
'GILDED PROSTITUTION'

*Status, money, and transatlantic
marriages, 1870-1914*

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considerations are not present in all marriages but that keener interest is shown in the handing over of substantial property in the marriage settlement. The persistence both of the cliché and the stereotypes of the impoverished noble and the American heiress owe much to the notoriety of a few alliances which attracted much publicity. At a time when many noble families felt besieged by the pressures on them to try to maintain their leadership of society, the negative publicity of this sort may well have been unwelcome. The exposure of the material side to marriage would have conflicted with the gentlemanly code of conduct, according to which money matters were not discussed in public. The revelations about a peer's misdemeanours would have undermined some of the mystique of the nobility, and, even in what was regarded as a hedonistic society, scandals were avidly avoided. We should not underestimate the pressures to conform. This was a time of social change when the aristocracy was keener than ever to retain its power. It would not have greatly assisted elite solidarity if men were breaking rank and seeking brides outside the traditional sources of aristocratic wives. Such marriages put pressures on the elite to reassert its leadership role and demonstrate its ability to assimilate newcomers. That is why the description of the arrival of Americans as an invasion is so significant: it indicates that the aristocracy was unable to contain the challenge and saw itself as being overwhelmed. Likewise, the weight of the negative characterization of Anglo-American marriages fell upon the American brides: it was their material motives which were questioned rather than those of their husbands. By attributing an unhealthy obsession with money to Americans, the British elite could blame Americans (and Jews) for the unwelcome changes taking place within the power structure of British society. Americans were held responsible for the watering down of aristocratic lineages, rising costs in London society, and lowering standards.⁵³ There was more, then, to the American heiress stereotype than just an acknowledgement of American wealth: there was, as we shall see, caught up in this a reservoir of resentment, envy, prejudice, and anxiety.

The American heiress: the formation of a stereotype

Of all supposed factors in history, scandal about women was commonest and least to be trusted.

(Henry Adams, *History of the United States* (1918), 1: 345)

In the 1870s there were few titled Americans in London society but they made their mark and were popular members of the Marlborough House Set. In these early years of the 'hymeneal North-West Passage' American women were, at times, victims of ignorance and prejudice and treated as a joke. Lady Randolph Churchill recalled:

In England, as on the Continent, the American woman was looked upon as a strange and abnormal creature, with habits and manners something between a Red Indian and a Gaiety Girl. Anything of an outlandish nature might be expected of her. . . .

As a rule, people looked upon her as a disagreeable and even dangerous person, to be viewed with suspicion, if not avoided altogether. Her dollars were her only recommendation, and each was credited with the possession of them, otherwise what was her *raison d'être*?¹

Jennie's niece by marriage, Consuelo, Duchess of Marlborough, did not fare much better more than twenty years later when Lady Blandford made remarks to her 'revealing that she thought we all lived on plantations with negro slaves and that there were Red Indians ready to scalp us just round the corner'.² Belle Wilson encountered similar misconceptions about life in the United States. Whilst visiting Cowes during her 1886 European tour, a frosty British matron told Belle that she thought America had to be 'a dreadful place' as Americans did not have servants. When Belle enlightened her, the British matron retorted that she had thought Americans did not like to be servants, whereupon Belle replied: 'They don't. All our working class are English.'³ British aristocrats either had some strange notions about the barbarity of American

life or were professing belief in popular misconceptions in order to put down young American women. Either way, such exchanges point to a clear undercurrent of prejudice.

As the number of transatlantic marriages increased, American women became less of a victim of British aristocratic humour and more of a threat to the exclusiveness of aristocratic circles. In fact, it was the marriage of Mrs Lilian Hammersley to Lady Blandford's ex-husband (the eighth Duke of Marlborough) which had provoked the comment from one British mother that American women were 'poachers' in the London marriage market and behaved like 'forward hussies'.⁴ The success of Americans in capturing titled husbands was viewed with resentment by mothers with daughters of marriageable age on their hands. By the early 1900s, however, the invective had switched from a contempt for uncouth, ill-bred ex-colonials and dismissal of Americans' ambitiousness and social climbing to a much more aggressive form of hostility. In 1904 H. B. Marriott-Watson described American women as cold of heart and cool of head in one of his articles for *The Nineteenth Century and After*.⁵ For him, the American woman was allowing her personal ambitions to dictate sexual relations, and this spelt danger for the future of the race: women were not marrying for love and devoting themselves to motherhood. A year later, a more extreme view was expressed by an anonymous contributor to the *Contemporary Review*. The author took up this theme of American women shirking motherhood and alleged that American pecesses were having a devastating effect upon British families: the failure of some women to produce male heirs meant that some titles would become extinct.

