Owning the Apparatus: Edith Wharton, Racine, and the Fetishization of Pre-Revolutionary France

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Abstract: This essay explores the best-selling American author Edith Wharton's status as a bibliophile and book collector. It draws comparisons between her tastes as a collector and those of some of her neighbors, especially those residing in the Berkshires area of western Massachusetts around 1900. It focuses, in particular, on a rare, first-edition copy of the play *Esther* (1689), by Jean Racine; Wharton owned a copy of this book and so did her neighbors, the Choate family. As such, the essay launches an investigation into the value that Racine held as an author for members of Wharton's milieu in fin-de-siècle America, exposing a set of class-specific beliefs that appear to counter the progressivist and democratic ideologies of that era. It reads Wharton's and her associates' interests in Racine as indicative of class-specific ideas regarding cultural inheritance. It argues that Wharton and the Choates, in collecting rare editions of Racine, were doing more than paying homage to literary tradition or enhancing their cultural capital; they were mounting tacit claims for their particular positions within a given social order, inspired in part by romantic visions of pre-revolutionary France.

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When she died in 1937, the American writer Edith Wharton left behind a library worthy of a best-selling and prize-winning author. Beginning with the success of *The House of Mirth* in 1905, Wharton remained a household name for more than three decades. At the time of her death, Wharton's personal library included about 5,000 volumes and, today, about two-thirds of it can be found intact and stored at her historic estate, The Mount, located in Lenox, Massachusetts. Among the library's

[1] My thanks to Mark Wilson, curator at the Naumkeag estate in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, for granting me access to the Choate family's copy of Racine's *Esther*, which provided much of the inspiration for this essay. Thanks, also, to Julie Quain, who volunteers at Naumkeag, for introducing me to both the collection and to Mark.

gems are a number of rare and early editions that speak to Wharton's tastes not just as a reader but, likewise, as an aesthete and a collector. One of those editions—an original, seventeenth-century copy of *Esther*, a play by the French dramatist Jean Racine—is the focus of this essay. Wharton's possession not just of this text but of this particular edition, I argue, sheds light on overlooked connections between her and certain members of her larger, socioeconomic milieu, most especially those living in the western Massachusetts region known as the Berkshires around the year 1900. At the same time, it prompts an inquiry into the value that Racine held for that very milieu in fin-de-siècle America, exposing a set of class-specific beliefs that would appear to counter the progressivist and democratic ideologies of the era.

Wharton was born in 1862 and came of age in the later decades of the nineteenth century, an era that saw the intensification of book-collecting as a practice and pastime. For certain collectors during that time, it was also an investment strategy, as elite collections were often acquired by institutions upon a collector's death. Even when such collections were bequeathed, as opposed to purchased, they served to enshrine a collector's profile and reputation. Many private library collections once furnished the seeds of some of today's most respected institutional libraries, like the Huntington Library in California, which grew from the personal collection of its benefactor, the railroad magnate Henry E. Huntington. Though her collection might have paled next to such a specimen as Huntington and his collection, Wharton was not immune from the impulse to invest in books: some valuable editions from her library include, for instance, a first-edition copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), which was privately printed in France by the firm Shakespeare and Company following a series of censorship efforts in England that stalled previous attempts at publication. Wharton's copy, which originally belonged to her friend Walter Berry, is one of only 750 original copies printed on handmade paper, with the original paper wrappers appearing pasted inside the cover of the leather-bound edition. Also included are the original subscription forms: in order to evade the French censors, Shakespeare and Company required that customers "subscribe" and pay in advance.[2] Wharton succeeded in acquiring this valuable edition, which was to be included in her friend Walter Berry's posthumous estate and turned over to his relatives following his death in 1927. This is in spite of the fact that she held little esteem for *Ulysses* as a work of literature. Though she owned copies of other works by Joyce, including *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), in letters to her friends, Wharton labelled *Ulysses* "a turgid welter of pornography" (qtd. in Lee 2008, 610). But that didn't stop her from acquiring this highly prized, rare first edition of it.

