The Mother and Mother-in-Law in Wharton’s Novels —The Handmaid in Patriarchal Society—

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要約

Edith Wharton の作品にみる母親、そして姑
—— 家父長制の侍女 ——

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1994年は、国際連合機構の制定する国際家族年。近代社会を形成してきた、この中核的存在であった「家族」という構造の崩壊が社会構造、人間関係を根本から変え、いま、「家族」の意味が本質的に問い直される。「母性は根源的な人間関係を指するものである」と同時に、あらゆる分野において男が女を支配するための戦術となる」と Adrienne Rich はいう。たしかに、近代社会を形成してきた家父長制のもとで、家族制度の成立、存続のために母性は政治的道具として操作されてきたといえよう。

1985年に出版された、Margaret Atwood の The Handmaid’s Tale（『待女の物語』）は、Rich のいう母性の二重構造を見事に解剖してきた。そして、フェミニストたちが、母性の体現者である母親を「家父長制の侍女」として紹介する時期はすでに過去のものである。とはいえ、われわれの文化や文学の中、家父長社会の戦略としての母性が存続する。

小論は、古きよき時代（1870－80年代）のニューヨーク社会を活写した Edith Wharton（1862－1937）の作品——The Reef（1912）、The Age of Innocence（1920）、The Mother’s Recompense（1925）——にみられる「娘と母親」あるいは「嫁＝婿と姑」の経緯を概観するものである。
The Book of Ruth in the *Old Testament* recounts a story of an exemplary daughter-in-law, whose loving care embraces the person who one would least expect it to, Naomi the mother-in-law. In a foreign land Ruth supports her mother-in-law, widowed like herself, with her gleanings from barley in the field of Boaz, a man of influence and a kinsman of Naomi’s husband, whom Ruth later marries and bears his children. Naomi on her part is blessed in having a sweet obedient daughter-in-law, who is “better to [her] than seven sons,” because through her Naomi secures for herself an heir to the house: “for thy daughter-in-law, which loveth thee, which is better than to thee than seven sons, hath born him [an heir to the house of David].” *(4:15).* And this mother-in-law is no simple woman. Made privy to the fact that Ruth has found favor with Boaz, Naomi’s distant kinsman, she begins to worm her way slowly and shrewdly to get a husband for Ruth, giving specific directions to her daughter-in-law how to win the man’s favor for good. Ruth in her inborn womanly sweetness dutifully obeys to do what she is told to so that Boaz may take Ruth as his lawful wife.

This beautiful story of Ruth and Naomi has been told to indoctrinate in its readers the duty of a mother and mother-in-law to a daughter and daughter-in-law in patriarchal society. Thus, the prescription reads that in patriarchy the ultimate duty of a mother is to find a suitable husband for her daughter; similarly, it is the function of a mother-in-law to see to it that the bride will produce a male heir, as the message in the narrative of Naomi and Ruth is clearly spelled out. In our post-Darwinian age, however, the whole issue may present a different story. It is no longer the survival of an individual nor a certain species that counts, but of much smaller unit, DNA, which manipulates a human or other “vehicle” for its own reproduction.

In his controversial treatise, “The Selfish Gene” *(1976)*, Richard Dawkins postulates that an individual is not an autonomous agent, but rather it is a particular DNA that controls the behavioral pattern of a human or animal being (=vehicle). The inexorable law of nature decrees that a certain DNA attempts to make as many copies of itself as possible, using different vehicles for its reproduction. Provided that the sole concern of “the selfish gene” is procreation, then it follows that DNA in a woman past menopause naturally seeks to produce its copy by means of her son or daughter as vehicle, who carries the same DNA as that of her own. In this light, the story of Naomi and Ruth—the wise mother and the exemplary daughter-in-law—provides a plausible explanation for the taboo of mother-in-law in different cultures. Just the same the fact still remains that the mother and the mother-in-law are the handmaiden in patriarchy, or the vehicle of Dawkins’ “selfish gene” in the perpetuation of a family line.