We can characterize this shift of attitude in another way. Whereas in the 1870s and 1880s the general view was that Americans were married for their money, by the peak years of transatlantic marriages, 1895-1905, American women were being portrayed as the ones who were doing the exploiting, buying titles. Attitudes definitely hardened towards Americans around the turn of the century, and yet this was a time when Anglo-American societies were flourishing, such as the American Society of London (1895), the Anglo-American League (1898), the Society of American Women (1899), the Atlantic Union (1901), and the Pilgrims (1902).⁶ Attitudes towards transatlantic marriages, it would appear, did not coincide with the activities of politically minded groups in London society trying to promote Anglo-American friendship. Even

though the social contact between the British and Americans elites increased, there is no real evidence that the British aristocracy felt more at ease with the growing number of transatlantic marriages. There was a underlying anxiety about the implications, and this was related, above all, to the role of money. The almost indiscriminate use of the term 'heiress' would appear to confirm this.

In addition to the frequency with which titled Americans were described as heiresses, it is possible to identify a stereotypical image of these women presented in the newspapers, journals, contemporary fiction, and autobiographies of the period. Along with wealth went a set of characteristics which denoted the social origins of 'the American heiress' and accounted for her success in the London marriage market. The stereotype cut across both British and American culture, although there were different aspects depending upon the nationality and cosmopolitanism of the perceiver. Within British society the formation of this stereotype denoted a need amongst contemporaries to understand the changes taking place around them and it performed a specific function. But before looking at the way the American heiress stereotype operated in Britain, we need to establish its content, that is to say, the characteristics which were attributed to these women.⁷

Contemporary fiction is a rich source of American heiress stereotypes. From such novels as *The Shuttle*, *Transplanted Daughters*, *The Anglo-Americans*, and *His Fortunate Grace* – all written in the 1900s – we can construct a composite American heiress. The woman herself was usually the daughter of a rich businessman who had made his money since the Civil War. She often had the reputation of being a beauty and was considered an individual, that is to say, someone with character. In many stories, it was the mother who was anxious for the daughter to marry well and who saw advantages accruing to herself by allying her daughter to a noble household, even if the suitor was penniless and this was almost always the case. The family was usually based in New York and moved in fashionable circles. This fictional stereotype was not far removed from the way that titled Americans were described in newspapers or perceived in London society, with a few added embellishments to represent the American woman in a more negative light. Among the features most likely to provoke comment were the woman's appearance, her behaviour, and her social origins.

Newspaper reporters of Anglo-Americans weddings on both sides

of the Atlantic were obsessed with the physical appearance of the bride. British papers, such as the *Daily Mail* or *Vanity Fair*, were particularly inclined to dwell on this, as the following examples illustrate:

The bride . . . is a tall and beautiful blond.⁸

She is of graceful figure, fond of athletics, of intensely artistic temperament.⁹

The Duchess of Marlborough is becoming one of the most popular women in London. She is a very popular woman, generous, exceedingly amusing, and pleasant. She has considerable good looks as well.¹⁰

The New York newspapers were even more prone to giving glowing descriptions of Americans who married into the British peerage. The *New York World* contained descriptions of Mrs McCrevey (the Hon. Mrs Coventry), Eloise Breese (Lady Ancaster), and Anne Breese (Lady Innes-Kerr) as being, respectively, 'a lovely and vivacious woman', 'very handsome, with a brilliant complexion, dark curly hair and dark eyes', and 'classically beautiful'.¹¹ Anyone reading either British or American newspaper accounts would have been left with the distinct impression that most of the American women who married into the peerage were renowned beauties. More general comments on American peeresses reinforce this impression of beauty, as do descriptions of individual Americans contained in memoirs.¹² The sixth Duke of Portland, for example, remembered Consuelo Manchester for the way 'she took Society completely by storm by her beauty, wit and vivacity, and it was soon at her very pretty feet'.¹³ Consuelo was described in one New York paper in 1898 as having been 'one of the loveliest girls in the United States'.¹⁴ Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan referred to her compatriot, Mary Curzon, as 'a dazzling beauty'.¹⁵ There is no shortage of testimonies to the beauty of many of the titled American women in London society, and, while the emphasis placed on physical attractiveness varied from person to person, it is nevertheless apparent that beauty was an integral part of the heiress stereotype. It could even be suggested that beauty went hand in hand with the notion of wealth and reinforced the view that only exceptionally wealthy or beautiful women outside the aristocracy were successful in marrying into the class above.¹⁶

Another aspect of the physical appearance of American women frequently commented upon was the way they dressed. Frederick Martin, an American whose niece married the Earl of Craven, wrote of American peeresses: 'They believe in the value of advertisement, they like to see society paragraphs about their jewels and their gowns'.¹⁷ The Society columns in both American and British papers were filled with the details of gowns and jewellery worn at weddings and balls. *Queen*, especially, concentrated on the dresses of the women in its column headed 'Fashionable Marriages'. Mary Leiter's wedding dress, for example, was described as

a white satin trained gown, trimmed with old point lace, which had been worn by her mother and her grandmother at their weddings. Her only ornament was a diamond brooch, the gift of the bridegroom; and she carried a bouquet of the loveliest white orchids.¹⁸

