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"This isn't exactly a ghost story": Edith Wharton and Parodic Gothic

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Edith Wharton's ghost stories[1] have usually been seen as skilful appropriations of the Gothic that allowed her, in Kathy Fedorko's words, to dramatise "the conflict between male and female selves in a 'dialogue with the unconscious.'"[2] They are also vehicles through which she expresses not only her indebtedness to her precursors in the Gothic mode,[3] such as the Brontës, Nathaniel Hawthorne,[4] Robert Louis Stevenson and Sheridan Le Fanu, but also her independence from them. In this article we shall argue that some of Wharton's ghost stories contain a further dimension, beyond allusion, where

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[1] Edith Wharton, *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 252. The phrase in the title of this essay is used by the narrator of "All Souls" to describe his cousin's tale. The volume is hereafter referred to in the text as *G*.

[2] Kathy A. Fedorko, "'Forbidden Things': Gothic Confrontation with the Feminine in 'The Young Gentlemen' and 'Bewitched'," *Edith Wharton Review*, 1 (spring 1994), 3. See also Allan Gardner Smith, "Edith Wharton and the Ghost Story," *Women and Literature*, 1 (1980), 149–59.

[3] In the Preface to *Ghosts*, the volume of her collected ghost stories published just after her death in 1937, Wharton cites as important precursors, Robert Louis Stevens, Sheridan Le Fanu, Fitz James O'Brien, Marion Crawford and Henry James (*G* 3). She dedicated the volume to Walter de la Mare, describing her own stories as "ghostly straphangers" to his work. The works of E. T. A. Hoffmann (in German) are represented in the extant books from her library and scattered throughout her writings are references to the "Contes de Perrault" (see her *A Backward Glance* [New York: 1934; London: Constable & Co., 1972], 33), the brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen.

[4] Cf. Janet Beer: "Hawthorne is the figure behind much of Wharton's New England writing … This is particularly the case in the two stories amongst my selection which can be classified as 'ghost' stories and which feature in the dedicated volume of supernatural tales she published in 1937." (*Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction* [Macmillan Press, 1997], 133).

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they shift into a parodic and humorous strain that enables her to engage self-reflexively with the Gothic tradition.[5] Here we define parody as a literary mode that, whilst engaging with a target text or genre, exhibits a keen sense of the comic, an acute awareness of intertextuality and an engagement with the idea of metafiction. This is a deliberately generous and inclusive definition that differs, for example, from some postmodern definitions of parody which (perhaps in an attempt to elevate its cultural function) minimise or excise the importance of comedy as an aspect of parody.[6] We would suggest, furthermore, that it differs from travesty, pastiche and satire in that travesty reduces the target text to something ludicrous, pastiche "works by imitation rather than direct transformation"[7] and satire does not necessarily engage with precursive texts. This is not to say that we see the cultural function of parody as limited and anodyne, since it is clear that it can function satirically in certain contexts. Indeed, parody's comic engagement with precursive texts not only allows an irreverent response to target works and authors, but also enables the writer, if he or she chooses, to engage critically with aspects of the contemporary world. It is thus essential to place parody within its historical and cultural moment. It is also clear that certain kinds of parody, in self-consciously foregrounding intertextuality, draw attention to writing itself, so that they offer both a reflection on fiction and the act of writing fictions. We shall argue here that several of Wharton's ghost stories are playful and skilful parodies in all these senses. We also wish to argue that this movement into parody most often occurs when the sexual appetite of women is at the heart of Wharton's concern in the narrative.

In stories such as "Miss Mary Pask" and "Bewitched," both published in the 1926 short-story collection *Here and Beyond*, and "All Souls'," published in 1937, we see a quasi-parodic appropriation of prior Gothic Anglo-American texts. This produces stories in which the idea of the supernatural – rather than the supernatural itself – is used not only to question the values at the heart of American culture and civilisation, but also to draw attention to the politics of representation and narration, issues that are never far from

[5] Jenni Dyman is one of the few critics to comment on the fact that Wharton's appropriation of the Gothic is occasionally parodic: "Set in the coastal region of Brittanny, France, where the narrator, a New York artist, has gone to paint waves, Wharton exaggerates the Gothic elements of the tale to the level of parody." *Lurking Feminism: The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996), 104. However, Dyman does not develop this insight.

[6] See Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 1995), 240, where she describes Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale as denying or underplaying the comic character of parody.

[7] Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 11.

