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**'I HAVE HAD MY VISION:' VISIONS AND THE ESCAPE FROM EXPECTATIONS IN
*THE HOUSE OF MIRTH AND TO THE LIGHTHOUSE***

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

PROFESSOR KOENIGS

PROFESSOR MATZ

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I. Introduction

“I have had my vision,” Lily Briscoe declares in the triumphant culminating line of *To the Lighthouse*, indicating the fulfillment of her artistic vision on a project over ten years in the making. In her success, Lily Briscoe disproves those who have told her “women can’t write, women can’t paint” and actualizes her ability to create, all the while rejecting gendered and heteronormative expectations which prioritize heterosexual marriage over her artistic pursuits (Woolf, TL 86). Strikingly, this language of vision also recurs throughout *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, a text published 22 years after *To the Lighthouse*, across the Atlantic in America, to describe a moment where Lily Bart and Selden transcend the confines of “the actual” and reach “a forbidden height from which they discover a new world” (Wharton, HM 73). In both of these texts, this idea of the “vision” allows for the text’s protagonist to escape from marriage—and in this, to escape from the gendered expectations and heteronormativity such a union connotes. Due to this deviance from normativity, I employ Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* and Sedgwick’s definition of queerness in *Tendencies* to theorize that both Lily Bart and Lily Briscoe occupy a queer positionality within their respective text, a positionality marked by outsidership and marginality. Such a positionality empowers their moments of vision to be “queer visions”—ones which transcend the norms of their time and offer the queer visionary a sense of clarity and a glimpse of a world outside of gendered and heteronormative confines.

Reading Wharton and Woolf together is still a somewhat rare scholarly occurrence, given the authors’ differences in place, associated literary movement (Woolf being widely associated with modernism and Wharton as something of a stepping-stone between realism and modernism), and the ambivalence Wharton and Woolf held about each other’s work. Such ambivalence especially

has precluded scholars from searching for common ground in these authors' texts, as it seems to preclude the possibility of literary influence. This paper will study this notion of their ambivalence towards one another, conceptualizing this ambivalence as a qualified admiration, qualified in part, by their sense of one another as a literary rival. I will make an argument which instates the potentiality of influence—particularly on Wharton's potential influence on Woolf, who read and positively reviewed *The House of Mirth* at the age of 23, 10 years before her publication of her first novel and 22 years before the publication of *To the Lighthouse*.

In light of these texts' differences in authorship, place, and the literary moment in which they were written, the fact that they share this common ground of queer visions is all the more remarkable. This common ground is especially fascinating given the fact that the two characters who create these "queer visions" have the same name—sharing the exact same first name and the first letter of their last name. But in spite of this common ground of "queer visions," both texts have drastically different endings related to these visions. While *To the Lighthouse* ends with the triumph of this vision expressed on the page, *The House of Mirth* ends in a markedly different way—in Lily Bart reminiscing about the "tragic yet sweet vision of lost possibilities" after she is abandoned by Selden before dying in her sleep as a result of an (accidental) overdose (Wharton, HM 32). My reading will consider how and why these texts with such continuities end in such drastically different ways. In response to this, I will posit Lily Briscoe as a potential rewriting of Wharton's character of Lily Bart, who is able to survive because of her existence in a post-1910 world, and how art makes resistance to gender norms a tangible practice, expanding her ability to imagine love in its many potential forms.

In sum, this paper's aim is threefold: (1) to put these two authors, who are often not studied together, in conversation with one another. This will allow me to make a case for Wharton's

potential influence on Woolf. This will also enable me to queer Lily Bart, performing a reading of *The House of Mirth* which may not be quite as apparent if the text were read in isolation and allowing us to enter into the burgeoning conversation of queer Wharton scholarship in new ways.

(2) To establish a queer reading of both Lily Bart and Lily Briscoe and illuminate vision-making as a queer action in both of these texts, in how it helps both characters escape from gendered and heteronormative expectations. (3) To consider the drastically different endings to these two texts, comparing the emptiness of Lily Bart's vision with the fulfillment of Lily Briscoe's and consider why these two texts end so differently.

II. The Study of Woolf and Wharton Together: An Overview

Virginia Woolf and Edith Wharton are two of the most widely-read women writers of the 20th century. For most literary scholars, this is where the similarities between the two end. The two influential authors hail from different countries and continents, writing in overlapping but slightly distinct literary and historical moments. Scholarly work which considers Woolf and Wharton jointly is still somewhat rare. Much of the scholarly work which pulls Woolf and Wharton together has to do with the study of their letters rather than a joint literary analysis of their works. These letters are specifically ones written *about* one another, rather than a dialogue between the writers, as the two never met or spoke directly (Joslin, "Embattled Tendencies" 203). To put it simply, Woolf and Wharton expressed ambivalence about each other's work, an ambivalence which has kept critics from reading the two together.

Much of Woolf's writing on Wharton seems to indicate admiration with qualification, a balance of critique with reverence. However, her first mention of Wharton is overwhelmingly positive. Woolf anonymously reviewed *The House of Mirth* in the newspaper *The Guardian* in

1905, when Woolf was just 23. “The first pages of this novel make it obvious, even if the writer’s name had not already conveyed this information, that we have to consider a serious work of fiction” (Woolf, *The Essays, Vol. One*, 67). Though she starts off noting Wharton’s presence as something of a literary celebrity, Woolf’s praise extends beyond this fact of celebrity. Instead, she hones in on Wharton’s gift of craft: “the writer has chosen her subject with deliberate foresight, and has spared no pains to make her delineation exact” (Woolf, *The Essays, Vol. One*, 67-8). Woolf also gets at the heart of the story’s thematic mission, even in this brief review: “In outline this [story] is unpleasant; in detail it is tragic, because, though the girl has many of the faults of her surroundings she has the capacity for better things which is never to be exercised” (Woolf, *The Essays, Vol. One*, 68). In Woolf’s view, Wharton walks the fragile line of being able to unveil a tragic story whilst ensuring that “the moral may be left to the reader” (Woolf, *The Essays, Vol. One*, 68). Woolf seems to have nothing negative to say about the text, ending her review with soaring approval: “There is no doubt that Mrs Wharton has so illuminated The House of Mirth for us that we shall not soon forget it” (Woolf, *The Essays, Vol. One*, 68).

20 years later, there seems to be a shift in Woolf’s perspective, as expressed through Woolf’s stance on Wharton in her essay “American Fiction.” Here Woolf’s take on Wharton seems to switch from pure reverence to qualified admiration, with a willingness to directly critique Wharton. In this essay, which centers British audiences reading American texts, Woolf selects Walt Whitman as the best candidate to give “the English tourist in American literature...something different from what he has at home” (Woolf, “American Fiction,” 111). She then adds that “To dismiss such distinguished names as those of Henry James, Mr. Hergesheimer, and Mrs. Wharton would be impossible but their praises are qualified with the reservation—they are not Americans; they do not give us anything that we have not got already”

(Woolf, "American Fiction," 111). Woolf indicates Wharton's works' similarity to European fictional traditions, rather than the experimental free verse of Walt Whitman, which declares its Americanness every chance it gets. Her sharpest critique of Wharton comes from her belief that, in its European influence, "the Edith Whartons...exaggerate[] the English culture, the traditional English good manners" and "that obsession with surface distinctions—the age of old houses, the glamour of great names" (Woolf, "American Fiction," 119). Such a critique may seem initially like a complete departure from her earlier praise. Yet even in light of this critique, Woolf continues to offer "praises;" they are simply "qualified" by the admission that other authors may give "the English tourist" a portrait of American artists distinct from English influences. Moreover, this positionality of being a literary "tourist" is one that Woolf herself qualifies and criticizes for its "crudity and onesidedness" ("American Fiction," 111). This specific positionality seems to suggest that the authors and texts which Woolf chooses to elevate in this essay as "American Fiction" for the English tourist are not necessarily the best American texts, but the best texts for a crude, outside audience. This fact seems to soften her criticism of Wharton, reconciling it in part with her praise. Though Woolf criticizes Wharton, she is hardly able "to dismiss" her entirely, nor does she seem especially keen to.

In 1934, Virginia Woolf wrote about her experience reading Wharton's memoir, *A Backward Glance*, to her friend Ethel Smyth. In this letter, a more private medium than the essay, Woolf seems to offer a qualified admiration for the now 72-year-old Edith Wharton. Woolf is conflicted, asking for other opinions to cement her own: "Please tell me sometime what you thought of her. There's a shell of a distinguished mind; I like the way she puts colour in her sentences, but I vaguely surmise there's something you hated and loathed in her. Is there?" (Woolf, *Letters Vol. Five* 304). Woolf's words seem to indicate an ambivalent but malleable

opinion about Wharton—there are moments of compliment (“distinguished mind,” “colour in her sentences”) which are partially undercut by the language of her mind being a “shell” and anticipating Smyth’s hatred of her. Katherine Joslin attributes Woolf’s language towards Wharton as in reference to Wharton’s “frailty of age” and “Woolf’s anxiety over a rival’s genius” (Joslin, “Embattled Tendencies” 202).

