
The Frenchwoman *Dépaysée*: Edith Wharton, Gabrielle Landormy, and Transnational Identities

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Abstract

In "The New Frenchwoman," a section of *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Edith Wharton characterizes the Frenchwoman who "rules French life" (111) as "more grown up" (106) and having a more "clear and sound sense of what constitutes real living" (110) than her American counterpart. The Frenchwoman embodies the continuity that Wharton praises in French life—as long as she retains her French propensity for remaining rooted. But what of the Frenchwoman who finds herself *dépaysée* through postwar dislocation, the imperatives of modernity, sexual freedom, and an absence of the thrift, prudence, and desire to marry for the propagation of French culture that Wharton insists in *French Ways* are the core values by which the very race is to be defined? The wayward transnational body of the Frenchwoman, "*dépaysée*" but never voluntarily an expatriate, appears in Wharton's late unpublished letters in the figure of Gabrielle Landormy (1888-1969), the companion and later wife of the well-known French philosopher Émile-Auguste Chartier (1868-1920), who wrote under the pen name "Alain." With her sister Renée, Landormy helped to run one of Wharton's workshops during World War I and in the 1920s and 1930s traveled between France and the United States. In Wharton's unpublished letters of the 1920s and 1930s to her friend Lily Norton, Gabrielle Landormy forms a good portion of the narrative as Wharton traces her movements and her business enterprises with mingled concern and irritation. This paper will analyze the Landormy story found in the letters with Wharton's representations of transnational identities through Wharton's rootless heroines of 1920s and 1930s, such as *The Glimpses of the Moon*, *The Mother's Recompense*, *The Children*, *Hudson River Bracketed*, and *The Gods Arrive*. The questions Wharton raises through Landormy's story are those of transnationalism inflected by gender: How do postwar allegiances construct or deconstruct notions of citizenship and nationality for restless heroines like Suzy Branch of *The Glimpses of the Moon*? How do movements across borders and continents intersect with, resist, or perhaps even reinforce claims of maternity, a feature of increasing interest in Wharton's late works? Through transnationalism, Wharton questions the ways in which the female body and its troublesome sexuality can be regulated and challenges conventional constructions of race and citizenship. Stranded between European ways and American ones, Landormy and Wharton's transnational heroines exist in an indeterminate state that exasperated Wharton and confounded the careful schema of national traits that she catalogued in her nonfiction.

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