Belle Herbert, writing to her parents about her first trip to Cowes, made frequent mention of the dresses she and her sister, May Goelet, wore:

Monday night Mr Mackay gave a pretty dance and I wore a lovely grey tulle ball dress which I had all beautifully packed to send home. It was immensely admired . . . and it was so lucky that I had pretty dresses as everyone talked so much about our clothes. . . . Our Cowes week was most disastrous on our clothes everything that we wore there is nearly ruined so that I am afraid it will be rather hard on Papa's purse.¹⁹

Clothes are, of course, an essential part of stereotyping, since they give some indication of a person's wealth and social standing, and Belle Wilson's comments reveal the pressure in smart society to conform to its standards of conspicuous expenditure. The selection of an appropriate gown for a social function also indicated that the wearer was *au fait* with the latest fashions and customs in Society. Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan recalled how on one occasion the Prince of Wales brought to her attention her neglect to wear 'the prescribed tiara' at a dinner in their honour: 'The Princess has taken the trouble to wear a tiara. Why have you not done so?'²⁰

One man who benefited from the demand for fashionable gowns to wear in London was the Parisian couturier, Jean Worth. In

fact, on the occasion of Worth's death, the *Illustrated London News* commented that

Worth was fortunate enough to secure the patronage of the Empress Eugénie in the hey-day of the Empire, but he ruled that sovereign as he ruled the American heiresses who, in the degenerate days of the Third Republic, became his chief clients.²¹

In 1867, several years before transatlantic marriages had become frequent occurrences, an article appeared in *Harper's* severely criticizing American women's devotion to French fashion.²² It denounced the 'ludicrous' way in which American women avidly followed Parisian fashions and adopted the latest styles without thought as to their suitability. It claimed that Parisian fashion leaders were physically unattractive and asked the question:

Why should American women so strenuously endeavour to follow out the Paris fashions, which are invented by capricious women of rank and wealth, or by the dress-makers, who, with the intention of inciting their customers to inordinate expenditure, rack their imaginations for the purpose of producing 'something new'?

The article sets up an interesting opposition between the simple, practical, unostentatious daughters of the American Republic and the conniving, avaricious European dressmaker with his wasteful, vain, aristocratic clients. The criticism is hammered home with a final point about the 'baneful influence' these American slaves to Parisian fashion were having on American society: the inability of young men to afford to marry extravagant wives, the encouragement of flirtation, the rendering of domesticity as distasteful, and worst of all the incompatibility of such women with a home life. This critique of American women in the leisured elite prefigures the argument which developed later about the growing anti-domestic inclinations of young women.

American women may have been amongst the best-dressed women in London, but the extent of their wardrobe testified ultimately to the financial resources of their family. In Belle's letter to her parents, the account of her success at Cowes is to a large degree attributed to the expensive gowns she had just purchased in Paris, and the excuse for such an outlay was that it attracted the attention of royalty. The implication is that a comparatively small sum spent on clothes could reap large rewards. Moreover, Belle was implying

that her success would be a reflection of her father's financial standing. This is, of course, similar to Thorstein Veblen's argument about dress as 'an expression of the pecuniary culture'. 'In the common run of cases', he wrote,

the conscious motive of the wearer or purchaser of conspicuously wasteful apparel is the need of conforming to established usage, and of living up to the accredited standard of taste and reputation. It is not only that one must be guided by the code of proprieties in dress in order to avoid the mortification that comes of unfavourable notice and comment . . . but besides that, the requirement of expensiveness is so ingrained into our habits of thought in matters of dress that any other than expensive apparel is instinctively odious to us.²³

Veblen went on to say that expensive clothes signified that the wearer both consumed 'a relatively large value' (an important fact to demonstrate to members of his/her own social group or the one s/he aspired to join) and consumed without producing (a demonstration for the benefit of social inferiors). In accordance with Veblen's theory of the leisure class, the expenditure of Americans on Parisian gowns – the annual visit to Worth's rooms to purchase his latest creations for the coming Season – was intended as a 'subtler sign of expenditure' to be interpreted by a knowing elite as proof of their social worth.

Moving on to behaviour, there are perhaps three main aspects of the behaviour of American women which received much comment: their speech, their character, and their expenditure of money. In her memoirs, Lady Randolph Churchill noted the tendency to reduce Americans to one type and the way in which American speech was ridiculed in *Punch* and elsewhere:

The innumerable caricatures supposed to represent the typical American girl depicted her always of one type: beautiful and refined in appearance, but dressed in exaggerated style, and speaking – with a nasal twang – the most impossible language. The young lady who, in refusing anything to eat, says, 'I'm pretty crowded just now,' or in explaining why she is travelling alone, remarks that 'Poppa don't voyage, he's too fleshy,' was thought to be representative of the national type and manners.²⁴

Henry James took Trollope to task for his treatment of American

speech in fiction. The gross grammatical errors of Isabel Boncasen's speech in *The Duke's Children* were, according to James, more representative of the English misapprehension of American speech than of American speech itself. In his critique of Trollope, James seems to be implying that the English novelist's portrayal of the American girl was wholly misconceived, that if Trollope could not discover 'the mysteries of her conversation' then he could not possibly get the rest right.²⁵ The American accent and idioms or colloquialisms were one more characteristic which could be held up to ridicule, as they still are today, and which could be used to emphasize that Americans did not fit in. In Britain, of course, accent was (and still is, to some extent) used as an indicator of social class.