This anxiety “over a rival’s genius” is most clearly outlined by the epistolary conversation which precedes Woolf’s inquiry about Wharton: Woolf’s discussion of her own process writing *The Years*. Woolf bemoans, “what a hopeless bad book mine will be!” before immediately asking for Smyth’s opinion about Wharton (Woolf, *Letters Vol. Five*, 303). Woolf’s insecurity about her own work seems to be reflected in her inability to wholeheartedly compliment Wharton’s work. And significantly, Woolf awaits Smyth’s opinion before coming to full judgement—indicating an admiration of Wharton’s command of language with the qualification that Smyth might dislike her for some unknown reason. Woolf’s private judgement of Wharton’s literary merit ends with a question, and in this, a sense of indecision and insecurity, about Wharton’s work and her own.

Wharton’s views on Woolf are comparatively simpler. Wharton indicates an admiration for Woolf the writer, which is overshadowed by her distaste for Woolf the person. In 1928, when entreated to read *Orlando* by friend Mary Berenson, a book widely considered to be a love letter to Vita Sackville-West, Wharton claimed that the novel’s advertising photographs of Vita as the titular character, “made me quite ill. I can’t believe that where there is exhibitionism of that order there can be any real gift” (Lewis 483). To Wharton, Virginia Woolf the person, her extramarital affairs and her openness about it all, potentially even her queerness, ruined her work. It’s likely with this in mind that Wharton intimated to friends that “she admired none of

Virginia's novels" (Lewis 483). It is also probable that Wharton's distaste for Woolf can be at least partially explained by her hurt over Woolf's critique of Wharton in her essay "American Fiction," published four years before Wharton read *Orlando*, and 20 years after Woolf's positive review of *The House of Mirth* (Lewis 483). Scholars have suggested that Wharton is responding directly to Woolf's "American Fiction" in her essay "The Great American Novel." In spite of this hurt, Wharton's distaste for Woolf is not without admission of Woolf's talent. In the same moment where she tells friends she admires none of Woolf's novels, Wharton acknowledges vaguely that Woolf had "prodigious gifts in other directions" (Lewis 483). While Wharton may be much more apt to dismiss Woolf, she finds she is not fully able to do so either.

When English noblewoman Lady Aberconway remarked to Edith Wharton in passing that Virginia Woolf was the most curious woman she had ever known, Aberconway reflects that Wharton retorted: "Had Virginia really a great curiosity?...certainly Virginia had a very imaginative mind, perhaps a very poetic mind, but was she fundamentally endowed with *true* curiosity?" (Lewis 483). This situation seems remarkably similar to Woolf's qualified admiration of Wharton—while describing Woolf as "imaginative," Wharton does not fully concede to compliment, questioning the extent of Woolf's curiosity, and qualifying our understanding of Woolf as having a "very poetic mind" with the word "perhaps." Wharton ends not with a strong assertion about Woolf's lack of gift, but a question, an indecision, a looking to someone else to fill in the blanks. Joslin reads this as "expos[ing] [Wharton's] sense of Woolf as a rival" ("Embattled Tendencies" 202). After their exchange, Lady Aberconway compares the two authors, reflecting that Wharton's "curiosity about people and things exceeds even Virginia's...I want her as a friend" (Lewis 483). A general feeling of rivalry, therefore, between Woolf and Wharton can be traced back to the two authors, who ran in similar circles, being placed in direct

competition with one another by others during their lifetimes. While this sense of Woolf and Wharton's ambivalence toward one another has precluded scholars from studying them together, the understanding of their qualified admiration creates space for readers to consider the potentiality of their influence on one another. This is particularly pertinent to Wharton's potential influence on Woolf, given the fact that Woolf read and reviewed *The House of Mirth* at such a young age and spoke so highly of the text.

In spite of this moment of direct comparison in their lives, and how widely studied Woolf and Wharton are individually, scholarship which considers Wharton and Woolf in tandem is still rare (Fedorko 16). However, recent efforts have been made to bring these seemingly unlike authors together. This is exhibited in Katherine Joslin's argument for studying them together, in how they represent the generic tensions inherent in Modernism. Thinking of Wharton, as many critics have, as a "transitional figure on a literary journey from the traditional novel forms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries toward the supposedly braver, bolder, experiment of modernism," (Joslin, "Embattled Tendencies" 204). Katherine Joslin argues that reading these two authors together is a way to better understand the "Passionate disagreement over form and content [which] characterises Modernism and links these two writers. The voices of Wharton and Woolf resonate throughout the period, not one or the other, not one and then the other, but rather the two together" ("Embattled Tendencies," 219).

In the rare moments where these two authors are analyzed together, common comparisons are considerations of Wharton's *The House of Mirth* with Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (Fedorko) or Wharton's first novel, *The House of Mirth* with Woolf's debut *The Voyage Out* (Joslin, "Embattled Tendencies"). These novels have been obvious choices for comparison in their plot/genre similarities—*Mrs. Dalloway* is Woolf's take on the novel of manners, which

takes place in the realm of dinner parties and unspoken exchanges, which is decisively *The House of Mirth's* genre and thematic domain. *The House of Mirth* and *The Voyage Out* are both also novels of manners with striking plot continuities—from “intrusions from sexually aggressive older married men” to the fact that “neither heroine marries; rather, the novels end in the only other conventional way for a domestic novel to end, the death of the beautiful woman” and the stream-of-conscious quality of their heroines’ final moments (Joslin “Embattled Tendencies,” 211). Readings of *The House of Mirth* and *To the Lighthouse* together are extremely rare. But by bringing *The House of Mirth* and *To the Lighthouse* together, I aim to, as Joslin suggests: “Read [] Wharton and Woolf together...to hear the dialogue between the writers, two dissonant yet overlapping voices” (“Embattled Tendencies,” 204).

III. The ABCs of Queer Theory & the Queerness of Visions

In a queer reading of these two texts, it is first crucial to establish what queerness entails. Eve Sedgwick, a primary force behind the development of queer theory, defines queerness in *Tendencies* as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically” (8). To signify monolithically is to align meaning with societal expectations, to indicate normativity. “What if instead there were a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other? What if the richest junctures weren’t the ones where everything means the same thing?” (Sedgwick 6). Queerness to Sedgwick is any sort of destabilizing, nonnormative, possibility-giving force. This gives theorists the opportunity “to queer” or find the nonnormativity in just about any piece of art, literature or experience; it opens up queerness as a

site of deviation from societal norms rather than a specific identity to be contained in one person or one community. Queerness shifts and changes as the world it is contained in shifts. Sedgwick makes note of the fact queer theory is particularly but certainly not exclusively relevant to instances where this destabilization occurs within the realm of gender and sexuality. Because, as Sedgwick further explains, “given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against *every* same-sex sexual expression, for anyone to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term [queer]’s definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself” (8). A line later, she revisits that assertion, citing that some of the most exciting invocations of queerness come from postcolonial and race theorists and are not necessarily related to gender or sexuality. In other words: *it’s complicated*.

Maggie Nelson takes up Sedgwick’s definition of “queer” in her book *The Argonauts*, where queerness has both nothing to do with sexuality and something to do with it, synthesizing, usefully: “In other words, [Sedgwick] wanted it both ways. There is much to be learned from wanting something both ways” (Nelson 29). Invoking queerness in this expansive way allows us to consider Lily Briscoe, with her love for Mrs. Ramsay in mind, but to see her queerness as manifesting in ways beyond this feeling. Moreover, it enables us to consider the queerness of Lily Bart, in spite of the fact that the central love story of *The House of Mirth* is heterosexual. A queer analysis of Lily Bart is particularly generative in that it reveals the tension between her queer positionality and her ambivalent longing for conventional, heteronormative society. Such a reading would be lost without a more expansive understanding of queerness.

Along with Sedgwick’s definition of queerness, Sara Ahmed’s notion of “Queer Phenomenology” provides a useful framework to perform a queer reading of Lily Briscoe and Lily Bart, particularly in its understanding of the queerness in marginality, outsidership, and the

presence of orienting one's self around compulsory heterosexuality. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed employs phenomenology, the study of conscious experience, to study the idea of orientation or the notion that consciousness is directed towards objects in relation to queerness. Ahmed discusses the orientation, space and the significance of lines (the straight and narrow or the slant) to propose her own queer phenomenology. In her discussion on sexual orientation, Ahmed indicates that orientations, including sexual orientations, are "effects of what we tend toward" but that they also "take [] time and work to inhabit" (15; 102). She quotes Simone Beauvoir here: "One is not born, but becomes straight" via following the straight line of heterosexuality set up by social forces.