Likewise, Dawkins’ theory of “the selfish gene” becomes a useful tool to explain the role of the mother or the mother-in-law in the fates of women in literature (as in life) as the handmaiden in patriarchal societies. Invariably, it is the mother rather than the father who decrees the rigidities of the custom be observed. She is a constant and persistent reminder and observer of various social codes of patriarchy on which rests the
continuity of a family. In Japanese society in particular, the mother has been made an instrument for the perpetuation of the institution which confines woman within marginal domesticity and thereby arrests her natural growth as an individual. On her part the daughter either obeys the precepts of patriarchy of which the mother is an embodiment in order to survive, because it is best for woman to be properly married rather than seek a career of her own, or else she defies the mother (= patriarchy) and more often than not is doomed to lose in the attempt. Yet the daughter's defiance is by no means futile nor meaningless, because it works as "a counter friction to stop the machine" of patriarchal system. Her protest is an expression of what Adrienne Rich has named "matrophobia" — "a womanly splitting of the self, ... to become purged once for all of our mother's bondage, to become individuated and free" (238). The process of this individuation, however, costs woman great sacrifice—the sense of social isolation and powerlessness.

I

Edith Wharton (1862–1937), the first woman novelist to receive a Pulitzer Prize, is one of those defiant daughters who sought woman's independence and freedom, the career of an artist in old New York of the seventies and eighties, which Wharton called "an age of innocence." Wharton created in her novels many remarkable and tragic heroines who go through the pain of individuation from the mother who enforces social codes in patriarchal society upon the daughter. Since her childhood through adolescence, Wharton herself suffered from a sense of alienation from her own mother, who never tried to understand the daughter's interest in and penchant to an intellectual life. As R. W. B. Lewis, the author of her definitive biography (1975), observes, the mother in old New York society is to provide her daughter with pretty dresses and suitable admirers, not to encourage literary or artistic interests in her. The "custom of the country" required that a woman "should be a 'moral lever,' and her role in life was 'to keep her home pure and sweet, to rule and govern it prudently'" (35. Emphasis added). To the young Wharton, Lucretia Jones, an exemplary handmaiden to patriarchal values, appeared like a witch who tried to stifle her interest in literature and art and her ambition to become a writer, arousing in the daughter a "choking agony of terror" (25). The image of mother as the agent of repression and dominance was such that it left a lasting impression on the author; it went into the making of the mother and mother-in-law in Wharton's novels. Also the unhappy resolution of Wharton's engagement to Harry Stevens offered this future chronicler of "the custom of the country" another indelible image of the formidable mother (=in-law) as inhibiting influence on woman's life. Lewis writes that Mrs. Stevens never "arranged a single event in honor of her son's forthcoming nuptials and of her prospective daughter-in-law" (45). Practically speaking, Marietta Stevens brought the engagemnt to an end, and Harry Stevens, never a strong man of character, did not fight to carry out the engagement. These early episodes of the author's life seem to have influenced Wharton's attitude toward the hypocritical ethos of upper middle-class society and colored its portrayals in her works. If the young "innocent"
heroine is powerless, before the domination of the mother and mother-in-law, a typical Wharton man proves to be quite "unsatisfactory," because he fails to fully satisfy the woman's intellectual or physical needs.

Thus, Wharton's personal experience either with her own mother or the prospective mother-in-law went into her imaginary portraits of mothers and mothers-in-law in her major novels: Mrs. Manson Mingott, Mrs. Welland, May, Mrs. Leath, or old Mrs. Clephane. The following discussion is an exploration of the mother or the mother-in-law who functions as the handmaid in patriarchy and of the daughter who either succumbs to or defies the mother, who is that institution.