When examining the way contemporaries described the character of the American woman, it becomes evident that, in fact, two different positions were adopted. On the one hand, there were social commentators like Frederick Martin, Smalley, and Corelli who wrote of the independence, adaptability, charm, energy, and resourcefulness of 'the American woman', while, on the other, there was the image of the rich, overdressed social climber who fawned upon titled aristocrats.²⁶ Corelli actually made the distinction between the two types and called the latter the 'American Female Bounder'.²⁷ She characterized this type as follows:

She is fond of 'frocks and frills' -- and wears an enormous quantity of jewels, 'stones' as she calls them. She 'pushes' herself in every possible social direction, and wherever she sees she is not wanted, there, more particularly than elsewhere, she continues to force an entry.

It was this type, 'the Bounder', which was closest to the American heiress stereotype.

The notion of American women buying their way into the best society, as opposed to being naturally taken up by members of that society, implied that, apart from their wealth, these women had little to recommend them. This in turn, undermined the concept of Society as a collection of people 'chiefly distinguished for their good-breeding, culture and refinement'.²⁸ In 1905 *Vanity Fair* published an article about the way in which the new American ambassador and his wife (the Whitclaw Reids) were using their influence to

discriminate amongst their compatriots. It went on to say: 'Within the last ten or fifteen years, mysterious strangers from across the Atlantic, better furnished with dollars than credentials, have turned up in our midst, and have been taken unquestioningly at their own valuation.'²⁹ This relaxation of social barriers was attributed to the expense of entertaining, and there is, in fact, ample journalistic evidence that Americans were providing some very lavish entertainments during the London Season. The *New York American* noted, in a self-congratulatory tone, that

The dominance of Americans has been the most striking feature of the social season just closed, admitted on all sides to be the most successful and brilliant in a generation. This distinction has been achieved mainly by the lavish entertainments of Americans and the invigoration they have infused into almost all society functions during the last few months.³⁰

Another American newspaper report was more ambiguous in its comments about the expenditure of Americans in London society. While it unequivocally stated that the motive behind such expenditure was social ambition, it also insinuated that London society was not as superior as it purported to be: 'Much as the English sneer at Americans, particularly rich Americans, dollars will more readily win position in London than anywhere else in the world.'³¹ T. H. S. Escott, amongst others, blamed the rise in the cost of living within smart society on American millionaires competing with colonial plutocrats. This sort of attitude towards American expenditure on entertainments was behind much of the resentment about the social success of Americans in London.³² This resentment, however, coexisted with a favourable response to those Americans who provided entertainments. *Vanity Fair*, for example, praised American hostesses in London as follows: 'they entertain with an originality, an entrain, and, above all, a splendid disregard for money, which our sadly handicapped aristocracy cannot afford to imitate.'³³ In a similar vein, a dinner and concert given by Mrs Bradley Martin, mother of Lady Craven, was praised in an article entitled 'America in London', published in *The King*.³⁴ Whether people resented or welcomed wealthy Americans into the inner circles of London society, they assumed that Americans were willing to pay handsomely to gain entry. And it was this willingness to

spend money in order to establish or maintain their social position which was associated with American heiresses.

Appearance and behaviour are not the only factors which contribute to the perception of a person. Information relating to life-style and social origins will also affect the way that someone is 'placed' in our experience of different social types. A woman might be considered wealthy and competitive in Society, but if she is a British aristocrat different deductions will be made about her behaviour from those about a businessman's daughter. Knowledge of the social origins of an outsider to London's social elite, however incomplete, was crucial to the weighing up of a person's acceptability.

American women were closely associated with New York and the Four Hundred. The British tended not to make the finer distinctions between Americans from different parts of the country, as Jennie Churchill complained:

The wife and daughters of the newly-enriched Californian miner, swathed in silks and satins, and blazing with diamonds on the smallest provocation; the cultured, refined, and retiring Bostonian; the aristocratic Virginian, as full of tradition and family as a Percy of Northumberland, or a La Rochefoucauld; the cosmopolitan and up-to-date New Yorker – all were grouped in the same category, all were considered tarred with the same brush.³⁵