Ahmed then discusses the spatialization of queerness. She traces the etymology of the word queer, meaning "to twist" and indicates how "Queer is, after all, a spatial term, which then gets translated into a sexual term, a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a 'straight line,' a sexuality that is bent and crooked" (Ahmed 67). A queer space for Ahmed, working off of theories by Foucault and Merleau-Ponty, is thus to be "off center" or "slantwise" (65). Queerness exists like this because of the stigma surrounding it. In light of homophobia and compulsory sexuality, Ahmed claims that "heterosexuality is not then simply an orientation toward others, it is also something that we are oriented around" (Ahmed 91). Queerness thus works around heterosexuality to occupy space, operating in slants and margins, as the world surrounding it tries to "straighten" it out. But because one must work to orient themselves toward straightness or deviate from it, Ahmed claims that orientations "exceed the objects they are directed toward, becoming ways of inhabiting and co-existing in the world" (91). To be queer is then not simply a difference of sexual preference but is an entirely unique way of being that provides the queer subject with a distinct vantage point through which to understand the world.

This vantage point, this space in the margins, while not to be romanticized, is also a space of possibility. It is through Ahmed's theory that we can understand marginality and outsidership as being inherently queer, an understanding which is pivotal to queer readings of both *To the Lighthouse* and *The House of Mirth*.

It is in this understanding of queerness' relationship to marginality and outsidership which makes visions a queer way of seeing. Visions do not exclusively signal "monolithically"—they are not so straight-forward as seeing something in real-life and describing it; they offer many potential meanings and interpretations, aligning with Sedgwick's vision of queerness. Visions are decisively nonnormative, perhaps even indicating to a reader a character's break with the sane or normative. And in their nonnormativity and association with the insane, visions occupy a space of marginality which Ahmed queers. Visions can also be interpreted as a sort of "slant" in their interruption of day-to-day existence and linear temporality, in line with Ahmed's idea of the queer slant.

Moreover, in a world in which everyone's reality is forced to cohere with the reality of the privileged (white straight men), visions, in their non-reality and nonnormativity, are the domain of the non-straight, non-man—that of the queered female subject. This notion of truth or reality as masculine is indicated right in *To the Lighthouse*'s opening pages, personified through the patriarch of Mr. Ramsay: "What [Mr. Ramsay] said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact" (Woolf, TL 4). In Valerie Rohy's reading of Mr. Ramsay's association with truth in *Chances Are*, she also notes his association with the realm of the symbolic, arguing that "Symbols belong to the masculine register of singular 'truth', to the metaphorical grammar of the symbolic order" (134). This understanding of Mr. Ramsay's association with symbolism indicates the power that Mr. Ramsay wields to construct his own

reality. His philosophical work is figured as a quest to “reach R,” and in this passage about reaching R, letters are made to serve as determinate symbols onto which degrees of knowledge can be mapped onto (Woolf, TL 34). But letters are already symbols to begin with. In this example, pre-existing symbols are given new but fixed meanings simply to illustrate how the realm of the symbolic conforms with Mr. Ramsay’s reality. Mr. Ramsay proves “incapable of untruth” because he is able to construct truth via patriarchal reign over symbolic, singular truth. In a world where patriarchy endows men with power over the realms of truth and symbolism, visions create space for other characters to create their own sense of meaning.

IV. Queering Lily Bart: A Queer Reading of *The House of Mirth*

Lily Bart’s Queer Positionality in The House of Mirth

Up until the last 10 years, Lily Bart’s potential queerness was largely ignored by scholars (Wagner 116). Though for many, it is easy to see Lily as solely “a conventional protagonist,” Wagner notes how “Other female characters might be deemed queer if they were to thwart every chance at heterosexual coupling, or if they were more moved by their own appearances and attire than any man” (133), as is the case for Lily Bart. In line with Wagner’s assessment, there’s been recent critical interest in addressing the question of Lily Bart’s sexuality. Most directly, scholar Katherine Joslin asked in 2007 (in an article of this same title), “Is Lily Gay?” Drawing inspiration from Joslin, George Simmel, and Eve Sedgwick, H. J. E. Champion attempts to answer this question in her article “‘Hold me, Gerty, hold me’: Lily Bart’s Queer Desire.” The article details the useful notions of queer futurity and Lily’s queerness in “side-stepping” heterosexual relationships at multiple turns (Champion 112).

To queer Lily Bart, Champion and Joslin draw on Wharton's text *French Ways and Their Meanings*, by noting Wharton's views on the function of marriage: "marriage, union with a man, completes and transforms a woman's character...A girl is only a sketch; a married woman is the finished picture" (Wharton, FWTM 114-5). Lily Bart has a habit of pulling away just before a proposal is given, as staged through missing the bus to accompany Percy Gryce to church and flirting with the step-father of an Italian prince right before her marriage to him is secured (Wharton, HM 53, 189). In this behavior, Lily "side-step[s] marriage, a step that would finish the picture" (Joslin, "Is Lily Gay?" 97). Champion concurs, asserting that "in a clear refusal to cooperate with the fixed notion of futurity signified by marriage, Lily thus seems to be choosing to remain...in a state of queer flux" (97). Champion furthers this by borrowing from Kathryn Bond Stockton's idea of queer delay. She glosses queer delay as "the disruption of linear progression toward a normative adult heterosexuality...queer children are 'growing sideways' instead of 'up' by refusing to 'approach the official destination of straight couplehood'" (Champion 111; Stockton 279, 283). Mrs. Fisher basically makes this exact claim in reference to Lily's aversion to marriage, through the metaphor of harvest. "That's Lily all over, you know: she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she over-sleeps herself or goes off on a picnic" (Wharton, HM 189). Even characters in the text notice how Lily exists out of step with linear progression, resisting the traditional linear trajectory of adult female life. And Mrs. Fisher's metaphor in particular, in its attention to the idea of Lily "sowing her seed," seems to not only refer to marriage but implicitly also refer to the avoidance of pregnancy. This idea that Lily exists in a state of delay and flux which is never overcome (Lily never marries, never procreates, always grows sideways),

queering the pattern of traditional female progression, stages Lily Bart's queer positionality and deviance from heteronormativity in *The House of Mirth*.

Such a positionality is furthered by Lily's eventual exile from society, which renders her a queer outsider to the world she once belonged to. (This idea of outsidership as queer being in accordance with Ahmed's theory in *Queer Phenomenology*). Describing the moment Lily flirts with the step-father of the Italian prince she is nearly betrothed to, Mrs. Fisher notes how: "You can fancy the scandal: there was an awful row between the men, and people began to look at Lily *so queerly* that Mrs. Peniston had to pack up and finish her cure elsewhere" (Wharton, HM 189; emphasis my own). In light of the scandal, Lily creates by avoiding heterosexual marriage, Lily begins to be perceived "queerly." This queerness makes her so much of an outsider to their society that Mrs. Peniston must remove her from it entirely. This plotline also seems to foreshadow Lily will be further rendered an outsider from New York society via Bertha Dorset's rumors.

But Lily's queer outsidership seems to give her a new perspective on the world around her. This is staged in her final conversation with Selden, as she grows frustrated with the way conventional social norms of conversation cause their banter to be circular and unmeaningful. In this conversation, Selden attempts to banter with Lily with their typical rapport, and Lily grows frustrated, because "In her strange state of extra-lucidity, which gave her the sense of being already at the heart of the situation, it seemed incredible that any one should think it necessary to linger in the conventional outskirts of word-play and evasion" (Wharton, HM 306). In this moment, Lily is depicted as existing within a state of clarity, or "extra-lucidity." This term, by virtue of the prefix "extra" meaning to be "outside" or "beyond" something, depicts Lily as not simply existing in a state of clarity, but a state of clarity which can perhaps only be found once

she grows to exist outside her society, beyond the confines of social conventions. Such a position as being outside or beyond convention is thus shown to be generative—it gives Lily a particular kind of knowledge—access to “the heart of the situation”—where others often “linger in the conventional outskirts of word-play and evasion.” This passage thus indicates not only that Lily is a queer outsider to the society she once belonged to, but that this positionality gives her a new power of perception.

Lily Bart & Selden's Queer Vision

Perhaps counterintuitively, Lily Bart's tether to Selden is not necessarily conventional nor heteronormative. It is Selden's eventual configuration of their relationship through the framework of marriage which “straightens” their passion, aligning it with heteronormativity. To start off, though, their relationship actively rejects marriage. In her analysis of the scene at Bellomont where the tone of Lily and Selden's relationship becomes not just flirtatious but romantic, Champion notes how “their flirtation extends into an exaggeration and mimicry of the rituals of heterosexual marriage” as Selden “teases Lily and her half-hearted efforts, and they describe the prospect of becoming engaged to each other with mirth, a mock proposal gleefully dancing in the air between them” (103-4). Champion notes how this mimicry is significant in how it aligns with Butler's theorization about what subversive action against heterosexual hegemony entails: miming and displacing heterosexuality's conventions (Champion 104; Butler 84). In their banter about marriage, “Lily and Selden play with the heterosexual norms they are supposed to perform” in a way “much like a child trying on their mother's high heels” (Champion 104).