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the surface in Wharton's work as a whole but which have an important and distinct role in her ghost stories. In "Mr. Jones," a tale published in 1928 and republished in *Ghosts* (1937), Lady Jane Lynke regards as a part of her duty in assuming responsibility for the six-hundred-year-old house, Bells, the articulation of a different kind of story. Moving from the chapel and contemplation of the tombs of her ancestors, she regards her family history as:

> A long tale, to which she was about to add another chapter, subdued and humdrum beside some of those earlier annals, yet probably freer and more varied than the unchronicled lives of the great-aunts and great-grandmothers buried there so completely that they must hardly have known when they passed from their beds to their graves. "Piled up like dead leaves," Jane thought, "layers and layers of them, to preserve something forever budding underneath." (*G* 175)

Part of Wharton's enterprise in her ghost stories is to communicate a sense of what is "forever budding underneath." In focussing on parody and appropriation it is possible to raise some productive questions about Wharton's manipulation of the Gothic, whilst suggesting, along the way, that she is a far more sophisticated writer of "ghost stories" than has previously been acknowledged.

The parodic and dialogic strain, it should be emphasised, emerges only for the reader who is able to pick up the implicit references to other Gothic texts and who is alert to the humorous baring of certain Gothic devices in some of Wharton's ghost stories. Wharton's characters and their names often echo those to be found in other Gothic works: for example, Wharton makes it inevitable that we will associate the Brand family in "Bewitched" with Hawthorne's Ethan. She frequently takes to a comic extreme the Gothic convention through which names signal the sinister nature of place; again in "Bewitched," we have Lonetop, Hemlock County and Cold Corners. Miss Mary Pask, in the story that bears her name, lives alone in a cottage "near the *Baie des Trépassés*" (*G* 132) – the Bay of the Deceased or All Souls – just in case we miss the point of the story. In this tale, weather conditions are exaggerated beyond even the usual Gothic inclemency: it is a wonder, given the "densest night," "a wet blackness impenetrable to the glimmer of our only lamp" and a "darkness" grown "three times as thick," that the nameless narrator of "Miss Mary Pask" finds his way to her cottage at all (*G* 132–33). Often Wharton takes the Gothic tale's focus on transgression and taboo to such extremes that stories hover on the cusp where the tragic becomes comic. "Bewitched," for example, is remarkable for the number of misdeeds that it presents: as Gerard M. Sweeney notes, the plot contains "domestic strife, adultery, promiscuous daughters, the murder of a daughter by her

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father, incest, necrophilia, insanity, and exorcism"[8] – to which we might add the massacre of a whole community by Indians, vampire slaying and last, but not least, the brutal murder of a pet canary! Read seriously, "Bewitched" is a rather purple tale in which the legacy of New England Puritanism tragically traps modern American consciousness between the poles of cold hypocrisy and anguished hysteria. Read comically and intertextually, however, it appears as a far more sophisticated work which engages ironically with the fictional fates of good-looking, sexually active young women like Hawthorne's Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* or Wharton's own Charity Royall in the novella of 1917, *Summer* – a text with its own claims to a Gothic genealogy. In other tales the detail of precursive Gothic texts comes back multiplied and magnified: Heathcliff murders the little dog that his pathetic and abused wife, Isabella, adores in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*; Wharton has the master of "Kerfol" murder no less than five dogs, laying all but one delicately on his wife's pillow.

Evidence of indebtedness to *Wuthering Heights* moves firmly beyond detail of plot in "Miss Mary Pask," where the Gothic elements of the novel are appropriated parodically. The ghost of Cathy is resurrected as the – in fact – undead Mary Pask, who sends the young narrator into a cold panic of nervous anxiety. The nameless narrator of the tale bears much resemblance to Brontë's Lockwood; a pretentiously sociable man, he scurries back quickly to the safety of New York, via a Swiss sanitorium, once the mysteries of rural France – like those of the Yorkshire moors – become too great to bear. The plot of the story is very simple. "Miss Mary Pask" is the sister of Grace, a friend of the narrator. She lives in Brittany, having moved there when Grace married Horace Bridgeworth. On holiday in Brittany himself, recovering from some kind of illness, the narrator decides to go to see Mary at her house by the coast. After a terrible journey he arrives, only to be seized – as he stands on the threshold – by the recollection that Mary Pask had died the previous year. However, the servant who has answered his knock at the door summons Mary Pask to see him; she duly appears and invites him in. A bizarre conversation between them, in which she laments, "'I've had so few visitors since my death, you see'" (*G* 138), results in his fleeing the house. During this interchange, Mary clearly enjoys herself, by defying superstition in lighting three candles before her visitor nervously blows one out and in having fun semantically at his expense: "'It's such an age since I've seen a living being!' … 'I've had so few visitors since my death, you see' … 'I like the darkness … The dead … naturally get used to it'" (*G* 138). She also

[8] Gerard M. Sweeney, "Wharton's Bewitched," *The Explicator*, 56: 4 (1998), 198.