Nor did they make, so it was alleged, distinctions between Americans of reputable social standing and parvenues. Americans themselves were of course keenly aware of the origins and age of wealth and regarded it as an insult that British aristocrats failed to be discriminating. As *Vanity Fair* reported: 'It has happened that members of that exclusive body the "Four Hundred" have been dreadfully shocked to find some compatriot who is taboo on the other side of the water received with open arms in Belgravia and Mayfair.'³⁶ And as for the American women who had themselves presented at the English court', wrote Edith Wharton in her memoirs, 'well, one had only to see with whom they associated at home!³⁷ With the appointment of Whitelaw Reid as Ambassador to Britain in 1905, it was hoped that he would exercise more control over presentations at court than his predecessor.³⁸ American expatriates in London, such as the Duchesses of Marlborough and

Roxburgh, Mary Curzon, and Jennie Cornwallis-West, were said to 'resent being classified with some other Americans who come over and try to push themselves into the inner circles'.³⁹

Henry James's short story 'The Siege of London', published in 1883, deals with the predicament of three Americans already established in London society who are called upon to vouch for a compatriot, Mrs Headway. The narrative hinges upon Mrs Headway's past. All we are told is that she is a Westerner and, although a wealthy widow at the opening of the story, she has been married and divorced several times. We know as much about Mrs Headway's past as her suitor, Sir Arthur Demesne, and his mother. The Demesnes are curious about Mrs Headway, they do not quite know what to make of her. Sir Arthur, it is said, 'hardly knew by what standard to measure her . . . and yet it was impossible not to see that she had a standard of her own'.⁴⁰ In order to find out if she is a suitable person to marry, Sir Arthur and his mother approach three Americans who are acquainted with Mrs Headway. The first is a rich man of leisure, George Littlemore, whom Sir Arthur visits to ask if Littlemore knows anything against Mrs Headway. But Littlemore makes it quite clear that he does not wish the subject to be broached, as he later tells his friend, Rupert Waterville: 'He [Sir Arthur] has no right, at any rate, to ask me such a question.'⁴¹ The scene between the two men highlights the delicacy of Sir Arthur's quest for information and Littlemore's response. Littlemore is not prepared to tell Sir Arthur what he has already told Waterville, namely that Mrs Headway is not respectable, and he cannot be evasive because this would indicate that Mrs Headway's standing was questionable, so he has to lie. But the situation does not arise. Sir Arthur hesitates for a minute as he takes his leave of Littlemore but finally realizes that he cannot ask him such questions. To have done so would have been presuming upon an intimacy between himself and Littlemore which does not exist. Littlemore, moreover, has been introduced to him by Mrs Headway as an old friend of hers, and by asking Littlemore for any personal information about Mrs Headway, Sir Arthur would have been asking Littlemore to break a confidence. Littlemore tells his friend Waterville that he would have been duty-bound in any case to lie to protect Mrs Headway's honour. In fact, he says it would be 'a joke to see her married to that superior being!'⁴² Waterville, however, finds the situation uncomfortable, especially as he is a

junior secretary at the US Legation and feels a certain amount of responsibility: 'he asked himself more than once how far it was permitted to him to countenance Mrs Headway's pretensions to being an American lady'.⁴³ When he is cornered by Lady Demesne, he follows Littlemore's line of defence by refusing to say anything against Mrs Headway.

Finally, Lady Demesne writes to Littlemore's sister, Mrs Dolphin, who has married a Hampshire squire and settled in England and who is 'usually not taken for an American'.⁴⁴ Mrs Dolphin discusses the letter with her brother, who admits that Mrs Headway has not 'behaved properly' but he still does not regard her as being 'much worse than many other women'.⁴⁵ Although inwardly 'irritated' by Mrs Headway's success in London, Littlemore still regards it as amusing. His sister, too, can appreciate that English society has only itself to blame for being so lax. She complains to her brother: 'English society has become scandalously easy. I never saw anything like the people that are taken up... It's like the decadence of the Roman Empire. You can see to look at Mrs Headway that she's not a lady'.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Mrs Dolphin does not like the way Mrs Headway has 'abused the facilities of things', that is, taken advantage of the ignorance of the British. And it is for this reason that she feels it is her 'duty', her 'responsibility', and her sense of 'decency' which require her to inform the Demesnes. She tells her brother:

What I see is a fine old race – one of the oldest and most honourable in England, people with every tradition of good conduct and high principle – and a dreadful, disreputable, vulgar little woman, who hasn't an idea of what such things are, trying to force her way into it. I hate to see such things – I want to go to the rescue!⁴⁷

But the crux of the matter for Mrs Dolphin has less to do with her romantic notions of the British aristocracy and more to do with her own self-interest as someone who is 'a party to an international marriage', as we are told: 'Mrs Dolphin naturally wished that the class to which she belonged should close its ranks and carry its standard high'.⁴⁸

As early as 1883, then, James had hit upon a tendency amongst American expatriates which became more pronounced over the next thirty years or so, i.e. for the Americans who had succeeded in

establishing their social position in Europe to make it harder for those who came after them. Mrs Dolphin, we are told, 'borrowed distinction' from being one of a few American women in England. If international marriages became commonplace she would lose the interest of those who found her a novelty. At the same time, the opposition of titled Americans to newcomers, especially those with less reputable social origins than themselves, can be understood as a desire to retain the value of their achievement in gaining entry into European society. The opening up of the nobility to anyone of wealth would have severely detracted from the status which they had acquired. This response is exactly the same as the one of New Yorkers in the fluid social situation in the last third of the nineteenth century.