In *The Age of Innocence* (1920) Edith Wharton presents a plausible portrait of a patriarchal society—old New York which has "rather old-fashioned ideas," where "... [t]he individual is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest: people cling to any convention that keeps the family together" (109–10). The grotesquery used to represent the matriarch (Mrs. Manson Mingott) in that society shows Wharton's attitude toward the institution itself, which is doomed:

The immense accretion of flesh which had descended on her middle life like a flood of lava on a doomed city had changed her from a plump active little woman with a neatly-turned foot and ankle into something as vast and august as a natural phenomenon. She had accepted this submergence as philosophically as all her other trials, and now, in extreme old age, was rewarded by presenting to her mirror an almost unwrinkled expanse of firm pink and white flesh, in the center of which the traces of a small face survived as if awaiting excavation. (28)

The arch matriarch has no face (no distinct personality); her small face is now invisible buried under the "unwrinkled expanse of firm pink and white flesh," however impressive the domination of "the immense accretion of flesh" might be. For in old New York, an "individual is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest." May is an ideal (=innocent) candidate to the succession of matriarchy. She dutifully preserves "the narrow pieties of old New York": to quote Cynthia Wolff, "May's devotion to an order by which the family can perpetuate itself is absolute" (323). In other words, May plays the role of Gorgon to Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska—individuals sacrificed to keep the order—and there exists in their tolerated marriage the sense of suffocation which entails the observance of family obligations. Ironically, in *The Age of Innocence* it is the son-in-law, Newland Archer, who is trapped in the narrow confines of domesticity, unable to gratify his natural longings for adventure. There is the vigilant Mrs. Welland, the mother-in-law, who keeps an eye on him so that he would never swerve from the path of duty. As is the case with Ethan in *Ethan Frome* (1911), the quest for woman's independence and freedom finds its expression in the dilemma of the male protagonist rather than the heroine. It is not surprising, therefore, that Newland goes through the crux of marital confinement which is usually the plight of a wife rather than a husband. Newland Archer questions to himself: "What am I? A son-in-law" (215).
The young man, as he followed his wife into the hall, was conscious of a curious reversal of mood. There was something about the luxury of the Welland house and the density of the Welland atmosphere, so charged with minute observances and exactions, that always stole into his system like a narcotic. (217)

In *The Age of Innocence* the husband pays a greater price either than Ellen or May in order to keep the "dignity of marriage," because to a person awakened from the influence of a narcotic the Welland house and the life in it is "unreal and irrelevant" (217). Still Newland endures the burden of being an obedient son-in-law, the role usually reserved for the bride. Hence Newland Archer is called, with a tinge of irony, "the last gentleman" in a review of the recently released movie version of Wharton's novel.

In *The Reef* (1912) the pattern is repeated; the image of entrapment is employed to describe a woman married to the house and her relationship with the mother-in-law. After her husband's death Anna Leath remains "a prisoner" at Givré, a French chateau—a dull and inconvenient house: "... the house had for a time become to her the very *symbol of narrowness and monotony*" (82. Emphasis added). Unlike Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, the lovers in *The Reef*—George Darrow and Anna Leath—are free to seek a life of their own away from Givré and Anna's mother-in-law. None the less Darrow fails to deliver Anna out of the prison, because of his noncommittal and irresponsible attitude either to Sophy Viner, with whom he spends an interim of holidays in Paris, or to Anna [Summers] Leath, the lady of his dream. George Darrow is another example of what David Holbrook calls Wharton's "unsatisfactory man."

As for Anna, like Newland Archer, despite the wide-awakened sense of her predicament the decent and prudent daughter-in-law finds it hard to leave the house in defiance of her mother-in-law and of what is sacred to them both. The indoctrination of the family tradition at Givré is thoroughly completed by Anna's late husband, who used to advise her "to be guided by [his] mother" (93); now the French chateau has become for Anna,

the shell of a life slowly adjusted to its dwelling: the place one came back to, the place where one had one's duties, one's habits and one's books, the place one would naturally live in till one died: a dull house, an inconvenient house,... but to which one was so used that one could hardly,... think one's self away from it without a certain loss of identity. (82–83)