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plays at being a vampire: "'I hate the light … And so I sleep all day. I was just waking up when you came … Do you know where I usually sleep? Down below there – in the garden … There's a shady corner down at the bottom where the sun never bothers one. Sometimes I sleep down there till the stars come out'" (*G* 139). Dressed in "graveclothes" she camps it up "down below" as a member of the living dead; freed by her liminality she begs him to stay, pleading for sexual attention, expressing carnal needs which in her former state she could never have articulated, uttering the words which, as the narrator says, "the living woman had always had to keep dumb and hidden" (*G* 141). In the place between death and life where Mary finds herself, the usual distinctions between propriety and impropriety, between suppressed and expressed sexual desire are suspended – along with Mary herself:

> "And sometimes I sit here and think: If a man came along someday and took a fancy to you?" She gave another wavering cackle. "Well, such things *have* happened, you know, even after youth's gone … a man who'd had his troubles too. But no one came till tonight … and now you say you're going!" Suddenly she flung herself toward me. "Oh, stay with me, stay with me … just tonight … It's so sweet and quiet here … No one need know … no one will ever come and trouble us." (*G* 140).

But the nature of the lustful demands being made upon the narrator, the pressure of the erotic charge felt by the previously silent spinster through the experience of "death," is enough to send him into a paroxysm of terror. This is expressed, in true Gothic style, by the blowing in of the window, the blowing out of the candle and his desperate struggle to free himself from the toils of her winding sheet as Mary, "white and wraithlike," crumples to the floor with the "pitiful low whimper" (*G* 140–41) of sexual disappointment.

The next day the narrator, traumatised by the event, weeps tears of sadness for the loneliness of Mary Pask's life but also finds himself dwelling on "old tales and legends," including those of "the medieval vampire" (*G* 141). He then spends a period in a sanitorium in Switzerland recovering from a nervous breakdown before returning to New York and to a social engagement with Grace. Concerned that he should betray no trace of mental instability, the narrator does not mention his strange experience in Brittany to her but confesses only to having been unable to find her sister's grave. Grace then reveals that Mary had not died after all but had been in a cataleptic trance that had fooled the doctors, but from which she had recovered.[9] He then tells her the whole story of his visit.

[9] A change in self-understanding prompted by a serious illness is commonplace in fiction. However, given Wharton's knowledge of the Brontës' work, it is perhaps worth noting that

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As already noted, the narrator, like Brontë's Lockwood, does not understand the complexity of what he sees or hears and it is typical of his approach to his subject that he dismisses events and people precipitately. He also reverts quickly to cliché and stereotype, suggesting a rather superficial and insensitive fabulist, despite his claims to be a gifted artist. Like Lockwood, he clearly harbours a fear of women beneath his urban sophistication and this manifests itself as mild misogyny that builds to hysteria as he tries to escape the insistent Mary's pleas that he should stay with her. For all these reasons, he is, again like Lockwood, an unreliable narrator. We sense this early on in the tale and identify more readily with the sensitivity, lively mischief and enduring energy of Mary Pask than with him, despite seeing everything through his eyes. What is the function of this narrator, then? Perhaps it is to reveal the inadequacy of middle-class American masculinity when faced with the emotionally demanding or complex woman. Wharton makes much of his attachment to Horace Bridgeworth; "if one knew Horace …" (*G* 131), it is implied, one would inevitably be affected by his charms. The narrator is perhaps afflicted with the selfsame unrequited passion for the clearly homosocial Horace, out at a "men's dinner" (*G* 144) as, it is suggested, Mary suffers for him. But this is all done lightly and humorously, so that the nameless narrator's ineptitude becomes – finally – something we laugh at rather than fear, whilst simultaneously the potentially sinister storyline dissolves into a Radcliffean explanation of the chance effects of catalepsy combined with poor communication – not least, Mary's refusal to confirm the fact that she is alive. Parody can function conservatively or subversively in that it tends to use humour either to interrogate or to restore the status quo: in that sense its cultural politics cannot be essentialised. Arguably, both "Miss Mary Pask" and the story "Bewitched" use parody to challenge the *grand récit* of gender difference, transforming the stuff of Gothic nightmare into fictions that offer a wry critique of conventional attitudes to desire. It would seem, then, that Wharton chose to use parody at this late stage of her career in order to raise subversive questions about the sexual politics of early twentieth-century Europe and America.

Set, like "Kerfol," in Brittany, the site of Perrault's "Bluebeard," the landscape of "Miss Mary Pask" is that of the furthermost western edge of

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Lucy Snowe, the lonely heroine of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), comes to understand her own true nature whilst in a cataleptic trance: "'Oh, my childhood! I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of past days, I *could* feel. About the present, it was better to be stoical: about the future – such a future as mine – to be dead. And in catalepsy and in a dead trance, I studiously beheld the quick of my nature.'" *Villette*, ed. Tony Tanner (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 175.

