in poetry dealing with the feminine in religion. Time and again Wharton’s poetry questions and examines the role of women in religion, both as martyrs as well as figures to be revered and honored.

In the poem “Chartres,” which appeared in the September 1893 issue of *Scribner’s Magazine*, Wharton again cham-

pions a feminine persona, the Black Virgin. The poem is a complex, layered representation of Wharton’s ability to address feminine spirituality. Written as a double sonnet, “Chartres” echoes or duplicates the double spires of the cathedral in poetic form. The concluding lines of both stanzas, moreover, do not form couplets, conveying the mismatched construction of the Cathedral spires. The poem, nevertheless, is also a *meditatio* where Wharton visits the realms of memory, understanding, and will, the three major components of a *meditatio* when examining the construction, history, and reverence of the cathedral and feminine spirituality. Unlike the traditional trinity presented by Saint Augustine that proposes a trinity of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, however, Wharton meditates on the Virgin of Chartres Cathedral and her worship, a uniquely feminine approach. In his *The American Aeneas*, John C. Shields explains, “The *meditatio* now must be seen as an exercise of mind originating in the classical rhetorical tradition” (52) and not necessarily a form that adheres to the tradition of Saint Augustine and Saint Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*.

The iambic pentameter lines of the poem are redolent of images of blood, emphasizing not only the rose window that “stigmatise[s] / The western floor” (11-12), but also alludes, as the window itself does, to the red color and rose symbolism associated with Mary. Typical rose windows in Gothic Cathedrals face west (opposed in the east by the male symbol of the cross, often situated in an apse) as a round window shaped as a rose, a mandala, symbolic of Mary as the mystic rose and mother of the Rosary and often the color red in dedication her. Repeatedly, Wharton alludes to blood, red, and rose, explaining that the window consists of “Petalled panes” (1-3) that are “

“stamened with keen flamelets that illumine” (1-5) and make “crimson.” Wharton’s stress of the *meditatio* shape of the poem, the color red, and the rose characteristics of the window conveys the meditative properties associated with the rosary, the word “rosary” extending from the Latin *rosarium* or rose-garden. In other words, the *meditatio* of the poem reflects the blood and rose imagery of Mary.

Wharton initiates the poem with the memory of the Virgin’s worshippers from a distant past: “IMMENSE, august, like some Titanic bloom, / The mighty choir unfolds its lithic core” (I.1-2)). Wharton attends not only to the massive size of the cathedral, but also to the enormous depth of its history. The cathedral is “Immense” and “august” with a “mighty choir” announcing its “lithic” or ancient “core.” Not only does Wharton point to the cathedral’s past but also the memory of its worshippers: “On the prayer-worn floor, / By worshippers innumerable thronged of yore.” (I.6-7) Wharton, hence, establishes the past, the memory of the cathedral, as an entity of both immense size and power.

Soon after establishing the memory of the cathedral’s past and the past worshippers, Wharton reaches the understanding component of her *meditatio*, conveying that for the remaining worshippers, “A few brown crones” who are “familiar of the tomb” (I.8)), are the only attendees left. Wharton’s understanding is that, regardless of the largesse of the cathedral’s history, the “meager remnant” (II.6) of the faithful consist of “crones” and women. Coinciding, nonetheless, with Wharton’s attention to the cathedral’s structure and aging worshippers, is her interweaving of blood and rose imagery. Among the “crones” of the “tomb,” the “crimson panes like blood-drops stigmatize / The western floor” (II.1-2) and the

cathedral, itself, comes to life with personification; “the triple portals” are “grave eyes” while the aisles are “mute and cold.” Wharton’s use of blood imagery in conjunction with the cathedral directly alludes to the Black Virgin of the cathedral, “The Virgin of the Pillar.” Wharton, therefore, relates the interconnectedness between the cathedral as a living being and the statue of the Virgin within. The “Virgin of the Pillar” is, like the cathedral, “A rigid fetich” or icon inspiring excessive devotion, on the one hand, or a superstitious reverence, on the other. With “blank eyes,” then, the Virgin is “Enthroned beneath her votive canopies,” in a “robe of gold,” gathering her “meager remnant to her fold.” (II.6) Paralleling to the Virgin’s “votive canopies,” however, is the cathedral which “Stands stark and gray beneath the burning skies” (II.8) in a similar pose. The statue and the cathedral, therefore, echo each other in purpose, history and rigidness, yet they are both illuminated by red light.