In its rejection of marriage and heteronormative expectation, Lily and Selden's romantic relationship produces a vision of the world which, though vague and uncertain, is possibility-giving. In this same moment where they mock marriage, Lily Bart and Selden are depicted "smiling at each other like adventurous children who have climbed to a forbidden height from which they discover a new world. The actual world at their feet was veiling itself in dimness, and across the valley a clear moon rose in the denser blue" (Wharton, HM 73). In this passage, Lily and Selden are doing something "forbidden" something outside of the "actual world at their feet." They are situated as queer outsiders to their society and in this positionality, they are "adventurous children" who are able to "discover a new world." In other words, their love carries the potential, perhaps even the imperative, for them to not just transcend their world, but to discover a new one. The dimming of the actual world in favor of a new one is also a powerful break from what came before them, seeming to indicate that their union spurs a break with or queering of pattern. Further, this break with pattern, the dimming of the actual world and its status as physically below the new one, seems to denote the supremacy of their new world to what came before it, indicating the power their queer positionality gives them: to see beyond the confines of their world, to see something better. Where people often see the rules and structures of society as fixed or inevitable, the text denotes the possibility of the current day's fade into something else and even stages a brief moment in which this occurs. The text takes this "new world" seriously—viewing it as not simply a product of their romanticism clouding their judgement, but a vision of something more, created through their queer positionality. What this vision actually entails is ambiguous and enigmatic—it could be many potential things. In its refusal to "signal monolithically" and its roots in Selden and Lily's queer outsidership, it is a decisively queer vision. The possibility this vision gives Lily and Selden is for something,

indeterminate but “Beyond!” the “prisonhouse” or “cage” of their current society (Wharton HM, 154, 64, 54). Perhaps this possibility could even be the potentiality for love or life itself—for Lily Bart, or for any who dare to be queerly or nonnormatively.

Lily Bart and Gerty Farish—Lovers? Or Mother and Daughter?

Champion’s queer reading of Lily attempts to take queer Lily even further via a reading of Lily as queer not just in positionality and vision but in sexual action. Though Champion’s argument is exciting in its queering of Lily Bart in new ways, ultimately, it proves incompatible with crucial details in the text—an insight which rather than dismissing Lily Bart’s queerness, allows us to see it in all its complexity. Champion’s analysis attempts to unearth sexual undertones in Lily’s intimate cuddling with Gerty Farish, particularly in the passage:

But as Gerty lay with arms drawn down her side, in the motionless narrowness of an effigy, she felt a stir of sobs from the breathing warmth beside her, and Lily flung out her hand, groped for her friend’s and held it fast. ‘Hold me, Gerty, or I shall think of things,’ she moaned; and Gerty silently slipped an arm under her, pillowing her head in its hollow as a mother makes a nest for a tossing child. In the warm hollow Lily lay still and her breathing grew low and regular. Her hand still clung to Gerty’s as if to ward off evil dreams, but the hold of her fingers relaxed, her head sank deeper into its shelter, and Gerty felt that she slept” (Wharton, HM 167)

Champion notes that the scene has “a palpable corporeality tinged with desire,” particularly in its diction of “moaned,” “caressed,” “groped” and “clung” (108). She adds that “the repetition of ‘hollow,’ together with the descriptions of Lily’s head ‘[sinking] deeper into its shelter,’ emphasizes the opening up of hidden spaces” (Champion 108). While sensuality is highly present in the scene, all in all, Lily and Gerty’s relationship seems to more closely resemble that between mother-and-child than lovers. When Gerty pillows Lily’s head, she does so “as a mother makes a nest for a tossing child.” Following this, Lily Bart clings to Gerty not so much out of desire but in her need “to ward off evil dreams,” the way a child might come to their caregiver

after having a nightmare. Champion reads the word choice of “hollow” as having sexual undertones for female genitalia; but existing in this “warm hollow” causes Lily “to lay still” and her breathing to grow “low and regular” (if we were Freud we might read this soothing effect as a result of the child returning to the womb). Rather than arousing Lily, this “opening up of hidden spaces,” which in Champion’s reading would suggest the moment of sexual encounter, has the opposite effect: it puts Lily to sleep.

Moreover, Champion’s analysis of this scene doesn’t consider what precedes it: Gus Trenor’s attempted sexual assault of Lily Bart. As Lily leaves Gus Trenor’s house, she is notably shaken, recounting that “shuddering darkness closed on her” and crying out, “I can’t think—I can’t think” (Wharton, HM 148). Her shakenness causes her to see her life as irreparably changed: a clear marker of a traumatic experience: “There was a great gulf fixed between today and yesterday” (Wharton, HM 148). But Lily has no one to help her cope with these feelings of despair; the narrative laments that “Lily had no heart to lean on. Her relation with her aunt was...superficial” (Wharton, HM 148). In the moment before realizing she’s nearing Gerty’s corner, Lily is searching not for a passionate exchange, but for compassion, compassion akin to what her aunt (Lily’s mother figure given the death of her parents) could provide for her if their relationship was more than superficial. Thinking of this motherly, or at the very least familial, compassion, Lily Bart happens upon Gerty’s street, and searches for this solace in Gerty. In this, her desperation for Gerty’s touch seems less of an outcry of desire than the need for soothing and comforting, more maternal than sexual, after an encounter which has left her understandably shaken. And for Gerty’s part, her attentiveness to Lily in this moment is characterized by “all personal feeling [being] merged in the sense of ministry,” which characterizes her more as a depersonalized, dutiful figure than a passionate lover (Wharton, HM 163).

This reading of Lily's queer attraction to Gerty also fails to take into account the lack of affection Lily seems to hold toward Gerty in other scenes. The narrative editorializes roughly 20 pages before Lily Bart flees to Gerty's house that "Gerty's affection for her friend [Lily Bart]—a sentiment she had learned to keep alive on the scantiest diet—had grown to active adoration" (Wharton, HM 150). Where Gerty adores Lily, Lily gives her "the scantiest diet" of affection back, seeming to suggest a lack of mutual affection between the two, lacking on Lily's end in particular. Champion's reading of Lily's sexual attraction toward Gerty also seems to disregard the text's repeated assertion of Lily's active distaste for the aesthetics of Gerty's room—the morning after this scene, Lily Bart describes "looking about the poor slit of a room with a renewal of physical distaste" and surveying her surroundings with a "rush of disgust" (Wharton, HM 168). Scholars have been apt to notice Lily Bart's particular passion for aesthetics—Merish going to far as to say that "Lily Bart's passion for men is much less convincingly rendered than her passion for things" (324). With this in mind, it would be difficult to imagine Lily desiring someone whose things she so abhors. Because of this, though Lily is shown to be a character in a queer position, Champion's reading of Lily as having a queer sexual encounter is slightly less compelling. Though Lily can certainly be read as queer, the actualization of queer sexual feeling does not seem to be found in the language of the text. This testifies to a reading of Lily as queer in some ways and not in others, which leaves her susceptible to the pressures of heteronormativity, imposed upon her by Selden, which kill her. This tension—between Lily Bart's queer positionality and her lack of a realized queer sexuality, allows us to read Lily the way Wagner does, in her focus on "The Conventional *and* the Queer" in *The House of Mirth*. In practice, this looks like "read[ing] past heteronormative impulses by investigating the convergence of conventionality and queerness" (116).

The Straightening of Lily Bart

However, after Lily and Selden's shared moment of queer vision and possibility, Selden shatters this vision, by beginning to think of Lily Bart as marriageable. This, in Ahmed's words, has the effect of "orienting" their relationship around straightness, curtailing the queer vision which enriched their relationship with possibility. After the tableau vivant, Lily believes that Selden seriously proposes to her through his assertion that "'The only way I can help you is by loving you'" (Wharton, HM 138). After this moment, Selden writes a letter to Lily requesting a meeting, and spends his time "thinking with intensity of Lily Bart" (Wharton, HM 151). In this bout of pondering, he contemplates how "he was paying up, as there had always been a chance of his having to pay up, on the voluntary exclusions of his past. He had meant to keep free from permanent ties" (Wharton, HM 151). After the tableau vivant, when he thinks of Lily, he is unable to separate his feelings for her with "permanent ties," seeming to imply thoughts of marrying her and how he is unable to think of her in any other way. This idea of marriage is only furthered by his thought that "he was paying up...on the voluntary exclusions of his past." In this line, Selden seems almost like a groom reminiscing about his time as a bachelor. The word "bachelor" itself is one Selden is often associated with, given his residence at the Benedick, which Rosedale tells readers is quite literally "an old word for bachelor" (Wharton, HM 15). He configures his feelings toward Lily Bart as repentance for his indiscretions as a bachelor, portraying Lily Bart as the woman who will turn him into an honest man by becoming his wife.