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France. This landscape is imbued with a Celtic imaginary dimension also attributed to Cornwall and the northern-most isles of Scotland in British folklore. The "intense Celtic sense of the super-natural" which Wharton lays claim to in her unpublished autobiographical fragment, "Life and I,"[10] is extended to the New England landscape straightforwardly through carriers such as the enigmatic Agnes in "All Souls'," who originates in the Hebrides. Writing in the introduction to *Ghosts* about the enquiries she received following the publication of her story, "Pomegranate Seed," enquiries which disputed whether ghosts could write or post letters, Wharton says: "These problems caused sleepless nights to many correspondents whose names seemed to indicate that they were recent arrivals from unhaunted lands. Need I say that there was never a Welsh or Scottish signature among them?" (*G* 2). However, in her ghost stories, often set in Brittany or the west of Britain, a complex double manoeuvre is executed. Wharton not only extends the landscape of the Gothic from western France through the British Isles to New England, but also invokes comic Gothic as a means by which the narrative to be embedded in the American landscape can rewrite and reconfigure European claims to the past and its complexities. For Wharton the fictional landscape of New England is in dialogue with that of Europe; she places the stories set in the United States alongside ghostly tales of seventeenth-century France or Italy, just as her predecessor, Hawthorne, did. In so doing she acknowledges her debt – artistically and culturally – then lays it bare and despatches it. As Robert Phiddian has noted:

> all parody refunctions pre-existing text(s) and/or discourses, so that it can be said that these verbal structures are called to the readers' minds and then placed under erasure. A necessary modification of the original idea is that we must allow the act of erasure to operate critically rather than as merely neutral cancellation of its object. Parodic erasure disfigures its pre-texts in various ways that seek to guide our re-evaluation or refiguration of them.[11]

Whilst the ghost story can barely function without the possibility of the alternative explanation, "parodic erasure," as defined in Phiddian's account, complicates the telling of the tale even further in the simultaneous summons and dismissal of the prior text. It is excess that unseats the earlier narrative, a strategy which we also see at work in other of Wharton's ghost stories, particularly in "Bewitched." To read "Bewitched" as if there were a real ghost involved in the proceedings would be to completely disempower it as

[10] Edith Wharton, "Life and I," Beinecke Library, MS, p. 17.

[11] Robert Phiddian, *Swift's Parody* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13–14; cited in Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 15–16.

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a narrative about the forces of sexual attraction, indeed, as a narrative about human nature. Paradoxically, the full seriousness of the story's engagement with the uncanny and the repressed is released only when it is read as parody.

"Bewitched" opens with the arrival of three men at a remote farmhouse; one is that standard denizen of the New England rural landscape, a churchman, Deacon Hibben; one is a young farmer who functions as the reader's centre of consciousness, Orrin Bosworth; and one is Sylvester Brand, another, older, local farmer. They have been summoned to her farmhouse by Prudence Rutledge to hear an account of her husband's supernatural possession by Ora, the dead daughter of Sylvester Brand, a possession that she wants them to break by means of driving a stake through the dead girl's heart, a manner of death traditionally reserved for vampires. Once the men have witnessed the physical effects that the seeming affair with the dead (or undead) is having upon Saul Rutledge, previously a "straight muscular fellow" (*G* 151), and have heard his confirmation that it is Ora who is drawing him, they agree to return on the following day when Saul says that he will next meet her. However, on the way home, all three stop at the broken-down shack where the live and dead lovers supposedly meet. They discover that the shack is occupied by a woman who leaves bare footprints in the snow and who holds the door closed when Sylvester Brand tries to force entry. A shot is fired, a scream is heard and the Deacon and Bosworth intercept Brand as he staggers from the doorway. The next day, news of the serious illness of Venny Brand, Sylvester's other daughter is spread abroad, closely followed by word of her death and her funeral three days later. The whole community turns out for the burial – all, that is, except Saul Rutledge, who is already promised as a mourner at the funeral of one of his aunts at a place distant from Lonetop.

The sub-text in "Bewitched" is entirely concerned with the sexual appetites of women. Even Mrs. Rutledge, the most repressed of women, has, as Kathy Fedorko points out, "constricted, phallic features"[12] – as befits, indeed, such an active proponent of "phallic law." She also vicariously relishes the rehearsal of the detail of both the sexual encounters and the attendant "self-drown(ing)" of her husband in lust. In the description of Mrs. Rutledge's "rigid neck" and "lids of marble" (*G* 167) it is possible to discern the facial contours of St John Rivers in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a bible-thumper similarly absorbed in the business of transmogrifying sexual appetite into disgust. He, too, maintains "a marble immobility of feature"

[12] Kathy A. Fedorko, *Gender and the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 110.