This is but one of the instances where Wharton's tastes as a collector appear to have trumped her personal sensibilities as a writer. Though William Royall Tyler, Jr., the man who would later inherit half of her library, would dismissively proclaim that she was "not a bibliophile" (qtd. in Ramsden 1999, xv) owing to the modest size of her collection, as he saw it, it's clear that she was *enough* of a bibliophile to collect a thing for its worth and not simply because she felt compelled by sentiment or appreciation for its literary merits. What's more, Wharton, as a collector, did not limit the scope of her activities to titles and authors that figured prominently during her own lifetime; indeed, many of the rare editions found in her library predate the event of her birth by centuries, suggesting that, as with the *Ulysses* example, she was not immune to the seductions of canonicity.

[2] For more on the publication history of *Ulysses*, including information about the original subscribers who, like Walter Berry, registered in advance to receive print first editions of the book, see Rainey 1996.

While new, cheaper print methods made Wharton's own early twentieth-century titles available at affordable prices, Wharton was collecting centuries-old, rare editions. So were her friends and associates: many of the members of Wharton's social circle were, like her, avid collectors of rarified editions of old books. Her friend Walter Berry, the owner of the previously mentioned first-edition *Ulysses*, was one of them. Today, Wharton's library contains over a hundred volumes that previously belonged to Berry. Among those items may be a set of rare, first-edition texts by the seventeenth-century French dramatist Jean Racine. Whether or not these volumes first belonged to Berry is unclear—there are no identifying marks, inscriptions, or signatures of ownership. But it is also likely given the style of the custom binding on both.

Berry was a committed bibliophile and he had strong preferences when it came to bindings. All of his books were bound in the same, uniform way, and by the same bindery, Champs-Stroobants. Berry's "signature" binding consisted of half- or quarter-bound navy blue morocco leather, with marbled boards and, sometimes, gilt-ruled decorations added to the boards or spines. Indeed, this is how his copy of *Ulysses*, now a part of Wharton's library, is bound. And the two Racine editions—slim volumes containing the text of the plays *Esther* and *Athalie*, Racine's final works—feature similar bindings. In her published autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, Wharton describes receiving the two texts as a gift from an unnamed "friend[], also a learned bibliophile, knowing of my admiration for Racine" (1996, 291–292). Indeed, Wharton's admiration for the French playwright must have been quite well known for, overall, her library includes five rare, first edition copies of works by Racine, all of them received as gifts.

All of this documented interest in collectible editions of Racine raises questions about the author's status in early twentieth-century America and, possibly, about Wharton's as well. What inspired American collectors like Wharton—and, possibly, her friend Walter Berry, as well—to acquire rare and costly editions of works by a French author published almost two centuries previous? What value did they see in these texts as objects, and in Racine's work more generally? What correspondences, perhaps, existed between their own era and Racine's that may have strengthened or reinforced such understandings of that value? This inquiry starts with Wharton, but it extends outward to include a number of her associates and friends as well, granting us impressions of the role that Racine might have played not just within literature at this time but with respect to elite ideology.

Wharton, Her Neighbors, and the State of Bibliophilia in America ca. 1900

One way to get at these questions is to consider Wharton's library in comparison with those owned by her neighbors. As a consequence of railway expansion, wealthy elites from Boston and New York City "discovered" the Berkshires region surrounding Lenox, Massachusetts in the middle of the nineteenth century and established summer residences throughout it. Both Wharton and her husband, Teddy, had family members living in the area when, in 1900, they purchased the land that would become The Mount, adding to a population boom that transformed Lenox from a town of 104 residents to more than 3,000 in the space of just a few years.[3] Her neighbors included descendants of the Vanderbilt, Astor, and Morgan families—icons of American Gilded Age wealth—as well as successful upstarts like George Westinghouse, her closest neighbor to the south, and also the

[3] Wharton and her husband, Teddy, were drawn to the Berkshires through the presence of Teddy's mother, Nancy Wharton, who had settled there in 1892. See Gilder 2017, 30–35.

philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. So did these neighbors of Wharton's, who compared to her in wealth and education, also collect and read books? And if they did, which books?

