

9-1-2011

"Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion", by Katherine Joslin

Emily J. Orlando
Fairfield University, eorlando@fairfield.edu

Copyright 2011 University of California Press.

Peer Reviewed

Repository Citation

Orlando, Emily J., "'Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion", by Katherine Joslin" (2011). *English Faculty Publications*. 7.
<http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/english-facultypubs/7>

Published Citation

Orlando, Emily (2011) Book Review: Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion by Katherine Joslin. (University Press of New England, 2009). Reviewed in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Vol. 66, No. 2, September 2011: 272-275.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

Crocker's early-twentieth-century romances (chapter 2). The book's second section is structured along a similar juxtaposition of fictional and nonfictional texts: a discussion of the role of Indian queens in the annexation of central Indian states in the course of the nineteenth century (chapter 3), and, more specifically, Philip Meadows Taylor's political dealings with the Queen of Shorapur and how they impacted on his literary works (chapter 4).

What makes *Educating Seeta*—despite the heavy focus on non-literary material—a vital contribution to literary studies as well is that it reads real-life encounters through the lens of literary analysis. As Kapila emphasizes, intersections between literature and history are never reducible to “simplistic translation of the historical record into a literary fantasy” (p. 18). Instead, this truly interdisciplinary work seeks out “common tropes and narratives in which the British colonial experience in India was being imagined and recorded” (p. 18). Although they have generally been dismissed as mere fantasy, interracial romances in British India clearly are more than simple love-stories. Nor can they be reduced to allegorical fantasies, failed or successful. Despite the stress on the failed romance, moreover, a lingering impression—generated primarily by the analysis of nonfictional material—is the sense of neglected successful marriages. Such success is apparently rarely realized in fiction, and this discrepancy could perhaps be explored more directly as well. A curious omission, by the way, seems to be romances involving Indian men and British women (as recently mapped out by Julia Kuehn, for example, in her “Exotic Eroticism in the Anglo-Indian Women's Romance, 1880–1920: Moral and Narrative Responsibility,” in *Literature and Ethics: Questions of Responsibility in Literary Studies*, edited by Daniel K. Jernigan, et al. [Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2009], pp. 125–48), which are arguably even more problematic for colonial discourses. But this is the subject of another study perhaps, of one of the complementary works that will certainly draw on the wealth of detail introduced in this one.

TAMARA S. WAGNER

Nanyang Technological University

KATHERINE JOSLIN, *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion*. Durham: University of New Hampshire Press; and Hanover: University Press of New England, 2009. Pp. xviii + 209. \$30.

Katherine Joslin's *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion* is a beautiful book—eloquently written, richly illustrated, a genuine pleasure to read. Much in the way that Wharton's Lily Bart

contemplates her *tableau vivant* gown on the last night of her life, the volume examines sartorial artifacts that have been cast-off, fragments of material culture and their relevance to fin-de-siècle America and especially Edith Wharton's fiction. With the arrival of Joslin's book, along with Daneen Wardrop's 2009 *Emily Dickinson and the Labor of Clothing*, the University Press of New Hampshire launches "Reading Dress," a subseries of "Becoming Modern: New Nineteenth-Century Studies," which should be of interest to this journal's readers. By attending to fashion, in particular to the "garments that encode cultural and historical issues," the series makes a significant intervention in cultural approaches to nineteenth-century literature (p. xi).

Like Bill Brown's *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003) and the collection *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture*, edited by Gary Totten (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2007), Joslin's *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion* is a study of material culture, and particularly a kind that has not, until now, been considered at length in Wharton's oeuvre. Joslin's book reminds us that Wharton consistently in her art "offers sureness of eye and absorption of pore as she considers the making of fashion, the design and production of clothing, and the depiction of dress" (p. 5). As Joslin poignantly notes of Wharton, "in response to the destruction she witnessed, her fiction in the 1920s and 1930s is full of the things she felt needed saving" (p. 37). It follows, then, that Wharton preserves in the later fiction "the artifacts of Old New York she had allowed readers of her earlier novels to imagine for themselves" (p. 37). Joslin argues for the legitimacy of her approach as she notes: "As a measure of aesthetic value, fashion holds the key to authenticity of mind and strength of character. Pick up any of Edith Wharton's books, . . . and you will find the same aesthetic ideas at work" (p. 6). In Joslin's hands, we learn the intricacies of the Houses of Doucet, Chanel, and Worth, all in relation to Wharton's *House of Mirth* and indeed her vast body of work.