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which indicates the "turbid dregs of disappointment," the source of which, Brontë indicates, lies in sexual frustration: "his marble-seeming features, though they refused to relax, changed indescribably; and in their very quiescence became expressive of a repressed fervour."[13] As in "Miss Mary Pask" the Gothic embellishments of the tale "Bewitched" are laid on with a trowel; the plot creaks with the excesses of the bogus, misleading detail, with a palpable atmosphere of portentousness and doom. The delineation of the players in the drama is particularly expressive of excess: the Deacon is described as having a "long face, queerly blotched and moldy-looking, with blinking peering eyes" – reminiscent of the physiognomy of a Gothic colonial portrait – and Brand is said to possess a "heavily-hewn countenance" (*G* 146). Such stereotypes prepare the way for the sepulchral whiteness of the "fixed" features of Prudence Rutledge. Embedded in the consciousness of the inhabitants of the frozen landscape of Lonetop is a pre-history which speaks of an accumulation of cross-cultural memories and superstitions; the remains of Native American dispossessions, of pre-Revolutionary massacres of colonial settlers, of practices both Christian and Pagan. Mrs. Rutledge may summon to her aid a Deacon from the Christian church but the ceremony she has in mind for him to perform is the pagan method of eliminating the vampire: "A stake through the breast! That's the old way; and it's the only way. The Deacon knows it!" (*G* 156). The landscape of "Bewitched" is littered with the debris of a million Gothic clichés; even the snow falls like a "winding sheet … descending from the sky to envelop them all in a common grave" (*G* 154).

The fact that Saul Rutledge is having a sexual relationship with Venny Brand and that she is shot by her own father[14] is obfuscated by the community's desperate adherence to the legacy of their communal past, to a commitment to a landscape which seems to offer them the richness of an evasive narrative, a richness which will endow meaning on the most mundane of human activities, even adultery. Faith in a Manichean world order means that events are attributable to either God or the Devil rather than the more simple "wild and ignorant" (*G* 159) Venny, and her paramour, Saul Rutledge, a man firmly in the grasp of the little death. Ghosts are conjured to express the pre-history of the present and ultimately neither Ora nor Venny have any individuality because what they stand for – a sexuality

[13] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: The Folio Society, 1965), 323, 318 and 332.

[14] There may well be an echo here of the plot of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), often described as the first Gothic novel. In this tale of usurpation, the virtuous Matilda is accidentally murdered by her father, Manfred, who stabs her, believing that she is the beautiful Isabella.

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unconstrained by morals, familial or cultural – is inexpressible in this fixed and narrow-minded community. The death of Venny restores the actual and symbolic boundaries between life and death, nature and supernature, present and past. Like Miss Mary Pask, Venny's sexuality is freely expressible for as long as she impersonates the dead or is seen as moving in the liminal sphere of the undead. Indeed, her reduction of Saul Rutledge to a "haggard wretch" (*G* 151), when taken together with the Deacon's comment that "Something's sucking the life clean out of him" (*G* 160), suggests that she is a vampiric lover. As soon as she is recognised as living, however, that sexuality is shut down, brutally and finally. The allusions to the vampire in both "Miss Mary Pask" and "Bewitched" are not, of course, accidental. As William Hughes has pointed out, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the vampire became eroticised, transmuting from the swollen, bloated peasant of East European folklore, preying upon his neighbours, into a figure who, within Western culture, is charismatic, mysterious and highly sexed, with an allure that is unearthly but also accessible.[15] As Hughes notes, this change has resulted in vampiric behaviour being rendered through the discourses of sexuality and in the vampire emerging as a trope for repressed or forbidden sexual desire:

> Regarded as erotic, the vampire functions as a vehicle through which criticism may advance with equal ease either psychoanalytical or cultural assertions. The sexualised vampire is thus read alternately as the embodiment of authorial neuroses and as the coded expression of more general cultural fears of which the author is, consciously or unconsciously, an observer … The vampire represents, in this sense, the liberation of those sexual activities or desires that have been allegedly proscribed or censored in society or repressed within the self.[16]

By masquerading as vampires – as the undead – both women can lay claim to an active sexuality, albeit briefly, within the dynamics of the plot. Correspondingly, such expressions of sexual energy subvert the social constraint of female desire: they are therefore consigned to an "outlawed" body. The sacrifice of Miss Mary Pask to a solitude expressed as a living death, and of Venny Brand to an all too real death, restores, in time-honoured fashion, the status quo. Thus attention is shifted back to the conventional family as represented by the Bridgeworths, or the married couple – the Rutledges – although the latter, as befits their place in such an excessively parodic tale, cannot constitute anything other than a desperate mockery of married love.

[15] William Hughes, "Vampire," in Marie Mulvey-Roberts, ed., *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 240–45.

[16] William Hughes, "Fictional Vampires in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in David Punter, ed., *A Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 145.