This is what I sought to discover on my visit to Naumkeag, the home of Joseph Hodges Choate and his family located in nearby Stockbridge, Massachusetts, about five miles from Wharton's home at The Mount. The Choate family, I had heard, had amassed a sizeable library of their own during the same era that also saw Wharton installed as their neighbor up the hill in Lenox. Joseph Choate was an attorney who had made his fortune by effectively founding the field of corporate law in America. He was involved in several of the most famous litigations of his era and also helped launch the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.[4] Given that philanthropic background, I wondered if I might discover overlaps between Wharton's library and the Choate family library at Naumkeag, which was formed by Joseph Choate, stewarded by his wife and, later, overseen by his daughter, Mabel Choate, who inherited the house after his death in 1917.

As with Wharton's historic home, The Mount, Naumkeag functions today as a museum that accommodates visitors and tours. This means that books contained in the mansion's library have to be secured, and they are: the shelves in the main library, located on the first floor, are reinforced with wire to prevent visitors from removing them. But in other spaces, including Joseph Choate's private library (also located on the main floor) and Mabel Choate's bedroom (located on the second floor), that approach to security remains unevenly applied. What I found was thus a library that was scattered throughout the house. That scattered arrangement reflected the collection's overall character, too: though it contained many interesting titles, it was not a collector's library that had been designed with preservation in mind. The Choate family, while they enthusiastically collected much of the American and European literary canon, did not appear to have prioritized the collecting of fine or rare editions. Neither did they invest in material details concerning their books. In comparison to Wharton's library, for instance, the Choates' collection contains a far greater proportion of popular titles and genre fiction, with less attention paid to the acquiring of certain editions, fine bindings, and other factors that might serve as markers of intense bibliophilic interest, except in a few special cases.

One of those special cases is to be found on the second floor, in what was once the childhood bedroom of the young Mabel Choate. That's where Mark Wilson, curator at Naumkeag, showed me another first-edition copy of Racine's *Esther*—not bound but, rather, kept in its original seventeenth-century paper wrappers and stored inside a custom-built archival slipcase. Here was one of the first significant overlaps I had discovered between Wharton's collection and that of one of her neighbors in the Lenox area. Which led to more questions, namely: why Racine and why *Esther*?

In order to answer these questions, one must begin by assessing Racine's value within the fin-de-siecle American book trade. One of the preeminent American bibliophiles during the early 1900s era was Robert Hoe, founder of the Grolier Club, a New York City-based institution that still exists today and is dedicated to the promotion of book-collecting as a pastime and art. In Wharton's celebrated historical novel *The Age of Innocence* (1920), her protagonist Newland Archer is credited with being one of the fictional founders of the club that, in real life, Hoe and others helped to establish. Wharton, for her own part, was likewise familiar with both Hoe and the contents of his prized library collection; she owned a copy of O. A. Bierstadt's 1895 work *The Library of Robert Hoe: A Contribution*

[4] For more on Choate's legacy concerning New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, in particular, see Anon. 1917.

to the History of Bibliophilism in America, which, like so many other volumes in her library, was a gift from that aforementioned friend, Walter Berry. A penciled inscription in Berry's hand graces a front endpaper and reads: "Edith Wharton—Christmas 1897."[5] The book itself offers readers a descriptive tour of Hoe's personal library, which, much like Wharton's own collection, also featured rare, first-edition copies of works by Racine, including *Esther*. In his survey of Hoe's library, Bierstadt makes a point of mentioning these "precious duodecimo volumes" (1895, 137). Hoe was a successful manufacturer of printing presses and his library was sold at auction following his death in 1909; in anticipation of that event, books such as Bierstadt's were used to circulate information about the library collection, which was eventually acquired in piecemeal fashion by a number of high-ranking institutional libraries, including the Houghton Library at Harvard University. But were collectors like Hoe, the Choate family and, arguably, Wharton herself interested in acquiring Racine in general, or acquiring Racine's play *Esther* in particular? And if so, what was driving that interest?

