



Sheila Liming. *What a Library Means to a Woman: Edith Wharton and the Will to Collect Books*.

Sheila Liming. *What a Library Means to a Woman: Edith Wharton and the Will to Collect Books*. University of Minnesota Press, 2020. 280 p. US\$108 (cloth); \$27 (paper) ISBN 978-1-5179-0704-4

The 2,700-plus books at the Mount, Edith Wharton's historic Berkshire estate, represent only a portion of the novelist's remarkable collection. Another 2,500 volumes, which one of Wharton's heirs stored in a London warehouse after her death, were destroyed in the Blitz. And the volumes now in the Mount's collection themselves survived storage in an English castle (some have the wormholes to show for it) and in a bookseller's attic before a high-profile (and contentious) negotiation brought them to the Mount in 2006.

The story behind that collection is the subject of Sheila Liming's *What A Library Means to a Woman: Edith Wharton and the Will to Collect*, an expansive and nuanced exploration of the nature of libraries and archives, the ethos of book collecting, and the gendered "self-making" of a renowned novelist whose library, in Liming's words, "gives voice to Wharton's varied articulations of her 'many selves'" (8). Liming's book also offers reflections on issues of authorship, inheritance, and literary influence and close readings of Wharton's own fiction, all while moving seamlessly among the varied methodologies of book history, literary analysis, feminist theory, "distant" reading and other approaches, including those from the digital humanities.

Wharton's collection began with the modest "gentleman's library" of about 200 volumes that the novelist inherited after her father's death, a collection of classics—works of "polite taste," uniformly bound—that she had read among while she was growing up and that served as the foundation for her self-education. (Unlike her brothers, Wharton was not formally educated.) To those volumes, Wharton added thousands of others in her lifetime, distributing them among multiple households—at Land's End in Newport, Rhode Island, and the Mount, for example, and at Pavillon Colombe and Saint-Claire-du-Château in France—and leaving traces of her own practices as a writer, reader, and collector in the process.

Underlining, marginalia, packing lists, book plates, the presence of cut (and uncut) pages testify to Wharton's behavior as a reader while inscriptions from family members and friends and the presence of "association copies"—books owned by or associated with other authors—help bring to life the varied social networks of the collection and its owner. An array of ephemera "tipped in" to various

volumes—dried flowers, pieces of pink ribbon, postcards, a raffle ticket for a wartime charity—likewise testify to the collection’s history of usage and to Liming’s own close relationship with its materiality. (Liming spent several summers at the Mount working on EdithWhartonsLibrary.org, an interactive database of works in the collection.)

What a Library Means to a Woman also engages perceptively with Wharton’s fiction where libraries and book collecting are common tropes. Like the novelist, protagonists in several novels—*The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *Ethan Frome* (1911), and *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), for example—link reading and libraries with self-making or self-development. Others—like Charity Royal of *Summer* (1917)—pointedly resist the experience a library might offer, shutting themselves off from any accrual of cultural capital. Two book collectors figure prominently in *The House of Mirth* (1905)—the urbane Lawrence Selden, who collects “good editions” and “values a thing for its rarity” (like the doomed Lily Bart) and the compulsive collector of Americana, Percy Gryce, whose motive is fame and accumulation (91). Liming likewise reads *The House of Mirth* against *Eline Vere* (1889), a much earlier work by Dutch novelist Louis Couperus. Wharton owned a number of Couperus’s works—some of which can be found today in the library at the Mount—which were translated into English and published by Appleton’s in the 1890s. The similarities are striking, including scenes of the famous tableaux vivant with Lily Bart on display. Equally striking is Liming’s discussion of the two novels, which moves beyond issues of likenesses to an argument about fin de siècle anxieties about material consumption.

But it is Liming’s reading of Wharton’s collection as a whole—a reading that draws on data visualization and techniques from the digital humanities—that might attract the most interest from book historians. Working with a sample of 2,200 books from Wharton’s library, for example, Liming constructs a “social network” for Wharton’s library showing those among Wharton’s own contacts who had perhaps the most influence on her collection. Except for Wharton’s own additions, her father, George Frederic Jones, was the largest single contributor to the library with his books accounting for about 8 percent of the total collection. But other family members gifted or owned books in Wharton’s collection and so did those in Wharton’s intellectual circle of friends in France. (Henry James was among them as was journalist Morton Fullerton with whom Wharton had an affair.) Walter Berry, Wharton’s longtime companion and, next to her father, the largest source of books in her collection, is likewise noted.

Breaking down the collection by dates of publication offers another lens on the collection, showing, for example, a period of intense collection in 1910 and 1911—the time period in which Wharton began her divorce, sold the Mount, and moved to France. And in that period, Wharton’s acquisitions looked more to the past than to the contemporary authors. Works by George Sand, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Joshua Reynolds were acquired during this period as were volumes on Beethoven and works by Machiavelli. As Liming writes: “Wharton’s library, though it grew considerably throughout the early part of the twentieth century, grew primarily backward, extending further into the nineteenth century and beyond” (121).

What a Library Means to a Woman ends with what Liming refers to as the “afterlives” of Wharton’s library—that is, with a narrative of what happened to the collection after the author’s death. And that narrative in turn closes with the story of the highly publicized (and quite dramatic) negotiations that brought the collection back to the Mount. Liming’s exploration of that library will be of interest to those who study libraries, readers, and collectors as well as to Wharton scholars.



Donna Harrington-Lueker, Salve Regina University, Newport, R.I

Date Created

02/04/2022