Anna Leath has indeed become the house itself and no human force could extricate the self from the house: over the years "insensibly Anna begins to live [her husband's] life" (94). So the efforts to leave the house and start all over remain, at the close of the novel, empty promises for everyone concerned: Darrow, Anna, Owen and even Sophy Viner, who is to liberate Owen Leath. Here again the dominance of the mother-in-law as the handmaid to patriarchy has taken its toll.
In *The Mother's Recompense* (1925) the sense of oppression which accompanies familial obligations becomes the crux of the drama; it gives the heroine (the daughter-in-law) cause for rebellion, the kind of rebellion Wharton herself felt for her mother who forced her to accept the conventional way of life for woman. Unwittingly Kate becomes an iconoclast–heroine in old New York. *The Mother's Recompense* is about the coming home of a mother, Kate Clephane, who deserts her baby of three with "a dreadful pang, a rending of the inmost fibres, and yet a sense of unutterable relief, because to do so was to escape from the oppression of her married life, the thick atmosphere of self-approval and insensibility which emanated from John Clephane like coal-gas from a leaking furnace" (13. Emphasis added). The trope of carbon monoxide poisoning is fitting here: Kate "couldn't breathe" in that thick atmosphere, which was "all she had to say in her own defence" (13). It was a question of life and death for Anne's mother and the mother decides to save herself from asphyxiation. Self-centered and "insatiable for personal excitements," Kate forfeits being a mother, whose "center of gravity [is] in a life not hers" (82). For Wharton's heroine self-immolation, the fate of Edna Pontillier in *The Awakening*, is unthinkable, even though society is better prepared to condone such self-sacrifice as heroic than a rebellion of a self-centered woman. Despite her impetuousness and suicidal impulse Kate Clephane is above such an easy way out. Likewise, she refuses to be the cause of "sterile pain" for her daughter. Wharton was too well aware of the futility of self-sacrifice, as the waste of life is underscored in the story of "Bunner Sisters."

Kate appears in the novel without a past, nor has she any recollection of her own mother. So the mother figure for Kate is no other than old Mrs. Clephane—the mother-in-law, "the formidable chieftain" (8) of a New York clan, who teaches the bride to conform to the rigidities of the custom of her establishment. Kate recalls her vain efforts to obey the inexorable laws of the house: "there had been the continual vain effort to adapt herself to her husband's point of view, to her mother-in-law's standards..." (58. Emphasis added). Thus in the old New York as in Japanese society mothers (and mothers-in-law) are made handmaidens of patriarchal culture, through whom the acceptance of female limitations is transmitted. The bride subsequently spends several decades under the vigilance of mother-in-law, until she in turn will be an impossible mother-in-law. In this way, woman is made a handmaid to make things easy for men, and the institution of patriarchy perpetuates itself without end.

In my reading of *The Mother's Recompense*, which is focused on the mother–daughter relationship in patriarchal culture, the use of the term "mother–in–law" assumes a special significance. For Kate old Mrs. Clephane is "the formidable chieftain," "the hated figure" (20), and "the arch–enemy" (65). These are familiar epithets used for the mother–in–law in Japanese novels and popular fictions; a bride and her mother–in–law could never be "the best of friends" (39). So the myth goes in any culture to create rivalry between the two to demean each other to serve as handmaid to the exigencies of family prejudices.
Kate recalls saying to herself in defiance of her mother-in-law: “Now I shall never again hear my mother-in-law say: ‘I do think, my dear, you make a mistake not to humor John’s prejudices a little more’” (243). The mother-in-law in *The Mother’s Recompense* is portrayed to represent inhibitions and constraints of old New York’s patriarchal culture. Just as in a fairy tale the step-mother is made a “hated figure”, a scapegoat, who tries to annihilate the poor suffering angel of a daughter, in Wharton’s novel Kate’s mother-in-law is made literally a villain. It is easily done since the relationship between Kate and old Mrs. Clephane is once removed; theirs is not a blood relation.

Kate tries to become free of the domination of her imperious mother-in-law, because in “the thick atmosphere of self-approval and unperceivingness” (13) Kate feels “like a caged animal” (225). The images of suffocation and imprisonment crowd her recollection of her life at the Clephane household. Naturally, the sense of “unutterable relief” she feels is great when she becomes free of the entrapment of her married life which consists of “John Clephane’s bad temper, his pettiness about money, obstinacy, his obtuseness, the detested sound of his latch key…” (243. Emphasis added). Kate’s return to the house on Fifth Avenue after old Mrs. Clephane’s fall in the scheme of narratology is no accident.