Esther as Valuable Apparatus

Today, *Esther* is often overlooked, considered to be one of Racine's minor works—plays that he wrote later in life, after his "official" (though ultimately short-lived) withdrawal from writing. Mitchell Greenberg, in his 2010 book on Racine, reports that "*Esther* is not, truth be told, a riveting psychological drama" (2010, 232). But turn-of-the-century American readers, it seems, felt differently about it, perhaps in part due to its presence within elite educational curricula aimed at young American girls. Racine's play is based on the Biblical tale of Esther, which appears in the Christian Old Testament as well as in the Hebrew Bible. Esther is the name given to the second wife of King Ahaseurus, who marries him at the behest of her uncle, Mordecai, despite being secretly a Jew. When the King attempts to wage war and exterminate the Jewish race, Esther reveals her identity to him in an effort to save her people, while also identifying conspirators within his own court. Her intercession ends up turning the tide of his genocidal vengeance and unleashing it on her people's—and her uncle Mordecai's—enemies, instead. Significantly, the original, Hebrew text of the Book of Esther omits any direct mentions of God and instead presents the Jews as a worthy race who are entitled to seek revenge; in the Greek version, though, the Jews' revenge at the hands of Ahaseurus is presented as God's will and the direct result of His intervention. Racine stays mostly faithful to the Hebrew text, but he invokes direct, repeated references to God. This suggests that he was not aiming for a strict adaptation of either the Hebrew or Greek versions but that he "made choices" to accommodate his contemporary audience, in the words of critic John Campbell (2009, 31).

That audience was, much like its late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American reader base, originally comprised of elite, teenage schoolgirls. The play was commissioned by Madame de Maintenon, the second wife of King Louis XIV of France, for the pupils at St. Cyr, a school that catered to the daughters of "ruined French nobles," as Charles T. Downey explains (2006, 495). Louis XIV had extracted money from the families of those who were close to his court in order to fund a string of expensive and disastrous wars, leaving those families destitute; thus, St. Cyr was something of a charity operation for those whose fallen fortunes threatened to affect their daughters' standings in society (Downey 2006, 495). Madame de Maintenon, in commissioning Racine to write the play, requested "a kind of moral or historical poem from which passion is absent" (qtd. in

[5] For Berry's inscription and other details relating to Wharton's copy of this text, see Bierstadt 1895 via the website EdithWhartonsLibrary.org, doi: http://edithwhartonslibrary.org/ ewl/items/show/184.

Kennedy 2016, 112). However, productions of the play featured performances by the young pupils at St. Cyr and were attended by members of the court, resulting in a minor scandal owing to the public display of the young women's charms. Following this debacle, Racine would go on to write only one more play, *Athalie*, also commissioned by Maintenon and performed by the girls at St. Cyr, though this time, in a strict oratorio style that lacked costuming, music, or sets—decisions that were made to offset some of the offense caused by the original performance of *Esther*.

That *Esther* should have been the subject of scandal back in 1689 is difficult to see, given contemporary critics' feelings towards it. Greenberg asserts that "[f]rom the beginning it has functioned as a pious morality tale for schoolchildren, enhanced by costume, music, and the curiosity of a jaded public" (2010, 232). But there are others who disagree, including the critic Roland Barthes, who, in his 1960 full-length study of Racine's works, does not treat *Esther* as a digression but, rather, as a kind of case in point. According to Barthes, Racine's entire oeuvre consists of repeated attempts at dramatizing the conflicts inherent in the modern notion of the family, with "incest, rivalry among brothers, murder of the father, overthrow of the sons" constituting "the fundamental actions of Racinian theater" (Barthes 1964, 9). Those conflicts, relics of what Barthes labels "ancient fable" and "archaic bedrock" (9–10) are thrown into greater relief given the context of seventeenth-century France, an era that saw intense negotiations occurring within the social hierarchy. Racine's tragic characters mediate, via their suffering, the conflict between new and old rules governing inheritance, private property, and social status. This makes *Esther*, in Barthes' view,

> not only a circumstantial entertainment for children; it is actually a promotion of childhood, the triumphant identification of irresponsibility and happiness, the election of a delicious passivity savored by a whole chorus of virgin-victims, whose chants, both praise and plaint, form a kind of sensual milieu of Racinian happiness. (129)

In other words, to the same extent that Racinian tragedy enshrines the modern family in general by attaching it to a mythically glorious past, *Esther* enshrines modern, privileged girlhood, in particular, engineering a similarly fabled legacy for it.

The reification of childhood in seventeenth-century France appears linked to what Michel Foucault identifies as a shift from "analogical" subjectivity to "the transparency of Classical representation," which became a de facto means for understanding human subjectivity later on, in the eighteenth century (1994, 25–26). What Foucault is describing here is a transition from humans regarding themselves as analogous subjects formed in God's image—analogues of each other and thus also God's will—to humans who regard themselves primarily as descendants of other humans, especially those belonging to glorious ancient civilizations centered in Greece and Rome. This is a shift away from divine ontology and towards biology, which brought with it an increased interest in heritage and bloodlines, according to Foucault.