As he continues to day dream about Lily Bart, Selden goes on to explicitly name the idea of marriage: "There had been a germ of truth in his declaration to Gerty Farish that he had never wanted to marry a 'nice' girl: the adjective connoting...certain utilitarian qualities which are apt

to preclude the luxury of charm” (Wharton, HM 152). This passage ties back to the beginning of the novel, where Lily contrasts herself with Gerty Ferish in conversation with Selden, through her assertion that “[Gerty] likes being good, and I like being happy” (Wharton, HM 7). This seems to intimate Lily to be the charming, rather than simply nice or good, woman that Selden aspires to marry. However, there is a notable distinction between the idea of being “happy” and “charming”—being “charming” is a quality which is oriented toward others, as it necessitates being perceived as charming by others. Happiness, on the other hand, is more about self-satisfaction. Where Selden grows to see Lily as the “charming” alternative to the “nice girl” he doesn’t want to marry, he negates Lily’s intended meaning—not to be good or charming *to him* but to be happy on her own terms. Such a desire to be happy implies an independence from gendered expectations which Selden attempts to impose upon Lily, further testifying to Lily’s resistance to expectation.

Selden’s desire to marry Lily is further staged via the narrative’s divulgence into the story of Selden’s upbringing, paying particular attention to his mother, who is also characterized as being “charming” in spite of their family’s lack of wealth (Wharton, HM 152). In preceding from marriage to Selden’s family, the narrative seems to trace the linear progression of marriage and childrearing. And through drawing this parallel between Lily and Selden’s mother, the text intimates Selden’s desire for Lily to take the place of his mother—to create the family dynamic he experienced as a child anew. This reading is only further proven by the fact that “many of Selden’s friends would have called his parents poor” (Wharton, HM 152). Lily Bart would need to give up her aspirations of wealth to marry Selden, to be considered poor within her social circle. Selden’s desire for Lily to make this sacrifice by deciding to marry him would further recreate Selden’s childhood family dynamic. Selden’s critical misstep, though, is assuming Lily

would slip into this role of his mother so easily, to be the kind of person who aspires to be charming rather than happy, who is content to “wear[] old velvet as if it were new,” the way Selden’s mother did (Wharton, HM 152). Where Selden fantasizes about marrying Lily and turning her into his mother, Lily contemplates Selden’s supposed marriage proposal much more bluntly. “Her first movement was one of annoyance: this unforeseen act of Selden’s added another complication to life...Did he really mean to ask her to marry him?” (Wharton, HM 139). Rather than viewing Selden’s potential proposal as romantic, Lily sees it as “another complication to life,” an inconvenience more so than anything else. In such a view point, Lily continues to reject orienting her feelings for Selden around heteronormative marriage.

Lily does not think of marrying Selden as a possibility. “Since she could not marry him, it would be kinder to him, as well as easier for herself, to write amicably evading his request to see her” (Wharton, HM 139). The word choice of “since” implies that the impossibility of their marriage is a given to Lily. However, her certainty regarding their inability to marry doesn’t preclude Lily from considering Selden with fondness, thinking to herself that “nothing was as sweet as the sense of her power over him” (Wharton, HM 139). Lily is able to hold in tension that she can enjoy someone’s company, perhaps even romantically, and not marry them. Selden, by contrast, is unable to do this, as “he could vividly conceive of a love which should broaden and deepen till it became the central fact of life. What he could not accept...was the makeshift alternative of a relation that should be less than this” (Wharton HM 153). While Lily is able to separate connection from marriage, Selden cannot accept a love that is not the “central fact of life.” This language of centrality seems to preclude the possibility of a love which is not able to be visible of centralized, i.e. a love that evades expectations of marriage, family, and other norms

of the time. In this, centrality implies a more traditional, heteronormative form of love, one which directly contrasts with the outsider positionality of the “alternative” or queer love.

Further, Selden’s shift in seeing Lily as marriageable simultaneously strips their relationship of the egalitarian quality of being “adventurous children” in kinship, “discover[ing] a new world” together. Instead, he begins to see Lily as existing to support him, performing the gendered labor of bolstering his perspective, completing him, rather than holding her own individual beliefs. “Selden was in the state of impassioned self-absorption that the first surrender to love produces. His craving was for the companionship of one whose point of view should justify his own, who should confirm, by deliberate observation, the truth to which his intuitions had leaped” (Wharton, HM 153). He also imagines rescuing Lily with greater fervor than any prior passages have suggested, enforcing gendered expectations upon her as he does so:

“Well—what had brought him there but the quest of her? It was her element, not his. But he would lift her out of it, take her beyond! That BEYOND! on her letter was like a cry for rescue. He knew that Perseus's task is not done when he has loosed Andromeda's chains, for her limbs are numb with bondage, and she cannot rise and walk, but clings to him with dragging arms as he beats back to land with his burden. Well, he had strength for both—it was her weakness which had put the strength in him. It was not, alas, a clean rush of waves they had to win through, but a clogging morass of old associations and habits, and for the moment its vapours were in his throat. But he would see clearer, breathe freer in her presence: she was at once the dead weight at his breast and the spar which should float them to safety. He smiled at the whirl of metaphor with which he was trying to build up a defence against the influences of the last hour. It was pitiable that he, who knew the mixed motives on which social judgments depend, should still feel himself so swayed by them. How could he lift Lily to a freer vision of life, if his own view of her was to be coloured by any mind in which he saw her reflected?”

Here Selden likens himself to Perseus and Lily to Andromeda, mythologizing himself as a hero and Lily to the beautiful but defenseless Andromeda, in need of his rescue. Such a portrait entirely deprives Lily of agency, fetishizing the idea of her feminine “weakness.” Moreover, this weakness is once again figured as a way for him to build himself up: “it was her weakness which had put the strength in him” and because of her “he would see clearer, breathe freer in her

presence.” Lily is portrayed entirely in relation to what she can do for Selden, how she can make him better. This speech also indicates his belief that he knows Lily better than she knows herself, describing the seal of her letters as “a cry for rescue” and describing carrying her back to shore unwillingly, because she is not capable of doing so herself, “for her limbs are numb with bondage, and she cannot rise to walk, but clings to him with dragging arms as he beats back to land with his burden.” This metaphor is also significant in how the story of Perseus and Andromeda hinges on their being married: Perseus only goes to save Andromeda once he receives her hand in marriage from her parents (Gardner Museum). To save Lily, to bring her “to a freer vision of life,” Selden implies that he must possess Lily in marriage first. But what he views as freedom for Lily Bart is an idea of her that he has created in his mind which strips her of her agency and binds her to sexist and heteronormative understandings of womanhood which fulfill his understandings of “Beyond!” but fail to even consider her meaning, her vision.

Ultimately, Lily loses her vision in adhering to this understanding of herself as Andromeda—in taking on the straightened version of herself who Selden wills into being, a Lily Bart who is entirely reliant on him. She affirms this reliance on him and his perceptions in her final conversation in Selden’s apartment. “Some women are strong enough to be good by themselves, but I needed the help of your belief in me” (Wharton, HM 308). This language of aspiring to “be good” is a sharp departure from Lily’s hope at the beginning of the novel: to be happy. Though the ideal of “be[ing] good” might be read as a commitment to moral virtue which supersedes the society Lily exists in, it can also be read as a commitment to what is proper, signaling a shift on Lily’s part towards conforming to ideals of conventionality over her own needs. In this way, this shift also signals a reorientation toward gendered expectations of female “goodness” and the heteronormativity implied in this ideal. Lily then adds that her inadequacy at

“be[ing] good” stems from something inherent to her, the fact that she is “a very useless person” (Wharton, HM 306). While Lily believes that this uselessness is innate to her, the text seems to suggest an alternative reading: that it has been willed into being by Selden’s vision of her. Lily can only fulfill Selden’s vision of her as Andromeda if she is helpless, but in her moments of helplessness, Selden never comes to rescue her—he leaves for Monte Carlo, or watches from afar, or fails to communicate before it is too late. In response to Lily’s burst of emotion, Selden is characterized as holding “an expression still untinged by personal emotion, but filled with a gentle understanding” (Wharton, HM 307). This reaction, though cruel and depersonalized, is in line with the way Selden has envisioned Lily. Selden’s feelings towards Lily have drifted away from the domain of the “personal” as they are rooted in the creation of the ideal woman, the ideal wife, signaling an attempt to straighten Lily to fit into a pre-determined role

In lieu of Selden’s love, Lily imagines her own life, she sees that all she has “to look forward to [is] a shabby, anxious middle-age” all the while feeling “an inner destitution...the clutch of solitude at her heart” (Wharton, HM 318-9). She sees that Nettie Struther on the other hand, is able to build a life that “had the frail audacious permanence of a bird’s nest built on the edge of a cliff—a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss” (Wharton, HM 320). Where Lily sees no way out of the miserable conditions of her life, Nettie provides an alternative: a life marred by poverty, with “scant margin for possibilities of sickness or mischance” (Wharton, HM 319), but one where she is able to survive the precarity of her situation and find some tenuous sense of “safe[ty].” Lily identifies what she believes is the key distinction between her and Nettie Struther: “Lily remembered Nettie’s words: *I knew he knew about me*. Her husband’s faith in her had made her renewal possible—it is so easy for a woman to become what the man she loves believes her to

be! Well—Selden had twice been ready to stake his faith on Lily Bart; but the third trial had been too severe for his endurance” (Wharton, HM 320). What Lily believes is the key difference between herself and Nettie is that Nettie has her husband’s faith, where Lily has lost Selden’s. Lily generalizes this experience, configuring this belief in gendered and heteronormative terms: “the man” who “a woman” loves is able to will her into becoming what he “believes her to be.” Such a configuration strips the female subject agency in becoming on her own terms and implies a particular relationship between heterosexual love and a woman’s ability to exist. Such a configuration mimics Selden’s understanding of Lily in his Andromeda metaphor, indicating Lily’s internalization of Selden’s vision of her. The irony here is that Lily has become what Selden “believes her to be” in becoming reliant on him, in need of his love and rescue to survive. Though what Lily longs for is a “faith in her” that might make “renewal possible,” she only contemplates this faith through the framework of heterosexual love. In losing Selden’s love and faith, Lily thus grows to believe that this “renewal” is not possible for her, precluding the possibility of finding this faith outside the framework of heteronormative romance, or simply in another person or relationship.