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Given the skill with which Wharton appropriates the Gothic, why has the element of parody in her work not been fully recognised until now? As our opening paragraph suggests, the cultural function of parody has only recently begun to receive serious critical attention, parody itself having previously been dismissed as a lightweight and parasitic mode of writing.[17] Furthermore, Wharton most exercises the parodic strain in her later work and this has received less attention than that of the early or middle period. Critics in general have often underestimated the fiction she produced from 1925 onwards, particularly the novels, *The Mother's Recompense* (1925), *Twilight Sleep* (1927) and *The Children* (1928), although there are exceptions.[18] Like her earlier *The Custom of the Country* (1913), these novels are chiefly satiric in their design and execution and they are all absorbed by the personal and cultural problems which arise from the absence of a meaningful role for the intelligent and passionate woman in American society. Female sexuality and its expression is naturally a crucial part of Wharton's concern here and, indeed, throughout her fiction. In reviewing Wharton's 1917 novella, *Summer*, T. S. Eliot noted: "This novel will certainly be considered 'disgusting' in America; it is certain that not one reader in a thousand will apprehend the author's point of view. But it should add to Mrs. Wharton's reputation as a novelist the distinction of being the satirist's satirist."[19] The term "disgusting" no doubt refers to the fact that Charity Royall, the heroine of the novel, is impregnated and abandoned by a young man and that her eventual fate is one usually avoided by Gothic heroines – marriage to her sexually predatory guardian. The Gothic plot is reversed here with the young, handsome, desirable hero acting as betrayer whilst the leering, sexually repellent old man, Lawyer Royall, makes his adopted daughter an honest woman. Much of the narrative energy in this and the novels of the twenties is absorbed by the business of portraying inappropriate sexual relationships, particularly those which verge on incest. In *The Mother's Recompense* a mother and daughter sleep with the same man, in *Twilight Sleep* Lita Wyant sleeps with her husband's step-father all the while believing he is his real father, and in *The Children* Martin Boyne wants to marry a young woman who is, herself, under the

[17] See Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (London: Methuen, 1985); Rose, *Parody*; and Dentith, *Parody*.

[18] See particularly Katherine Joslin, *Edith Wharton* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991); Dale M. Bauer, *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); and Hildegard Hoeller, *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000).

[19] James Tuttleton, Kristin Lauer and Margaret Murray, eds., *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 263.

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impression that he plans to adopt her and her siblings. In all these cases Wharton is – in extreme fashion – portraying a culture in which the moral climate at once denies and deforms the sexual appetite of women.

Wharton's parodic appropriation of the Gothic in the short stories thus has similar objectives to her social satires, although arguably the parodic strain renders the tone of these tales more playful than that of the novels. These objectives include exposing – through parodic reference to mid-nineteenth century Gothic texts – the fact that sexual relationships between men and women are still informed in the 1920s by the same rigid gender stereotypes that held sway in the mid Victorian period, despite the world-shattering effects of the First World War. In this respect, Wharton's appropriation of the Gothic fulfils Hutcheon's claim that parody "can either be used at the expense of the original text's ideology or it can hold that ideology up as an ethical standard. From this point of view, parody acts as a consciousness-raising device, preventing the acceptance of the narrow, doctrinaire, dogmatic views of any particular ideological group."[20]

In the last story she wrote before she died, "All Souls'," Wharton can be seen to appropriate and parody the conventions of the Gothic in the most transparent manner possible. Like James's *The Turn of the Screw*, it is a tale within a tale, and one in which yet another anonymous, but here gender-ambiguous, narrator tries to make Gothic sense of his or her cousin's prosaic account of inexplicable happenings. A great deal of energy is expended in establishing the credentials of the narrator as a proper and appropriate storyteller, thus indicating a meta-fictional dimension at the very start of the tale. The story opens: "I read the other day in a book by a fashionable essayist that ghosts went out when electric lights came in. What nonsense! The writer, though he is fond of dabbling, in a literary way, in the supernatural, hasn't even reached the threshold of his subject" (*G* 252). Such an ostentatious display of literariness is offered in contradistinction to the portrait of the person to whom the supernatural events happened – the matter-of-fact Sara Clayburn, whose "muscular," "quick," "imperious" character is reassuringly free from any trace of fancy or imagination. The story is almost entirely absorbed by the business of narrative, of self-consciously constructing the Gothic tale. The opening statement from the narrator refers to the myth-making which has already taken shape around the events of one particular All Souls' eve: "the stories about it having become so exaggerated, and often so ridiculously inaccurate" that he or she has been charged by the families of both Sara Clayburn and her dead husband, "to get at the facts,

[20] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 103.

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as far as they can be called facts, and as anybody can get at them" (*G* 252). In this respect, it refers back to all Wharton's other work in the genre and foregrounds the very business of reading/interpretation that she notes in the Preface to *Ghosts* when she outlines her expectations that her readers will fill "in the gaps in the narrative with sensations and divinations" (*G* 2) which match her own as writer. "All Souls'," can therefore be seen as a coda to the prior parodic stories, structured as it is to have a relationship to all other Halloween tales by Wharton and other writers. Significantly, the story is entirely cast in stereotype. The setting is a remote and lonely country house in one of the longest-settled parts of the United States; the time is All Hallows' eve, the pagan new year and the night upon which the dead can walk. The heroine has an accident that renders her helpless and transforms her status on the instant from mistress to victim. In spite of the modern conveniences of the house, the well-ordered rooms and gardens, and the presence of a loyal staff (so long-established that she inherited them, like slaves, from her mother-in-law), she becomes vulnerable to the kind of terror which lies beyond human understanding.

