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## Edith Wharton and the "New Gomorrahs" of Paris: Homosexuality, Flirtation, and Incestuous Desire in *The Reef*

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### Edith Wharton and the "New Gomorrahs" of Paris: Homosexuality, Flirtation, and Incestuous Desire in *The Reef*

*Richard A. Kaye (bio)*

"The French are not frightened by the names of things . . ."

Edith Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning*

A double specter haunts critical discussions of Edith Wharton's writing: the specter of the male homosexual and the erotically ambivalent male. Wharton's circle in Paris included many homosexual and bisexual men, an aspect of the novelist's web of personal associations that long has been noted. With R. W. B. Lewis's 1975 biography, the first study of Wharton to consider the paramount role of Morton Fullerton in her romantic life, there might have emerged a new interest in the subject of homosexual relations as they relate to Wharton's fiction. But despite Lewis's frankness in dealing with the novelist's affair with

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Fullerton, scholars of Wharton's writing have given little attention to questions of same-sex eroticism, particularly in France, where Wharton resided for three decades. It is as if the inexplicable but crucial **[End Page 860]** connection between the homosexual social context of Wharton's Paris and the indecisive males of the author's fiction requires acknowledgement but defies existing analytical categories. Cynthia Griffin Wolff observes, pointing to Henry James, Fullerton, and Howard Sturgis, that "many of [Wharton's] closest friends were men whose sexual preferences tended to blur" (258). Wolff's comment suggests the confounding of analysis that results from the breakdown of customary sexual categories evinced by Wharton's male coterie, for the word "blur" denotes less a muddled erotic identity than the obscuring of a clear-eyed critical perspective. In the absence of an adequate interpretative means of addressing homosexuality and its relation to masculine irresolution in the novelist's work, critics have remained where Wharton scholarship stood in 1966, when the novelist Eleanor Clark, in an overview of recent works on Wharton in *The New York Review of Books*, questioned the "curious omission in all these books" of "the word homosexual" (12).<sup>1</sup>

Seeking to address this dilemma, scholars of Wharton's work have pursued the real-life models for Wharton's fictional bachelors: Lewis has suggested that Guy Dawnish of the short story "The Pretext" (1908) is based on Fullerton and has identified George Darrow of *The Reef* as Walter Berry transformed into a "somewhat shifty prig" (193); Judith L. Sensibar sees Martin Boyne of *The Children* (1928) as a composite of Fullerton and Berry. While there are origins in Wharton's circle for her fictional bachelors, there exist more fundamental questions beyond such sources. An enhanced critical appreciation of Wharton's fiction in the light of male homosexual relations at the early part of this century—what Wharton knowingly referred to as the "new gomorrahs"—could benefit from a sensitivity to the historically contingent nature of sexuality itself.<sup>2</sup> Such an assessment should be alert to the specific social character of France at the beginning of this century during Wharton's self-exile there, when she returned to her native America on only two occasions.<sup>3</sup> The originality of the novelist's conception of both the indecisive male and the male homosexual was shaped against a Parisian background in which male sexuality defined as "perverse" was, while medically taxonomized and sometimes socially proscribed, unhampered by legal constraints.

Throughout this essay I rely on a constellation of terms—"ambivalence," "flirtation," and "male coquetry"—or variations of such **[End Page 861]** terms, which are employed in order to illuminate the complex nexus of concerns animating Wharton's fiction and informing, as well, a specific period in French social relations. As explored here, ambivalence is a state of uncertainty that does not preclude action but allows, potentially, for a noncommittal playing out of erotic roles, an open-ended condition of not knowing one's amorous impulses while wavering. Flirtation (or coquetry) refers to a wide range of behavior in personal relations in which male and female characters may entertain erotic options without submitting to them. Flirtation may be a mode of indecision, or a mode of decisive initiation, but I want to examine it chiefly as a means of exploring unsanctioned forms of erotic...

## Additional Information

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