But as the text concludes, Lily doesn’t just mourn the loss of Selden’s love in her life. She reflects on the lack of love in her life more generally, considering her upbringing with newfound clarity, “no centre of early pieties...to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others” that would “broaden[] and deepen[] the individual existence [by] attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving” (319). What Lily yearns for more than anything else at the text’s close, is not so much Selden specifically as it is human connection and shared understanding—love in its many potential forms. She thinks back on the story of her family, where her mother only seemed to

value her father for material wealth. The text goes so far as to say “he no longer counted” to his wife “when he ceased to fulfill his purpose,” (33). At the text’s close, Lily doesn’t wish that she married Selden, or that she was born rich, but that she was born in a house with love. Her reflections are not so tied to the idea of any one person, but the pattern made by the many people whom have failed to love or teach Lily to love, who have instead held each other to gendered, heteronormative expectations.

Where Lily errs is in her belief that this love can only be found in Selden. In crafting a life with his straightened vision of her in mind, orienting herself around being Selden’s Andromeda, she has precluded herself from the ability to see a vision of her life where Selden’s love is replaced by love in its many potential forms. This idea that she could’ve found this love in another form is furthered in the text’s realization that Lily’s so-called “mating-instinct” was about more than just wealth or even Selden. “Such a vision of the solidarity of life had never before come to Lily. She had a premonition of it in the blind motions of her mating-instinct; but they had been checked by the disintegrating influences of the life about her” (Wharton, HM 319). Though Lily herself does not realize this, “the blind motions of her mating-instinct” were her efforts, “blind” as they may be, to combat “the solidarity of life.” Lily has taken a general desire for love and understanding and oriented it around Selden—an orientation which proves fatal for Lily Bart.

The last few pages of *The House of Mirth* are characterized by Lily’s loss of vision: an emptiness where there was once presence, enacting the emptiness of becoming “the ideal woman” if there is no man to be the ideal woman *for*. On the night before her death, Lily thinks about who she was two years prior, the plans she once had for her life: “Then she had been planning to marry Percy Gryce—what was it she was planning now?” (Wharton, HM 306).

Where her life was once “vacuous” but structured by routine and the potential for marriage, now her life is both empty and has no structure (Wharton, HM 55). There is nothing for her to do next. This sentiment continues and intensifies as Lily nears sleep (and death): “But the terrible silence and emptiness seemed to symbolize her future—she felt as though the house, the street, the world were all empty, and she alone left sentient in a lifeless universe” (Wharton, HM 321). Such an emptiness makes sense in light of Selden’s vision of Lily—his vision of the ideal, heteronormative straight woman has no reason to exist if she is not to be married to Selden, not able to “justify” his point of view and “confirm” truths he has already come to. Without his ideal to serve, Lily is given no function of her own. As she drifts into oblivion, Lily Bart imagines cradling Nettie Struther’s baby in her arms. This image serves a dual function: it marks the vision of a motherhood Lily will never have, one she has never expressed interest in before the final pages of the text, seeming to suggest that it is a vision which has been forced upon her by gendered expectations. But this image also provides a vision of Lily finding the love she has never known in her lifetime through the love of another person’s child, suggesting that the love Lily yearns for doesn’t need to come from Selden or even a child of her own.

Lily’s death is also, it seems, partially motivated by the fear that she will not be able to, in life, break or queer the patterns of her life: “Then there was the cheque in her desk, for instance—she meant to use it paying her debt to Trenor; but she foresaw that when the morning came she would put off doing so, would slip into gradual tolerance of the debt. The thought terrified her—she dreaded to fall from the height of her last moment with Lawrence Selden. But...she could feel the countless hands of habit dragging her back with some fresh compromise with fate” (Wharton, HM 321). This loss of an ability to break with the old, to create queer possibility, is a stark testament to how Lily Bart has been straightened. Instead of queering this

pattern, of attempting to discover a new world outside her debt and even Selden, Lily thinks to herself: “If only life could end now—end on this tragic yet sweet vision of lost possibilities, which gave her a sense of kinship with all the loving and foregoing in the world!” (Wharton, HM 321). She is not able to break the pattern and move forward, to orient herself around something which is not Selden’s love or its loss. Instead, Lily Bart turns back to a vision of what has been lost and allows herself to be straightened to death.

While struggling to process Lily’s death, Selden asserts that perhaps it was for the best that he and Lily never became a couple, for this way, their love “had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives” (329). But one wonders if things could have been different. “The ruin of their lives” might’ve been preventable—their love might’ve prevented it. And what new world could’ve been created out of their queer vision? This question is ambiguously answered in Virginia Woolf’s text *To the Lighthouse*, through Lily Briscoe’s triumphant vision which closes the text.

V. Lily Briscoe & the Fulfillment of Queer Vision

Queering Lily Briscoe

Similar to Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, Lily Briscoe occupies a queer positionality throughout *To the Lighthouse*. This positionality is indicated even just from descriptions of Lily Briscoe’s physical appearance. Mrs. Ramsay depicts how: “Lily’s charm was her Chinese eyes, aslant in her white, puckered little face, but it would take a clever man to see it” (Woolf, TL 26). Continued descriptions of Lily’s “Chinese eyes” (also found on pages 17, 91 and 104) make her an outsider to gendered and racialized beauty standards, invoking Ahmed’s understanding of queer outsidership. Her eyes’ description as being “aslant” also seem to visually render Ahmed’s

notion of the “queer slant” on Lily Briscoe. Mrs. Ramsay worries that such features will make Lily unmarriageable via “comparing her with Minta,” who in this moment of the text, has just become engaged: “She faded under Minta’s glow; became more inconspicuous than ever, in her little grey dress with her little puckered face and her little Chinese eyes. Everything about her was so small” (Woolf, TL 104). This emphasis of Lily Briscoe’s smallness, each of her features being described as “little” seems to further visualize Lily as queer—working under Sara Ahmed’s understanding that “heterosexuality is not then simply an orientation toward others, it is also something that we are oriented around” (91). Queerness works around heterosexuality to occupy space, forcing it into slants or margins, making queerness a spatially small thing compared to the overwhelming influence of heterosexuality around it. Lily’s association with “little”-ness and “slant”-ness render Lily visually queer—both in how her appearance exists outside normative Western beauty standards and in its tether to Sara Ahmed’s notion of the queer slant.

Mrs. Ramsay also worries about some intangible quality not tethered to appearance which will keep Lily from heterosexual marriage: “There was in Lily a thread of something; something of her own which Mrs. Ramsay liked very much indeed, but no man would, she feared” (Woolf, TL 104). This “thread” can be read as queerness, in that it is something that “Mrs. Ramsay liked very much indeed,” or some intangible quality which caters to a female subject without appealing to men. This reading of the “thread” as a metaphor for queerness is also suggestive in thread’s relationship to being twisted via knitting or sewing, the former of these being an activity Mrs. Ramsay is often associated with throughout the text. In tracing the etymology of the word “queer” with the verb “to twist,” Ahmed indicates queerness’ role as a

spatial term for a “twisted sexuality” (67). By metaphorizing this intangible quality as a thread, which functionally exists to be twisted, Mrs. Ramsay implicitly associates Lily with queerness.

Lily Briscoe also expresses an admiration and love for Mrs. Ramsay which can be read as a direct indication of queer romance and sexuality. Lily thinks of Mrs. Ramsay’s appearance in highly complimentary terms considering her as “unquestionably one of the loveliest people” (Woolf, TL 49). Lily Briscoe’s love for Mrs. Ramsay is most directly expressed when Lily Briscoe describes that she had to “control her impulse to fling herself...at Mrs. Ramsay’s knee and say to her—but what could one say to her? ‘I’m in love with you?’ No, that was not true. ‘I’m in love with this all,’ waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children” (Woolf, TL 19). This outcry is a direct proclamation of Lily’s love for Mrs. Ramsay. The language of wanting to “fling herself” toward Mrs. Ramsay indicates a love-sick desperation and passion which clearly renders Lily’s queer love for Mrs. Ramsay.

