
Picturing Wharton, Adapting Age

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Abstract

"Picturing Wharton, Adapting Age" will explore Wharton's representations of aging in the context of illustrations and filmic adaptations of Wharton's work, drawing from periodical illustrations of Wharton's later short fictions ("Miss Mary Pask," "Bewitched") and novels (A Son at the Front, The Mother's Recompense, The Children). Stills from several filmic adaptations will also serve as evidence of the profound age-based revisions directed at Wharton's work (The Marriage Playground, The Old Maid). Borrowing from disability theory and readings of the increasingly normative ideal of the modern body, I argue that adaptors of Wharton's work intervened in her provocative depictions of aging and cross-generational relationships. Whereas Wharton's work tends to stress the anomalies of aging and desire alike, often uncomfortably so, attending to characteristics that underscore both aging and youth, often in rapid succession, adaptations of Wharton's work normalized Wharton's attention to aging's complex and destabilizing effects. What resulted in these adaptations was a normative social construction of aging, itself a codifying project that constituted a radical revision of Wharton's characters' age-based anomalies, or a re-aging of her characters, usually so as to rejuvenate the male figures and to age the women significantly. Part of what this adaptive work reveals is a norming of age vis a vis the woman's body, or a tendency outlined by both Margaret Morganroth Gullette and Kathleen Woodward's works on gender and older age. In part, too, this tendency indicates a desire to locate the woman's body via sexuality rather than intellect, ambition, or spirit, revealing a corporal politics far from Wharton's own.

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