During the interval the old quarrel between Kate and old Mrs. Clephane is repeated between Kate’s daughter Anne and the grandmother. Fred Landers, a family friend of long standing, observes: “Things didn’t always go smoothly between her and her grandmother” (39). When Anne wanted to have a studio old Mrs. Clephane was opposed to the idea, and would not give in. “Mrs. Clephane had never heard of anybody in the family having a studio; that settled it” (39). Enid Drover is another witness to the tension between the two: “Poor mother [old Mrs. Clephane] didn’t always find Anne easy,….” (76). Anne too suffers from the restrictions imposed upon her by the matriarch of the Clephane family— “the closing-in on [the daughter] of all the bounds” (47).

Ironically, the conflict between Kate and old Mrs. Clephane is reenacted on Kate’s return between Kate and Anne who takes more after her father and old Mrs. Clephane—in terms of biological transmission—than after herself. The mother notices in her daughter the family resemblance: “John’s straight rather heavy nose, beneath old Mrs. Clephane’s awful brows” (29) and “a note of finality in her voice” (46) complete a caricature of Kate’s daughter, an exact copy of her mother-in-law. The house itself has undergone little change: “Anne’s establishment, which had been her grandmother’s, still travelled smoothly enough on its own momentum, and though the girl insisted that her mother was *now the head of the house*, the headship involved little more than ordering dinner, and talking over linen and carpets and curtains with old Mrs. Clephane’s house-keeper” (82. Emphasis added). Clearly, Kate’s claim to the headship as well as to motherhood is misplaced. She has forfeited that right. She is no more than a “privileged guest” (69–70) since she has forfeited her apprenticeship under old Mrs. Clephane’s supervision. Hence her right to be the matriarch in her turn as the chieftain of the clan.

During the interim of one year Kate spends in her old house, she literally relives her early married years. Each crucial event—the Opera night after the mourning, the engagement dinner given by Mrs. Lanfrey, and the eve of Anne’s wedding—brings back
the memories of the early years of her marriage. Each confrontation with "the enveloping conformity" (121) convinces Kate once again of the legitimacy of her past act of rebellion: "This is what I ran away from, she thought; and found more reasons than ever for her flight" (121). Kate's coming home to New York is therefore to be understood as a reconfirmation of what she has done on the spur of a moment. If she was an iconoclast unwittingly, now she comprehends the full meaning of the abandonment of her daughter, giving it a name—"Matrophobia" which is not the fear of one's mother but the fear of becoming one, whose "center of gravity [is] in a life not hers" (82).

Kate returns, upon request, to be Anne's mother, she tells herself, but she learns that motherhood is something different from what she has dreamed of. There is no "mother's recompense." For "in actuality, mothers obtrude less and less into their children's lives as the children grow up—eventually, 'a real mother is just a habit of thought to her children'" (Wolff 364). Little Anne in the mother's memory has come of age and she is now a "free agent" independent of her grandmother (=mother). And the choice of her partner in marriage is the first and most important exercise of her free will; marriage is a symbolic rite of individuation—the daughter's splitting from the mother.

Naturally, there arises the conflict of interest between the mother and the daughter. The mother wants the daughter to marry the right man—that is a man of her own class. On the other hand, the daugtherer would "do anything to get him [Chris] back. I only want you to do what I ask! " (152). Ironically, in her fierce opposition to the match, Kate becomes aware that she herself is taking the very "attitude of caution and conservatism" the Clephanes tried to force upon her (74), in vain. At the same time, the daughter's challenge provokes the mother: "Her own pride seemed suddenly to start up from its long lethargy, and she looked almost defiantly at her defiant daughter" (152. Emphasis added). This is a recapitulation of Kate's defiance of old Mrs. Clephane—her rebellion against "the narrow pieties of old New York."

Finally, Kate's self respect tells her to respect her daughter's will; the mother realizes she need not be a vessel of the daughter's self-denial and frustration. "Had she, Kate Clephane, ever shrunk from her own bliss because of the hidden risks it contained? She had played high, staked everything—and lost. Could she blame her daughter for choosing to take the same risks?" (218) Impulsive and impetuous as she is, Kate is also a good sport who knows the burden of freedom too well not to respect her daughter's independence. If she betrayed her daughter's trust before, she won't repeat the same mistake. Anne will have a full life—Chris and her painting with nobody quoting Dr. Johnson's adage that "portrait—painting is indelicate in a female" (76).