Edith Wharton, who had herself expressed contempt for social climbers in the Gilded Age, satirized the attempts of the newly rich to establish a foothold in fashionable society in her unfinished novel, *The Buccaneers*:

When Colonel St George bought his house in Madison Avenue it seemed to him fit to satisfy the ambitions of any budding millionaire. That it had been built and decorated by one of the Tweed ring... was to Colonel St George convincing proof that it was a suitable setting for wealth and elegance. But social education is acquired rapidly in New York... and Mrs St George had already found that *no one lived in Madison Avenue*, that the front hall should have been painted Pompeian red with a stencilled frieze, and not with naked Cupids and humming birds on a sky-blue ground, and that basement dining-rooms were unknown to the fashionable [emphasis added].⁴⁹

What Edith Wharton was pointing to here is the way that location of a residence, and even the way it was painted, was a means of determining whether a person, or family, was in Society or not. Only those within the inner sanctum were, after all, informed as to the latest fashion in décor. It is rather revealing about Wharton's social prejudices that the vestibule of her family's home on West Twenty-third Street, just off Fifth Avenue, was in fact painted 'Pompeian red'.⁵⁰ Fashion, whether it be in dress, furnishings, portrait painting, or types of entertainment, acted as a form of social arbitration; it was also a test of financial standing. In Veblen's terms, this is classified as 'pecuniary canons of taste', where a

consumer conforms to 'a standard of expensiveness and wastefulness in his consumption of goods'.⁵¹ But such indicators of a person's social status would not have been readily available to the British elite. In London Americans would have rented the homes of aristocrats or stayed in fashionable hotels which would have underscored the impression of their substantial financial resources without necessarily detracting from their claims to social recognition. The relative anonymity of Americans away from home and their detachment from certain signs of their social position such as place of residence made it difficult, as we have seen illustrated in 'The Siege of London', for the British to judge Americans. That is perhaps why there is a considerable degree of interrelationships amongst titled Americans in Britain: there were at least ten sets of sisters who married into the British elite and another five women who married into the peerage twice.⁵²

British aristocrats were not totally at a loss in trying to place Americans socially. As we have already noted in an earlier chapter, the Duke of Marlborough made inquiries by letter about Leonard Jerome. The Duke's reaction to the reports he received was duly conveyed to his son:

from what you tell me and what I have heard, this Mr J. seems to be a sporting, and I should think vulgar kind of man. I hear he drives about six and eight horses in New York (one may take this as a kind of indication of what the man is).⁵³

The vulgarity of Jerome's sporting proclivities was compounded by the fact that he made his money by speculating on the stock market. The precariousness of such income and the daily business of calculating monetary gain would have been anathema to the Duke. The occupation of a prospective daughter-in-law's father was one way of judging a person's social standing – but according to British rather than American standards. Even so, although the main distinction for aristocrats would have been between landed and commercial wealth, there was an advantage to marrying the daughter of an American businessman as opposed to that of a British plutocrat – the source of American wealth would have been relatively anonymous. This double standard is illustrated rather well by the predicament of Mrs Gordon Selfridge, who, in 1909, wished to secure an invitation to a court *levée* in London. Presentation at court was, of course, the ultimate test of social acceptability

in Britain. It was a keenly sought distinction, and Americans competed for the invitations to Drawing Rooms and *levées* at the disposal of the American Ambassador. Whitelaw Reid, conscious of some of the criticism that his predecessors had attracted by failing to filter out those Americans of dubious reputation, was at pains to scrutinize the social qualifications of the many applicants. In 1909 he was approached by Mrs Selfridge. As the wife of an American businessman, she was 'perfectly eligible', as Reid told Mrs Taft, but as 'the wife of a shop-keeper in London in sharp and aggressive daily competition with other shopkeepers', she could not qualify for presentation.⁵⁴ To break the rule against people in trade would have offended British retailers and put the court and the Embassy in an awkward position.