Once Wharton reaches the interweaving of the three strands of the cathedral, the Virgin of the Pillar, and the devotees in her *meditation* she discovers the will or the action to which the *meditatio* unfolds. By connecting the Virgin, the attendees and the cathedral, Wharton observes the interplay between the whole of the cathedral with the whole of nature. The cathedral’s “floor is ridged like some rude mountain lawn” (II.12) while its “mighty framework grows / To be a part of nature’s self, withdrawn” (II.9-10). The will, in the concluding lines, directs the reader to be “withdrawn / From hot humanity’s impatient woes” like the devotees, the statue of the Virgin, the cathedral, and nature. Wharton’s concluding line, “The roseate coldness of an Alp at dawn,” (I.14) therefore, draws the components of the *meditatio* together by connecting the feminine spirituality of the

cathedral to a larger, massive, Nature.

Coinciding with the *meditatio* form of the poem is also Wharton's use of the double-sonnet in which the concluding lines of both stanzas do not form couplets, but do mimic the mismatched construction of the Cathedral spires. In the first stanza, Wharton concludes with "Tranquil, and fixed upon eternity, / The cloud of witnesses still testifies" (I.14), while the second stanza concludes, "And in the east one giant window shows / The roseate coldness of an Alp at dawn" (II.13-14). While both certainly describe the spires as well as reflect the unfolding aspects of the *meditatio*, they also direct the reader's attention to what resides between the spires, the cathedral itself. The double-sonnet form coincides with Wharton's use of Ekphrasis (or Ecphrasis). The description of a work of art, is most commonly cited in poems about specific art pieces, not cathedrals or buildings in general. Wharton, nevertheless, utilizes the double-sonnet to accentuate her description of the cathedral by describing its enormity compared to the town of Chartres around it; the cathedral is situated on a hill above the town of Chartres and appears to erupt from the earth: "Immense, august, like some Titanic bloom, (I.1-2) / The mighty choir unfolds its lithic core." Wharton then describes the large, stained-glass roseate windows:

Petalled with panes of azure, gules and or,
Splendidly lambent in the Gothic gloom,
And stamened with keen flamelets that illumine
on the prayer-worn floor (I.3-6)

Once Wharton establishes the cathedral or space within which worship takes place, she describes the worshippers themselves as "brown crones" who are "familiar" to the place and the worship of the Virgin: "A few brown crones, familiars of the tomb," who are "The stranded drift-

wood of Faith's ebbing sea—" (I.9). The floor Wharton portrays is "prayer-worn" because of the labyrinth on the floor where "worshippers" would and still sometimes do walk in a meditative prayer. The "few brown crones," therefore, ebb and flow in their meditative movement, directing the reader's attention to Wharton's correlation between her use of Ekphrasis and her own poetic and moving *meditatio*.

Wharton's conclusion, thereafter, aligns her use of Ekphrasis with her use of the *meditatio* via her description of the Virgin of the Pillar. The words, "rigid fetich" suggest a superstitious reverence of the Virgin by the "meager remnant" within the cathedral. The Virgin, correspondingly, stares with "blank eyes" (II.4) or, rather, unmoving eyes. Wharton's hard description reflects the dual nature of the poem, the *meditatio* versus the sonnet forms. Wharton then concludes the poem by leading her meditation not within the seat of the Black Virgin, but rather connecting the Virgin and the Cathedral to nature and the larger universe. The *meditatio*, in other words, does not end as it begins at or within the cathedral before the statue of the virgin, but rather in seeing the "roseate coldness" of "an Alp" or mountain "at dawn," a beautiful, though profound, image.

Wharton's poetry often treats feminine figures in non-traditional ways, exploring the concepts of love, sensuality and spirituality. Her exploration of the feminine in her writing frequently leads her to investigate stories where women are customarily portrayed as victims, complicating traditional perspectives. Wharton's contribution to American poetry is truly significant and though she may be remembered as a substantial writer of fiction and non-fiction, her poetry champions the feminine perspective. Wharton is one of the few poets who, in an age of few strong, feminist voices, conveys

the complexities of womanhood and challenges traditional perspectives of feminine figures from the past and in her own time.

Notes

1. Black Madonnas or Black Virgins are statues or paintings of what appears to be Mary with a dark-colored or mahogany skin. Found mostly in Europe, the origins of the Black Madonnas are generally unknown, though numerous scholars suggest that they pre-date Christianity and depict Isis and Horus or Demeter and Kore, particularly feminine spiritual histories. Stories about the figures often describe how they were found in a natural setting, such as in a tree, and may convey early earth goddess worship such as worship of Diana and Cybele, particularly since Chapels are often built over the sites of pre-Christian temples. Still other suggestions say that the Black Madonnas are depictions of Mary Magdalene or are associated with the “Great Mother” archetype. Current Christian interpretation connects her to the Song of Songs (1:5) line, “*Nigra sum sed formosa*” (I am black, but beautiful), particularly since some statues have had the Latin phrase inscribed on them.

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