On the other hand, Kate is too independent to let her daughter mother her the rest of her life. Nor can she live in the house on Fifth Avenue, where she never belonged. Kate is "homeless" (163), which is the price she willingly pays for the enjoyment of her personal freedom: "I'm used to being lonely. It's not as bad as people think " (231). Because she will have nothing to do with being the handmaid in patriarchy with inhibiting influences on young people; besides "mothers-in-law are not a serious problem in modern life" (208).
The free and independent Kate back in Riviera is not a poor middle-aged lonesome woman; she is an iconoclast heroine who shares with Lily or May "the plight of being a woman"—though each a different kind—"the isolation and powerlessness, the marital confinement, the loneliness of the 'intellectual' woman" (Ammons, 6–7). May Welland enjoys a rich easy life in exchange for "the marital confinement"; she succeeds to the matriarchy of her clan, but as the handmaiden of a patriarchal institution which confines not only herself but her husband as well. A similar fate awaits Anna Leath at Givré till she dies. Refusing to marry or failing to marry the right man, Lily Bart pays dearly; she is given more than her share of the powerlessness and isolation of being an outsider of the society. Like the author herself who left old New York which was embodied in the impossible matriarch she encountered in her adolescence, Kate Clephane chooses a lonely life of moral and mental independence abroad.

Wharton's heroines here considered each makes her attempt to unburden the repression imposed upon woman in patriarchal culture with its insistence on the importance of marriage and familial obligations. They realize that marriage is the very means by which the institution perpetuates itself, making mothers and mothers-in-law its handmaidens. Wharton detected the misogyny inherent in a patriarchal society in old New York, and the subtle way the system preserves itself by creating rivalry and conflict between the mother and the daughter, by making woman a scapegoat of whatever is repellent and negative in the system—which is the handmaid's duty. As Rich clearly spells out, motherhood is not only a central human relationship, but a political institution, which is "a keystone to the domination in every sphere of women by men" (216). In a patriarchal culture the daughter sees her mother as a dispiriting influence who teaches her a compromise and an easy way out in her struggle to become free of the mother. The confrontation with her defiant daughter is then an eye-opener for Kate who is made fully aware of the hidden meaning of her own rebellion against old Mrs. Clephane and her prejudices—that she must end the vicious circle by which the patriarchy perpetuates itself. In her relation with old Mrs. Clephane and then with Anne her daughter Kate too goes through the cycle of "matrophobia," to repeat Adrienne Rich, "a womanly splitting of the self, ... to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage, to become individuated and free" (248). In this sense too Kate Clephane in The Mother's Recompense is an iconolcast heroine.

Cynthia Wolff's observation that the adolescent Edith was her mother's child is both insightful and accurate: "...the impulse to be like Mother has been transformed into a conviction that only the shimmering surface of her femininity could be of interest—that she had nothing but her youth and her pretty frock to commend her" (43. Emphasis added). Wharton writing in "the age of innocence" which nurtured a patriarchy fathomed the dimensions of the mother–daughter relation and dramatized the crux of the problem in the daughter's defiance of the mother and the mother–in–law in her novels, which finally set her free of the domination of Mother in her life and of the "pernicious and debilitating belief."
Notes
Here I'd like to acknowledge, with gratitude, a research subsidy granted by Kobe College Research Institute in 1992 to this study of Edith Wharton.


2. The taboo of "the mother-in-law" and the conflict between the mother-in-law and the bride has been a favorite literary subject in many Japanese novels and dramas, modern and classical. I find it extremely interesting that an American author writing in a quite different socio-cultural milieu deals with a similar problem of the mother and mother-in-law.

3. At the first annual meeting of the American Literature Association held at San Diego, California, from May 30 to June 2, 1990, I read a paper at one of Edith Wharton sessions, entitled "Old New York and Japan—Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense* and Nogami Yaeko's *Machiko*." This essay is partly based on that paper.

Works Cited


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