The basic characteristics of the American heiress, therefore, are that she was beautiful, dressed expensively, talked with an unpleasant accent, knew how to be charming and win men over, was 'pushy', and the daughter of a wealthy New York businessman. As time went on, certain characteristics were embellished to support a more negative view of American women which emphasized the detrimental effect they were having on the peerage. By the turn of the century conjecture and prejudice contributed to an image of the American woman as frivolous, vain, and calculating. Money appeared to be at the heart of it all, and this has already been amply demonstrated in the way that the appearance, behaviour, and social origins of Americans were described in newspapers, journals, social commentary, and memoirs. Transatlantic marriages exacerbated a conflict between the aristocratic code and the new values of the plutocratic class, and it is in this context that we can best understand how the heiress stereotype functioned. Despite the fact that big businessmen had been filtering into Society for over a generation and that some had received the additional kudos of hereditary peerages, protests against them became more strident around the turn of the century. As well as from within aristocratic circles, plutocrats attracted criticism from outside the upper classes. In right-wing political quarters the alliance of the aristocracy and plutocracy spelt corruption, while the eugenicists, William and Catherine Whetham, blamed the *nouveaux riches* for the demoralization of the upper classes.⁵⁵ There was a certain degree of distrust of both businessmen and their ethics, but there was no British

counterpart to the American Progressive movement attacking corruption in the business world.

The particularly hostile view of American women which gained currency in the early 1900s must be seen against this background of distrust and suspicion of the business classes in general. Marriott-Watson placed a very sinister interpretation on transatlantic marriages. Writing for *The Nineteenth Century and After* in 1903, he warned British society of what was in store if Britain followed the United States into the commercial age.⁵⁶ He regarded the cold-bloodedness of American females, which he represented as the calculations of an imaginary Chicago pork-butcher's daughter buying an English coronet, as a sign of America's degeneracy. He fully accepted the popular notion of American men devoting their lives to money-making while leaving their wives to the pursuit of pleasure and 'abnormal activities', and argued that the worship of titles, money, and Society was harmful to women. He made it very clear that such preoccupations caused infertility; this was the result most to be feared, and his rhetoric was structured to make this point with the greatest effect: 'overworked men and nervous women tending to sterility, and living upon an artificial plane', he warned, 'do not promise a brave future for the nation'.⁵⁷

An even more extreme stance was taken by an anonymous contributor to the *Contemporary Review* two years later. In an article comparing titled American women to titled colonials, the author slighted the American contribution to British society and alleged that the influence of American women in Society 'makes for cheapness'.⁵⁸ S/he claimed, furthermore, that transatlantic marriages were less productive than colonial alliances in terms of offspring. This type of polemical, racist literature found an audience amongst those primed by the ideas of the Radical Right and the eugenics movement in Britain. Some members of the aristocracy who embraced these views took their role as social leaders, 'weighted with the ultimate eugenic responsibility',⁵⁹ very seriously. Arguments put forward about the inability of American peereesses to bear children were intended to increase the fears of the British aristocracy about its inability to maintain its numbers.

The weight of these essentially racist arguments fell upon American women rather than upon the aristocrats who married them, or welcomed them into their social circles. It was Americans who were accredited with the taint of commercialism and moral weakness,

not the peers who allegedly sold their titles, or the peereesses who sold introductions. The fear of the effects of materialism on social and political relations was displaced by attributing to Americans an even greater obsession with money. Whether this is true or not is less important than the fact that the aristocratic class, and the socio-economic groups which emulated it, failed to perceive how money had already become the basis of all relationships within its Society.⁶⁰ Americans, after all, were not responsible for marriage settlements, and some Americans objected strongly to the principle of financially supporting sons-in-law. Lady Dorothy Nevill, whose comments on the entry of American women into London society are widely quoted, no doubt struck a sympathetic chord amongst aristocratic families when she attributed to Americans the 'new conception of life', i.e. the idea that wealth was 'the ultimate end of existence'.⁶¹ George Cornwallis-West, the second husband of Jennie Churchill and a relative of Lord de la Warr, was far less circumspect about the transformation of Society. As a beneficiary of plutocratic wealth and influence – Sir Ernest Cassel helped him to find lucrative employment with an electrical engineering firm – Cornwallis-West recalled the Edwardian years with much nostalgia: 'Those were wonderful days. Taxation and the cost of living were low; money was freely spent and wealth was everywhere in evidence. Moreover it was possessed by the nicest people, who entertained both in London and in the country.'⁶² His emphasis on 'the nicest people' sounds like a rejoinder to all the criticism of plutocratic ostentation. Marie Corelli, in contrast, attacked both the aristocracy and plutocracy (Americans included) for their 'insane worship of wealth'. She regarded 'cash power' or 'money-dominance', i.e. the use of wealth to buy position and power, as an 'American taint' as far as its origin was concerned, but it was certainly not her intention to turn Americans into scapegoats by making them solely responsible for modern-day ostentation. Instead, she was at pains to show how the aristocracy had willingly abandoned older standards of 'simplicity, sincerity and hospitality' for vulgar ostentation, self-advertisement, and greed.⁶³ In fact, her harshest censure was reserved for the titled aristocrat who tried to use his title for financial gain. In her portrayal of American women in England, on the other hand, Corelli depicted the operation of the heiress stereotype with a slightly different emphasis: 'it often happens that the sight of a charmingly dressed, graceful, generally "smart" American girl

attracts the stolid Britisher in the first place because he says to himself – 'Money?'⁶⁴ Here, Corelli shows quite clearly that the material motives are exclusively confined to the British side. Her stereotypes, at least, were not drawn to uphold the status quo.