At the same time, this sentiment is seemingly undercut by the notion that Lily’s revision to this idea seconds later: “No, that was not true.” Lily then reconfigures the phrase to be: “I’m in love with this all.” While this might be read as a dismissal of feeling, it is important to note that Mrs. Ramsay would still be included in this understanding of “this all”—that it does not entirely remove her as subject of Lily’s love. Moreover, Lily Briscoe’s stated love for not just Mrs. Ramsay but the entire world Mrs. Ramsay has created could indicate a deeper show of love than simply expressing love for Mrs. Ramsay the person. Throughout *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay tasks herself with the role of “merging and flowing and creating” (Woolf, TL 83). Mrs. Ramsay notes in particular how in the dinner party scene, before this process of merging occurs: “The room (she looked round it) was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere. She forebore to look at Mr. Tansley. Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate” (Woolf, TL 83).

This notion of the separation between people is a source of despair for Mrs. Ramsay—a thought akin to her lament that her home is “shabby,” the world she has built being one without “beauty.” With this in mind, “this all” can be read as an extension of Mrs. Ramsay, the fruit of her labors of bringing “separate” people together. Lily’s love for “this all” and her refusal to separate Mrs. Ramsay from the social world she strives to create can be read as a further testament to her passion for Mrs. Ramsay (Woolf, TL 83).

It is fair to say, though, that Lily Briscoe’s attraction to Mrs. Ramsay is depicted in a roundabout way. The indirectness with which Woolf renders what could very well be queer sexual attraction is explained in her speech “Professions for Women,” where she details the phantoms which haunt women writers from being able to write uninhibitedly. In this speech, given four years after the publication of *To the Lighthouse*, she describes an “experience that I believe to be far commoner with women writers than with men” of writing “something about the body” and fearing how this will be perceived by men (Woolf, *Professions for Women* 5).

“The line raced through the girl's fingers. Her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. And then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. The girl was roused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of--what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness” (Woolf, *Professions for Women* 5).

If Woolf fears that writing about female sexuality will rouse such a reaction in male readers, one can only imagine the kind of reaction writing about queer female sexuality might elicit. Woolf’s fear of discussing female sexuality explains the elliptical way in which Lily’s desire for Mrs. Ramsay is rendered and leaves space for Lily Briscoe’s feelings toward Mrs. Ramsay to be that of queer love and queer sexuality.

And much like Lily Bart, Lily Briscoe similarly indicates a resistance to the expectations of heterosexual marriage. These pressures are directly placed onto Lily by the exacting force of Mrs. Ramsay, who actively works throughout the text to ensure Lily marries William Bankes. Mrs. Ramsay tries to matchmake Lily Briscoe with William Bankes, insisting that “William must marry Lily” because “he cared...He was not ‘in love’ of course; it was one of those unclassified affections of which there are so many” (Woolf, TL 104). In other words, Mrs. Ramsay believes they must be married not because they are particularly enamored of each other, but because they care enough about each other to function as a married couple. It is not so much that they must marry *each other*; it is rather that “people must marry; people must have children” on a more general level (Woolf, TL 60). In this assertion, Mrs. Ramsay forces the heteronormative expectation of marriage onto Lily for the purpose of simply fulfilling this expectation. Ramsay persists that “there could be no disputing this: an unmarried woman has missed the best of life” (Woolf, TL 49). Lily, however, is unconvinced. Though the pressures of marriage do weigh on her, causing her to see her own desires as “virginal” Lily continues to criticize Mrs. Ramsay’s matchmaking, conceiving it as Mrs. Ramsay’s way of “[leading] her victims, Lily thought, down the altar” (Woolf, TL 50; 101). In spite of Mrs. Ramsay’s insistence upon her marriage, Lily “urge[s] her own exemption from the universal law” and “laugh[s] almost hysterically at the thought of Mrs. Ramsay presiding with immutable claim over destinies which she completely failed to understand” (Woolf, TL 50). Lily resists the thought that “the universal law” of marriage must be her destiny and imagines a destiny outside of such parameters. In this, Lily indicates the generative nature of her queer positionality—how it empowers her to see beyond what is “the universal law” and begin to imagine and shape her own destiny.

But Lily is not just a queer visionary in her rejection of patriarchal norms: Lily's rejection of patriarchal norms and traditional ways of seeing is directly staged in her art, making her art a manifestation of her queer vision. The piece Lily dedicates her summers to is something relational, imagining an oft revered subject of mother and son with her new artistic vision, one which, in Bankes' words, renders "objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty...to a purple shadow without irreverence" (Woolf, TL 52). Where Bankes is supportive but lacking understanding, Lily explains a vision of her work which attempts to convey the relation between the two subjects rather than trying to mimic the physical qualities of the subjects exactly: "But the picture was not of them, she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other senses too in which one might reverence them. By a shadow here and a light there, for instance...A light here required a shadow there" (Woolf, TL 52-3). Lily clearly distinguishes her vision from "his sense"—seeming to denote her work as outside Bankes' purview, which is indicative of a more traditional view of what art should do. This traditional view is also equated with masculine traditions, a point which is set up most subtly in Lily's word choice of "his sense," gendering Bankes' understanding of art. But Lily's work is more interested in depicting the relationship between her two subjects, showing their joining together to create a sense of harmony: "A light here required a shadow there." Lily's understanding of art lies outside this boundary, so much so that it is one Bankes has never thought of before: "The question being one of the relations of masses, of lights and shadows, which, to be honest, he had never considered before" (Woolf, TL 53). In this positionality of being outside "his sense," Lily Briscoe's art and the vision which inspires it is thus shown to be queer.

This notion that Lily's art is connected to her queerness, and her queerness to her vision, is also articulated in "Entering a Lesbian Field of Vision" by Lise Weil. Weil's reading argues

that *To the Lighthouse* “creates a lesbian field of vision” and “moves the reader into this perceptual field” through the character of Lily Briscoe (241). Weil performs a reading of the novel which draws upon lesbian thinkers “In whose work ‘lesbian’ is associated primarily with a certain kind of vision of attention” (241). Weil argues that the novel “recapitulates the perceptual shift that a woman experiences when she begins to see the lies of patriarchal myth, to see what she had mistaken for reality itself was only one possible version of it—a version that made it all but impossible for her to discover the truths she is now able to recognize as her own” (242). In other words, Lily’s story in *To the Lighthouse* is not just that of having an artistic vision, but one of becoming “by virtue of her focus, her attention, her attachment...disloyal to phallogentric reality” (Weil 242). In Weil’s reading, such a journey allows Lily “to see clearly and fully not only Mrs. Ramsay, but everything that had once overwhelmed her about the Ramsays and their way of life, all that had been included in the sweep of her hand at the beginning of the novel when she said, ‘I’m in love with this all...’” (Weil 242). More specifically, it empowers Lily to ask: “What does it mean, what can it mean?” and reorient herself “from the family romance of ‘The Window’ to her own creative work” (Weil 245; TL 145).

How Does Lily Briscoe Survive?

Lily Briscoe herself admits though, that her ability to resist marriage, and in this, gendered and heteronormative expectations, is tenuous: “She had only escaped by the skin of her teeth though, she thought. She had been looking at the table cloth, and it had flashed upon her that she would move the tree to the middle, and never need marry anybody, and she had felt an enormous exultation” (Wharton, TL 176). In “How Virginia Woolf Reimagines Edith Wharton’s Lily Bart in ‘Mrs. Dalloway,’” Kathy Fedorko argues that Virginia Woolf drew inspiration from her

reading of *The House of Mirth* to create the character of Clarissa Dalloway. Noting the similarities between the two texts, Fedorko argues that “In *Mrs. Dalloway*...[Woolf] imagines her own script for a wiser, more mature, more aware version of Lily Bart who also shares many of Lily’s same vulnerabilities” (12). The main point of departure that Fedorko identifies between the two texts is their ending: “While society destroys Lily Bart, however, Clarissa Dalloway finds a way to live a joyful life despite the system” (Fedorko 12). Perhaps a similar conclusion can be drawn between *To the Lighthouse* and *The House of Mirth*. In her review of *The House of Mirth*, Woolf herself declares that “There is no doubt that Mrs Wharton has so illuminated The House of Mirth for us that we shall not soon forget it.” Perhaps, true to her own words, Woolf “ha[s] not forgotten *The House of Mirth*” (Fedorko 11). Perhaps instead, she offers a reimagining of Lily Bart through Lily Briscoe, staging what Lily Bart’s unfulfilled queer vision might look like if it had been fulfilled, if Lily Bart’s efforts of resistance had been able to be sustained.