The first chapter, "Dressing Up," considers the great extent to which fashion lies at the center of Wharton's aesthetics. "The moral fiber of her characters," Joslin asserts, "is reflected in their garments" (p. 88). But Joslin does not limit her study to the fiction. She suggests that examining such works of nonfiction as *The Decoration of Houses* and *French Ways and Their Meaning* against the backdrop of fashion unveils "a remarkably coherent writing career" (p. 11). Chapter 2 examines what Joslin calls "the underside of the fashionable clothes that Wharton and others of her social class wore" (p. 52). Together, the second and third chapters look at the production of textiles and garments and

consider Wharton's representations "of women as owners and managers" (p. 12). Discussing *The House of Mirth*, Joslin makes what might strike readers as a bold claim when she notes that the 1905 work "is, in many ways, a novel about the wearing and making of hats" (p. 76). Joslin substantiates this claim, underscoring fashion's presence in this novel right down to the millinery shop where the defeated Lily toils away in her final days. One of Joslin's most original assertions—that "it is fashion that prompted Wharton's war work" (p. 92)—is validated by the meticulous close readings of letters and visual culture offered in her volume. Joslin reminds us that Wharton "eyed the machine with suspicion and bemoaned the uniformity of ready-to-wear clothing, an industrial process that she believed demeaned seamstresses and cheapened the value of labor" (p. 98). One can only imagine what Wharton, astute cultural critic that she was, would have to say about the twenty-first-century sweatshop.

Chapter 4, "Desire in the Marketplace," compares the shopping styles of Midwesterners with those of New Yorkers and reads American habits against the traditions of French fashion in *The Custom of the Country*, which Hermione Lee considers Wharton's greatest novel. Joslin reads the conspicuously consuming Undine Spragg and Elmer Moffatt as at once consumers and goods themselves. The chapter considers the narcissistic Undine in the context of the pier-glass mirror that was increasingly ubiquitous at the turn into the twentieth century.

The fifth chapter, which focuses on *The Age of Innocence*, studies the effect of a single article of clothing—Ellen Olenska's scene-stealing gown at the start of the novel—and the extent to which the plot hinges on this dress, which Joslin describes as "a hybrid creation that links fashions of the 1870s and the postwar patriotic designs of Paul Poiret" (p. 12). Joslin underscores the details of Wharton's "hieroglyphic" world by elucidating the difference between tucker and tulle and the degree to which fashion serves as a signifier for Wharton.

Chapter 6, "Dressing for Middle Age," reads Wharton's remarkable but underexamined *The Mother's Recompense* in the context of changes in fashion relative to mother-daughter tensions in the early decades of the twentieth century. The seventh chapter, "Democracy and Dress," studies Wharton's final, unfinished (and critically neglected) novel *The Buccaneers*, which Joslin presents as "a costume drama, laden with apparel" (p. 164).

Throughout, the book offers compelling close readings of image and text. Joslin concedes early on that "it is a strange experience for a literary scholar, schooled in the subtleties of language, to research actual garments and literally to read dress" (p. 53). Yet Joslin conducts

her study with such finesse that she makes this reader yearn for a pilgrimage to the costume collections at the Metropolitan and Mint Museums to see in person what she verbally and visually illuminates for us. One of the most endearing elements of the study is its thoughtful close readings of photographs of Wharton—some for publicity, some candid, many of them unfamiliar.

Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion will appeal to a broad range of readers, not only those interested in Wharton, whose critical reputation arguably has never been higher, but also to readers engaged in literary studies, fashion studies, women's studies, and visual culture. This impeccably researched volume reminds us why Wharton is so attractive to such contemporary writers as Candace Bushnell (*Sex and the City*) and Cecily von Ziegesar (*Gossip Girl*). This reader is prompted by Joslin's study to trace the origins of Carrie Bradshaw's feathered bridal headpiece to Madame Viot's Parisian creations. The book's arrival is well timed, given that Wharton is as much *en vogue* as she is (literally featured) in *Vogue*, not to mention that she is arguably American literature's best-dressed author. As Wharton's friend Elisina Tyler observed, the writer "indulged all her life in the 'fetish of dressing' and stood by the custom of dressing for dinner as 'an absolute sign of civilization'" (p. 175). With her latest book, Katherine Joslin has made an important contribution to Wharton scholarship. Joslin notes "how visual Edith Wharton was as a chronicler of culture" (p. 178), to which this reviewer would add how equally astute is Joslin as a chronicler of Edith Wharton and the making of fashion.

EMILY J. ORLANDO
Fairfield University