Upon returning from a late Saturday afternoon walk, Sara Clayburn encounters a strange woman when approaching her home, Whitegates. When asked her business the woman replies that she has come to see one of the maids. They go their separate ways but subsequently Sara slips on a patch of ice, falls and breaks an ankle. The doctor is called, she is told to stay in bed and rest and that her ankle will be x-rayed after the weekend. The next morning Sara awakes to an empty house; no servant answers her call, the electricity is cut off, the boiler out of commission. She gets out of bed and makes her way painfully round the house, beginning with the maids' rooms, and ending in the kitchen where she loses consciousness at the point of discovering that the only noise in the house, the low sound of a man speaking in a foreign tongue, emanates from a radio. On coming round she drags herself back to bed and spends a feverish day and night until awakening to the sight of Agnes, her dour Scottish maid, and a locum doctor standing beside her bed. Whilst she insists that she spent a long and painful Sunday alone, Agnes in turn insists that she has not been left and is merely feverish. The only person who can confirm her story is the first Doctor, but he has been called away to a patient in Baltimore. We later learn that, having become ill himself, he will be out of reach for the next year, sent away to convalesce. The following year, Sara tells the story to her cousin who pays an extended visit to Whitegates before returning to New York at the beginning of October. A few weeks later, on All Souls', Sara meets once again the mysterious woman approaching the house and this time does not wait to be

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abandoned; she flees to the safety of her cousin's flat, confiding her extreme terror at the thought of a repetition of last year's events and stating her intention never to return to Whitegates. Both the participant and the story-teller surmise that the servants, every man and woman, attended a coven on the night of Sara's accident and that the mysterious woman was a "fetch," sent to lure them to the night's bacchanal.

What is clear from the narrative is that the events of that one night have rendered Sara's house uninhabitable; the uncanny here really is the "unheimlich" or the unknown in the home. In spite of all the trappings of civilised living which surround her and have made her existence well ordered and comfortable, she has been dispossessed by the stories which attach to Halloween, stories of sexual abandon and the breaking down of barriers, including those of class. Her security has been shattered by the sudden unreliability of her loyal bondsmen and women; terror strikes the woman so bound to the maintenance of class markers that she drags her broken ankle halfway round the house to a dangerously slippery polished oak staircase rather than use the servants' stairs.

For the protesting, middle-class voice of the nameless narrator there is only one explanation for the events of the night – the supernatural. However, there is an unspoken, hidden tale in "All Souls'," one buried much deeper than the simple adultery plot that leaves its footprints visible in "Bewitched." The strange woman, whose facial pallor, low laugh and "foreign" voice obliquely suggest vampirism,[21] appears as the doctor absents himself, first to Baltimore, then to the West Indies and then to Switzerland. The activities of the distinctly unglamorous "fetch" (*G* 273) – for this, according to the narrator, is what she is – are entirely mysterious, as are those of the even dowdier Agnes who, if she is a participant in a coven, goes to it sensibly dressed in her mistress's cast-off hat and coat (along with – it seems – the housemaid and the chauffeur). The equally mysterious reappearance of the woman at dusk on the following All Souls' eve – "the night when the dead can walk" (*G* 273) – is linked with the blotting out of "transparent twilight" as a "black cloud" suddenly appears, masking the movement of the woman as she "slip[s]" (*G* 271) ahead of Sara to the house. Whether "a 'fetch', or else, more probably, and more alarmingly, a living woman inhabited by a witch" (*G* 273), the woman gives physical shape, in the same manner as the vampire, to the sexual desire of a group of people who are otherwise refused its expression. The liberation of the homely Agnes

[21] E. Jones, "On the Vampire," in C. Frayling, ed., *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 409.

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and her compeers from their usual, uniform and uniformed decorum into a state of "uncontrollable longing" where they are free from "all inhibitions" (*G* 274) presents Sara Clayburn with more than she can bear to know about the "irresistible fascination" (*G* 273) of sexual pleasure: "'No, no,' she said with a little shiver, whenever I touched on the subject of her going back to Whitegates, 'I don't want ever to risk seeing that woman again …' And she never went back" (*G* 274). The "shiver" experienced by Sara Clayburn, who says "No, no," to carnal knowledge, is of repulsion not ecstasy; all her fears of anarchy, of the loss of social control are ultimately focussed on the reappearance of the figure of the irresistible woman.