What I would like to argue here is that something similar was occurring in America circa 1900—something that is furthermore revealed through an assessment of the habits and tastes of specific book collectors during this era. Seventeenth-century France, as Greenberg claims, surfaces in historical hindsight as an "apogee of hegemony" (2010, 1). It's a period that saw French artists like Racine working to harness classical aesthetics and yoke them to arguments made in favor of monarchical rule. Through references to classical Greece and Rome, such arguments sought to lend

credibility, vis-à-vis history, to Louis XIV's often controversial reign over an increasingly modern and volatile French public. It is for this reason that Leo Bersani, much like Foucault, sees seventeenth-century France as enshrined in pre-revolutionary "conservatism," right down to its literature:

> Classical French literature is a conservative social force not merely because its pessimism about human nature would discourage any hopeful view of what might be accomplished by changes in social conditions, but also because it helps to reinforce the hierarchical structure of seventeenth-century French society. (Bersani 1976, 56)

Following Bersani's lead here, Greenberg asserts that theater became "the most important ideological apparatus for seventeenth-century France" (2010, 6). It served, in essence, as a vessel for the staging of national traditions that, though barely recognizable as such, were used to bolster and consecrate a conservative vision of the state.

Building on Greenberg's assessment of Racine, it's possible to see *Esther* as an attempt to dramatize the origins of the modern family. But it's a narrow, privileged view of the modern family that appears on display in this text—one that results primarily, and rather reductively, from the forces of economic competition and conquest. Mordecai, who is the orphaned Esther's uncle and guardian, "dedicate[s] her as virgin-victim to the God-bridegroom [King Ahaseurus]," according to Barthes. "[H]e manipulates her actions as he would those of an automaton […][;] he concentrates within himself both sacred power and temporal ingenuity" and becomes "a veritable specter of inertia to which the Racinian psyche submits and dedicates itself, as Esther to her creator" (Barthes 1964, 128–129). Mordecai is the true architect of Esther's fate, according to this reading; as the "owner" of Esther, he "sells" her to King Ahaseurus and, in so doing, purchases the safety of his own people and likewise his right to reap vengeance on his enemies. Greenberg picks up where Barthes leaves off, finding traces of the Oedipal myth within the text of Racine's *Esther* and reinforcing the play's connection to modern, Freudian interpretations of the family:

> Here […] it [the massacre of an entire race of people, the Jews] is rendered all the more pathetic by the intensely affective familial rhetoric that poignantly reduces the obliteration of an entire people to the destruction of a family ("mère, sœur, frère, père" [mother, sister, father, brother]) thereby introducing, I would argue, that familial, that is Oedipal, dynamic that is obfuscated by the ostensibly passionless sweep of the dramatic plot. (Greenberg 2010, 230)

To this, Greenberg's reading of Racine's vision of the modern family, we might add Erich Auerbach's observation that the Racinian hero "has so strong an awareness of its […] rank that it can never be without it" (2003, 375). This is no less true of Esther, who, in the play, approaches her husband King Ahaseurus' chambers without having been summoned, an offense that is punishable by death, so that she may intercede on behalf of her people, the Jews. Upon the threshold, though, Racine has her falter and cry out to her handmaidens, "O children, hold your queen! […] I die."[6] Here,

[6] The translator of this edition, John Masefield, admits to taking many liberties with Racine's original text, which may be reflected here. Auerbach, meanwhile, translates these lines as "Handmaidens, sustain your distracted queen! I die." See Racine 1922, 43 and Auerbach 2003, 376.

she draws attention to her status as queen even as she expresses weakness and solicits help, supporting Auerbach's point about how "Racine's tragic personages identify themselves by their rank. They do not say 'I wretched,' they say 'I wretched prince!'" (2003, 376) This tactic is central to Racine's style as a dramatist: a character's position in the social hierarchy becomes *the* chief feature of their personality and character in these plays. In prioritizing issues of rank and offering them up as a shortcut to character psychology, Racine endeared himself to members of the court in seventeenth-century France. And, I want to posit, it is this same tactic that may have endeared him to upper-class readers and collectors in turn-of-the-century America, including Edith Wharton and her neighbors, the Choate family.