Unlike Fedorko’s argument about Clarissa and Lily Bart, the differences between Lily Bart and Lily Briscoe are not exclusively distinctions in character but can also be seen as differences in time period. Lily Briscoe’s existence in what Woolf characterizes in “Character in Fiction” as the ever-shifting world of 1910 perhaps offers Lily Briscoe opportunities to defy gender and sexuality norms that Lily Bart simply does not have access to. “On or about 1910, human character changed” (Woolf, *Essays Vol. Three* 421). Extrapolating on this claim, Woolf explains: “All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in...literature” (Woolf, *Essays Vol. Three* 422). Woolf’s rewriting of Lily Bart’s tragedy into Lily Briscoe’s triumph can thus be read as “a change in...literature” appropriate for the world post-1910. In “Character in Fiction,” Woolf proves the capacity of humanity to change

(and stages that this change has already begun!) by exploring two literary examples having to do with gender. “Read the *Agamemnon*, and see whether, in process of time, your sympathies are not almost entirely with Clytemnestra. Or consider the married life of the Carlyles, and bewail the waste, the futility, for him and for her, of the horrible domestic tradition which made it seemly for a woman of genius to spend her time chasing beetles, scouring saucepans, instead of writing books” (Woolf, *Essays Vol. Three* 422). Where Clytemnestra was once something of a villain figure in the story of Agamemnon, in 1910 she is a woman who has been wronged by Agamemnon and whose being wronged is of consequence to a modern reader. Now the fact that Jane Welsh Carlyle was forced into domestic life instead of becoming an author herself can be read as a “waste” rather than simply the way of the world. In other words, the world Lily Briscoe is creating art in is one with the capacity to change, one which has already begun to change (Yardumian, “A Place in the Universe” 11-12).

Weil locates the “Time Passes” section as the site of this shift in gendered expectations. In the section which precedes “Time Passes,” entitled “The Window,” Weil perceives there to be “an archetypal grandeur to most of the characters and events in ‘The Window’ that suggests their inevitability and universality”—from Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s rendering as “the symbols of marriage, husband and wife” to the fact that “Lily’s abstract rendering of [Mrs. Ramsay and James] smacks of irreverence” (Weil 243; TL 92). “Time Passes,” however, marks a stark departure from this sense of inevitability: “‘Time Passes’ shows us the precariousness of civilized structures, their vulnerability to the forces of corrosion, decay, and disintegration” (Weil 243). Weil then interprets that “the mirror that breaks in this section where all fixed meanings, collapse, is the mirror of patriarchal realism, of a reality that has imposed itself as ‘Reality.’ Also evoked here is the passage in *A Room of One’s Own* where Woolf describes

women as reflecting men back to themselves at twice their natural size” (Weil 244). The shift which occurs in “Time Passes,” which enables the expansion of Lily’s field of vision, is one of gendered expectations beginning to shift.

This notion is supported by the other deaths in “Time Passes:” those of Andrew and Prue. Prue is generally associated with traditional femininity throughout “The Window” section of *To the Lighthouse*. Recalling memories of Prue, Lily Briscoe reflects that at dinner parties Prue always “sat in the middle between brothers and sisters, always occupied, it seemed, seeing that nothing went wrong so she scarcely spoke herself. How Prue would’ve blamed herself for that earwig in the milk!” (Woolf, TL 200). Taking on the feminine role of mediator and hostess, Prue is so occupied with taking care of others and tending to the party that she “scarcely spoke herself” and “would’ve blamed herself for” anything that went wrong. In this, Prue seems to disappear into the figure of the proper hostess. Prue is continually associated with caretaking, as if foreshadowing her eventual role as a doting mother, in Mrs. Ramsay’s characterization of Prue as “a perfect angel with the others” (Woolf, TL 58). Prue is also continually associated with the feminine ideal of beauty—in this same sentence, Mrs. Ramsay notes how Prue “took one’s breath away with her beauty” (Woolf, TL 58). Mr. Bankes similarly associates Prue with the beauty of traditional femininity in the private nicknames he gives the Ramsay children—“Prue the Fair” (Woolf, TL 22). Prue is similarly described as “beautiful” in the discussion of her marriage, a passage just a page prior to her death in “Time Passes” (Woolf, TL 131). Prue’s death is then revealed and explained: “Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth” (Woolf, TL 132). Dying in “childbirth” is a particularly gendered death, in its association with motherhood and pregnancy. Prue’s association with feminine ideals—

particularly in the moment of her death—allows us to read her death as a metaphor for the death of traditional femininity.

Such an argument can also be made via the death of Andrew: “Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay” (Woolf, TL 133). His death alongside other “young men,” presumptively as a soldier, posits his death as a gendered one as well. This especially rings true in light of Woolf’s assertion in *Three Guineas* that war is gendered: “to fight has always been the man’s habit, not the woman’s...Scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman’s rifle; the vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you, not by us” (Woolf, *Three Guineas* 6). Similar to Prue, Andrew’s death thus signals the death of traditional masculinity. This death of traditional femininity and masculinity can be read as part of the shift in human relations which Woolf traces to 1910. In light of this shift in gender norms, Weil theorizes that “The crises of ‘Time Passes’ can be seen not as terminal but as generative. The naked world exposed here, the shattering of preconceived meanings, creates a space where new questions and answers can take root; from this chaos, new shapes can be found and given” (245).

But just time alone does not account for Lily Briscoe being saved from Lily Bart’s fate—especially in how the pressures Lily Bart faces are shown to largely still be present in Lily Briscoe’s life. What prevents Lily Briscoe from Lily Bart’s fate, beyond just the passage of time, is her art. Lily’s art functions as a way to resist gender norms and find new meaning to her life outside the realm of gendered and heteronormative expectations. In lieu of caving to Mrs. Ramsay’s pressure to marry, Lily thinks of “her father; her home; even, had she dared to say it, her painting” and “gathering a desperate courage she would urge her own exemption from the universal law; plead for it; she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself” (Woolf, TL 50). Lily’s

passion for painting allows her to gather this “desperate courage” and “urge her own exemption from the universal law”—in other words, to take ownership over her own fate, to separate herself from “universal law” (which seems to be another way of saying, gendered expectations).

Painting is a space where Lily seeks to reject other gendered expectations—that “women can’t write, women can’t paint” (Woolf, TL 86). Painting providing a space of resistance for Lily to pursue what she loves and fly in the face of norms about who should be allowed to create.

Painting makes resistance to gendered expectations tangible, an action Lily takes each day through picking up her paint brush. Such a practice might allow her to store up enough courage, enough resolve, to resist the pressures of marriage, where others might not have the reserves, this daily practice of defiance, to summon such courage.

Lily Briscoe’s art gives her something tangible to center her life upon which is not marriage. Where Lily Bart sees her life without Selden as “empty,” Lily Briscoe is able to fill the space which marriage or heteronormative love might take up with her art. Contemplating William Bankes and how Mrs. Ramsay spends time “pitying” him (presumptively for not being married), Lily Briscoe insists, “He is not in the least bit pitiable. He has his work, Lily said to herself. She remembered, all of a sudden as if she had found a treasure, that she had her work. In a flash she saw her picture, and thought, Yes I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid that awkward space” (Woolf, TL 84). Her work is a “treasure” filling her life with joy and giving her something to fixate on, giving her something to envision which is not absence.

Lily’s art also allows her to take on a vision of love which does not center heteronormativity or marriage. Lily is able to see Mr. Bankes’ love for Mrs. Ramsay and consider it “like the love which mathematicians bear their symbols, or poets their phrases, was meant to be spread over the world and become part of the human gain” (Woolf, TL 47). The

vision of love art gives her, a vision which is likely akin to a poet with a passion for their phrases, allows her to see Mr. Bankes' love for Mrs. Ramsay as something collective, something "part of the human gain"—in other words, something she too can be a part of. His passion for Mrs. Ramsay is something she can take "shelter" in and allows her to "feel herself praised." Moreover, by sharing her art with Mr. Bankes, Lily is able to connect with Bankes without marrying him. In looking at her work together, Lily notes how "This man had shared with her something profoundly intimate" (Woolf, TL 53). Though Lily does not choose to marry William Bankes, this does not mean that she and Bankes do not have a sense of love and connection. Lily herself reflects on their connection in Part III, coming to the realization that: "One could talk of painting then seriously to a man. Indeed, his friendship had been one of the pleasures of her life. She loved William Bankes" (Woolf, TL 176). Their shared interest in painting allows Lily to be "intimate" with Mr. Bankes. In this way, Lily is able to find a love for Mr. Bankes which is not fostered through marriage but through friendship. This love outside the bounds of heteronormative and gendered expectations allows Lily to find fulfillment through human connection without sacrificing her love of independence and painting in the process.

VI. Conclusion

Reading these two unlikely authors together shows how generative such unexpected readings can be, how they enable us to see widely studied texts in a new light. Such a reading allows us to hone in on Lily Bart's queerness in *The House of Mirth* in ways reading the text in isolation might not prove obvious and offers a potential understanding of Edith Wharton's subtle influence on Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*, making a case for the further study of Wharton and Woolf together. But most powerfully, reading these texts together highlights a

shared desire between heroines to combat the gendered and heteronormative expectations of their respective times and cultures, indicating how aspirations of a world “Beyond!” the confines of the world we currently live in exist across time and the Atlantic. These spaces of imagining, these queer visions, are a testament to the way women and queer people have challenged their marginality and sought more for themselves. Inconclusive as these visions might be, the possibility for hope and change they offer is a powerful one indeed.

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