
Ethan Frome's Afterlife on Broadway: Crossing Generic Borders

Meredith Goldsmith*¹

¹Ursinus College – United States

Abstract

The 1920s and 1930s saw several adaptations of Edith Wharton's work on Broadway, all of them quite successful. Although Edith Wharton often criticized stage adaptations of her work, she praised Owen and Donald Davis's adaptation of her novella *Ethan Frome* on Broadway. This paper proposes first to investigate the popularity of these late translations of Wharton's work to the stage—including Margaret Ayers Barnes and Edward Sheldon's *The Age of Innocence* (1928) and Zoe Akins's *The Old Maid* (1935)—and to explore how the Davises' adaptation alters *Ethan Frome*. The shift from novella to play and the loss of the most unique aspect of *Ethan Frome*—its multiple narrative frames—forces a rethinking of other aspects of Wharton's narrative. Through the adaptation to the Broadway stage, the relations of the three main characters are altered, although the outcome of the play is not. Significantly, scenes between Mattie and Zeena to which the narrator only alludes, are staged in the play, thus forcing us to reconsider Wharton's depiction of the conflict between the two women. Stage directions and press photographs from the production emphasize the differences of the two women, yet scenes showing them together demonstrate communication that the novel obscures. Excising key aspects of characterization, as the genre requires, reshapes the nature of the conflict between the three characters and shifts the audience's sympathies even further away from Zeena and toward Mattie, yet, in an important revision of the final scene, away from Ethan. Production stills, illustrations from the stage version, and reviews will enhance our understanding of how Wharton's work changed as it crossed temporal and generic borders.

*Speaker