Legacies of Monarchy and Class Allegiance

Joseph Choate served as ambassador to the United Kingdom from 1899 to 1905, during the McKinley and Roosevelt presidencies. During his six years in that role, he frequently visited France, including once during the spring of 1900, when he was joined by his wife Caroline and daughter Mabel (Sandford Martin 1920, 125–126). A bookseller's receipt, tucked inside the Choate family's edition of *Esther*, dates from this period and lists the book's purchase price. Accounting for both inflation and the redenomination of the French currency that occurred in 1960, the 100-franc sticker price listed on the receipt would total about $4,000 in today's US dollars. This makes the Choates' purchase of the Racine volume not extravagant by book collector standards—especially in 1900, when volumes from the likes of Robert Hoe's private collection were individually selling for much more. But it's a steep price when one considers that the Choates did not really collect fine editions to add to their library at Naumkeag.

So what prompted the Choates to acquire the precious edition of *Esther*, the same one owned by Wharton? There are a number of factors that can help explain this situation, I think. The first has to do with the book's appearance in the educational curricula of elite young women during this era. Charles T. Downey explains that "*Esther* is part of a tradition of school theater [along with] Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*" (2006, 495). John Campbell, similarly, characterizes it as a "cross between a piece of religious poetry […] and an innocent entertainment for schoolchildren" (2009, 25–26). A popular English-language version of Racine's *Esther*, translated by the American Caroline Andrews—an Astor and also a distant relative of Edith Wharton's through the Schermerhorn family line—was published in 1876 and may have helped to popularize the play for modern American audiences. The presence of first-edition copies in both Wharton's and the Choates' libraries may result, then, from a combination of class and gender politics: if young, upper-class, American girls were being taught to appreciate *Esther*, then Wharton would have likely been the recipient of such an education right alongside the young Mabel Choate.

But beyond these shared curricular experiences, there is a wider, political dimension to be considered. Campbell observes that, apart from its use in turn-of-the-century schoolrooms, *Esther* may be viewed as the product of a complex set of political circumstances. The text of *Esther*, he argues, centers on the dramatization of a "power struggle" that has its roots in the political landscape of seventeenth-century France (2009, 26). Recall, for instance, that the original Hebrew text of the Book of Esther contains no direct mentions of God, but that Racine's text does. Indeed, Racine's version has Esther chosen by King Ahaseurus not because she is beautiful, or because of any qualities that are specific to her as a character; rather, she is selected with the help of God's grace and intervention. As

she puts it in the play, "Heaven […] caused the scale to tip for me" and "acted upon [King Ahaseurus'] heart," until "At last, with eyes in which gentleness reigned, 'Be queen,' he said …" (qtd. in Auerbach 2003, 373). Auerbach quotes this passage and shows how it is consistent with his understanding of the Racinian tragic hero, who does not act but is instead acted upon as the object of force and not its author. Through God, Esther is placed in a seemingly pre-ordained but highly political position in this play, through which she is able to assert her influence. Perhaps the most overtly political aspect of the whole text, then, is the way that it condones slaughter and places the decision to slaughter—i.e. the ability to "play god"—in the hands of a ruler. King Ahaseurus reverses course and, instead of slaughtering the Jews (as was suggested by his servant, Haman), he orders his troops to slay Haman himself, his ten sons, and his whole tribe. Thus, one genocide is prevented and another enacted according to God's, and the ruler's, will.

This couching of modern monarchy within visions of holy legitimacy has obvious significance for the kingdom of Louis XIV. But what of its significance to fin-de-siecle America? What did readers like Wharton or the youngest members of Choate family see in this text that matched up with visions of life in their own era? If, as Greenberg says, theater, and Racinian theater in particular, was emblematic of ideological "apparatuses" at work in seventeenth-century France, then American collectors who prized this and other rare editions from Racine's oeuvre would appear to be offering tacit support for such an ideology. That is to say, collectors and admirers of Racine may have used his works in order to access and indulge in the fantasy of a pre-revolutionary, pre-democratic France. What's more, this is a fantasy that is twice removed from its original source: where seventeenth-century France used ancient Greece as a source of inspiration and, arguably, cultural appropriation, early twentieth-century Americans like Wharton and the Choates may have been interested in doing something similar through the vantage point of seventeenth-century France.