Questions are left hanging at the end of the tale. What are all these people up to? Why are we given so much information about, and so little explanation of, Dr. Selgrove's flight from the area? Did he really fall ill? What connection has his absence to do with the other absences and the two appearances of the mysterious woman? Is someone being blackmailed, persecuted or haunted for an all too human previous transgression? Wharton does not give us the answers, but clearly we are not supposed to accept the narrator's florid Gothic explanation of events, precipitated as it is by literary leanings and a desire for authority. Rather, the reader is meant to pay heed to Sara Clayburn's admission of inadequate vision – "I could hardly see her" (*G* 271) – and take it as the clue to what the story is really about: what cannot, in fact, be "seen" or "told" in such a society. The reader is therefore left to "fill in the gaps" and is meant to deduce that this tale is another story about illicit sex, signified by mysterious liaisons and inexplicable appearances and absences. Not surprisingly, then, the narrator's rationale for the events of that night hedges round the sexual dimension, although it obviously betrays a voyeuristic curiosity concerning things forbidden and taboo:

> To learn what happens at Covens, and the reason of the irresistible fascination they exercise over the timorous and superstitious, one need only address oneself to the immense body of literature dealing with these mysterious rites. Anyone who had felt the faintest curiosity to assist at a Coven apparently soon finds the curiosity increase to desire, the desire to uncontrollable longing, which, when the opportunity presents itself, breaks down all inhibitions; for those who have once taken part in a Coven will move heaven and earth to take part again. (*G* 173–74)

In this light, the narrator's "Gothic" explanation is indicative of a regressive mentality – for to investigate and discover real human agency in what occurred would be to assume the fearsome responsibility of a modern consciousness, with all of its post-Freudian understanding of the disruptive power of repressed sexual desire, a power that is no respecter of class boundaries.

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Edith Wharton was 63 years old when she wrote "Bewitched" and "Miss Mary Pask" in 1925/26, and in the last year of her life when she wrote "All Souls'." The confidence with which she so mischievously inflects the Gothic mode in these three stories, which all feature older women as main characters, might well have had something to do with her changed perspectives on life as a mature woman writer. Allan Gardner Smith notes that "Bewitched" and "Miss Mary Pask" are "both … concerned with the problems of women's ageing"[22] and there is, indeed, a parodic representation of the desexualised older woman in the character of Mrs. Rutledge in "Bewitched" with the younger, sexually active female reduced to a quasi-ghost like presence. However, "Miss Mary Pask" is much more positive about ageing in so far as the autonomy and creativity of the older woman is validated above that of the story's young, rather supercilious male narrator. The entire cast of characters in "All Souls'" is mature; the sexual fantasy of the narrator has the aged Agnes cavorting round a fire whilst her mistress struggles to maintain the class position which forms the main claim she has to authority and, indeed, to authenticity in her own home. What we have in Wharton's stories, then, is a wry awareness that stereotypes of women – from the young desirable woman to the eccentric or strident and sexually repulsive older woman – still haunt masculine consciousness, even in the twentieth century. But here we have moved beyond the nineteenth-century Gothic representation of the woman as victim. On the one hand, we have in "Bewitched" the older woman who maliciously colludes with patriarchy and religious oppression in order to maintain control of her own domain, and on the other, we have in "Miss Mary Pask" a portrait of the older woman who has taken charge of her own space and her own language in order finally to realise her autonomy. Wharton's ironic view of the world here combines with the humour of parody in order to use the ghost story as both a vehicle for anxiety and as an expression of gleeful liberation from the strictures of masculine judgement.

In conclusion, Wharton's parodic Gothic stories entail a different contract between the writer and the reader from that set up by James or Hawthorne with their readers. Humour, irony and pathos rather than fear and anxiety are the unsettling factors. Her stories are therefore not subversive in the classic Gothic sense – that is by promoting intellectual transgression and rebellion through the breaking of taboos and the challenge to legitimacy. Nor are they conservative in the way that some Gothic texts are – that is, by seeking a restitution of the status quo through the extermination of "evil." Rather,

[22] Smith, "Edith Wharton and the Ghost Story," 152.

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she uses comedy and the idea of the supernatural to unsettle conventional values and beliefs. Wharton's ghost tales, then, are – to borrow Margaret Ann Doody's description of another text – "full of parodic and self-referential explications of narration itself, and the power that narration provides,"[23] and nowhere is this more obvious than in the self-reflexive voice of "All Souls'." In Wharton's ghost stories, the combination of excess, intertextuality and the baring of the device results – at least for the knowing reader – in meta-fictional commentaries that address issues of desire, power and narrative control (both cultural and literary). As such they are triumphs of ambiguity and parodic appropriation of the Gothic mode.

[23] Margaret Ann Doody, in Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote or the Adventures of Arabella*, ed. Margaret Dalziel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), Introduction, xxvii.

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