This connection helps to place Wharton's own political leanings in a clearer, more nuanced context. The biographer Hermione Lee, for instance, explains that Wharton, who wrote many books about France, praises it as a "grown-up" nation while viewing America, by contrast, as an "infantile" one (2008, 268). In Wharton's *French Ways and their Meaning*, published in 1919, just after she had emigrated to France and begun living there full-time, Wharton lauds the French for their orthodox approach to manners and protocol, for their moral superiority, and for being "far less the slaves of the luxuries they have invented than are the other races who have adopted these luxuries" (2010, 105). This idealization of Wharton's adopted country can likewise be seen throughout her library—not just in the books she acquired and collected, as with the Racine volume, but also in her interactions with those books, including her annotations. In a volume of Paul Valéry's *Variété* (1924), she marks a passage in which Valéry explains, through references to Leonardo, that the great man is not original but descended from ancient models and prototypes. Translated from Valéry's French, the line in question reads, "The great man does not reject the past, because he is of the past" (1924, 184). Indeed, Wharton's estimations of French superiority extended even to the practice of criticism in which, once again, she saw the French as prevailing over Americans and others. This, as she put it, was due to the "rich deposit" of the French artistic tradition, which made French critics better, almost from birth, at their trade. Her views on this subject were likely influenced by members of her social set, including the French critic and novelist Paul Bourget, who argues something similar in his 1895 work *Outre-Mer* (see Bourget 1895).

Maturity and adultness, ritual and tradition, devotional observance of the past, an inherited appreciation for "taste" and luxury: these are the characteristics of French culture that Wharton idolizes. And they are, arguably, precisely what appears on display in Racine's works. That includes *Esther*, which began life as a moralistic tale for young schoolgirls, designed to present wifely devotion and national, or ethnic, pride as necessary ingredients for ideal femininity. As such, I think we can arrive at some informed speculations about the Wharton's and the Choates' interests in Racine: as representatives of two American households that had geography and socioeconomics in common, both, it seems, collected rare Racine editions because they were inspired by a fetishistic appreciation for "traditional" (that is, pre-modern and pre-revolutionary) France. That they did so despite being members of, and participants in, a modern democratic state is especially intriguing, for it suggests that such understandings remained deprioritized in light of class values and loyalties. Such priorities, though, were not confined to the representatives I've named here. In fact, they were widespread throughout American elite society at the start of the twentieth century and discernible, even, in the case of the Roosevelt presidency. Wharton was close friends with President Theodore Roosevelt and, likewise, it was he who appointed Joseph Choate as ambassador to the United Kingdom. But what the connection to Racine helps to make all the more clear is how this group of ruling elites—whose collective influence extended across literature and the arts (in Wharton's case), law and diplomacy (in Choate's case), and politics and government (in Roosevelt's case)—saw their positions within the reigning American social hierarchy as being essentially inherited. This inheritance came not through culture in an immediate sense, but through the racial legacies of culture in a more protracted and ancient sense. As seventeenth-century elites, including Louis XIV, saw themselves as descendants of Greece and Rome and, accordingly, as custodians of classical culture, twentieth-century Americans like Wharton and the Choates saw themselves as descendants of seventeenth-century France and as guardians of those aforementioned "rich deposits" of white cultural tradition.

In conclusion, I want to argue for an understanding of the inherent and far-reaching connections between book-collecting as a pastime in America—a seemingly innocent one, I'll grant—and hegemonic structures underpinning life there circa 1900. In collecting rare editions of Racine, Wharton and the Choates were doing more than paying homage to literary tradition or enhancing their cultural capital; they were mounting tacit claims for their particular positions within a given social order and using the image of Racine to lend greater credibility to those claims. Just as Barthes observes that "[t]here are no characters in the Racinian theater[,] […] only situations" (1964, 13), so might we extrapolate and observe that the white, American, fin-de-siecle bibliophile is less of a subject than a representative of his rank—and less of an American, perhaps, than an orphaned child of Europe.

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