In the 1890s Elizabeth Banks, a young American journalist, exposed the vulnerability of the landed elite to financial pressures: by inserting the following advertisement in a London newspaper: 'A young American Lady of means wishes to meet with a chaperon of Highest Social Position, who will introduce her into the Best English Society. Liberal terms. Address, "Heiress".'⁶⁵ Within two days she had received eighty-seven replies, including some from titled personages. One Lady X proposed a visit to the South of France that winter, presumably as a rehearsal for the following London Season during which she promised to present 'Heiress' at a drawing-room. The terms Lady X proposed were £100 per month in France, in addition to travelling and accommodation expenses, and £200 per month in London. The most telling point of all, however, was that Lady X asked for bankers' references to attest to her client's financial soundness, but made no inquiries as to her social position. Elizabeth Banks followed up this offer and wrote to Lady X emphasizing that she came from a family of no social standing or refinement, couching her reply in terms which would evoke a change of mind in the least of snobs. In fact, Lady X remained undeterred. Among the other replies, a dowager claimed that she could supply 'Heiress' with both social position and a husband for a total of £5,000. According to the young journalist, who interviewed some of her prospective chaperons, the offers appeared to be genuine and were generally from people who found themselves in a position of financial embarrassment.⁶⁶

If British society was as commercialized as that of the United States, as indeed the evidence of writers like Corelli, Escott, and Elizabeth Banks would very much seem to suggest, why then did Marriott-Watson and other social commentators on Americans concentrate so much more on the materialism of American life?

Part of the answer lies in the belief that Americans posed a greater threat to aristocratic values, since both the number and size of American fortunes far exceeded those of British-based fortunes. W. D. Rubinstein has estimated that in the period in question American multi-millionaires were roughly twenty times richer than their British counterparts.⁶⁷ He has also suggested that, out of deference

to the ritual of aristocratic social life, British millionaires were less ostentatiously conspicuous than Americans.⁶⁸ The Duchess of Marlborough was allegedly made to feel that 'certain standards' had to be maintained, and her 'democratic ideals' had no place in Churchill family tradition.⁶⁹ Other American peereesses were also made to feel that the onus of assimilation lay upon them, rather than upon the British family into which they married. It is feasible that the British landed elite felt they had a greater measure of control over native-born plutocrats than over the more independent-minded republicans with their superior financial resources.

A more convincing explanation, however, is the fact that British aristocrats could disassociate themselves from the current obsession with money and profits by blaming foreign plutocrats for lowering the tone of Society.⁷⁰ It deflected accusations about growing materialism away from an aristocratic social structure which depended upon wealth and conspicuous display. The extent to which wealth and financial standing were an important element in aristocratic power had been disguised by the emphasis placed on public service, honour, birth, and tradition; it was these values which had contributed to the exclusiveness of the landed aristocracy. Once Society and the peerage were open to men from all walks of life, regardless of birth and occupation, the only way of asserting social leadership was through the power of the purse. By blaming Americans and Jews for the change in standards, the aristocracy could draw upon powerful national prejudices and thus avoid too close a scrutiny of the aristocratic system itself.

The stereotyping of Americans as materialistic, which has persisted to the present day, tells us a great deal about the way the British perceived themselves in the years when the United States was beginning to have a major economic impact upon Britain. In one of the earliest discussions of stereotypes, Walter Lippmann attempted to explain how they functioned:

in the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world, we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.

But, he went on to say, it was not simply a matter of imposing order on reality, but also 'the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights'.⁷¹

Articles written by visitors to the United States offering a British perspective on the development of the young republic appear to have been in vogue around the turn of the century. They invariably involved a measuring of American society against an undefined but recognizable British standard. Frederic Harrison, for example, noted the rapid accumulation of wealth, and the absence of *noblesse oblige* amongst the elite.⁷² Although the article is entitled 'Impressions of America', Harrison's observations of American life are strictly comparative. Amyas Northcote, younger son of the statesman Lord Iddlesleigh, also wrote an article for *The Nineteenth Century* which was more open in its attempt to evaluate American society from an English point of view.⁷³ Northcote set out to revise his countrymen's traditional set of cultural assumptions about Americans, not so much with the intention of unsettling British opinion of Americans but to try to deride American pride in democracy:

In the land where all men are said to be born free and equal, and the titular distinctions of the Old World are supposed to be held in contempt, there is this large class . . . to whom the sayings and doings of the least known British peer are of more importance than those of their own President.⁷⁴

The article contains many misconceptions and broad, generalized statements about the American elite, and in spite of his intentions Northcote reinforced existing cultural assumptions about Americans, i.e. that they lacked family tradition, that they pursued social distinction with an ostentatious display of their spending power, and that most gentlemen were commercial men, reckless and poorly educated. He saved his more generous words, i.e. 'charming' and 'accomplished', for American women. Whilst this may have been inevitable since his wife was an American, it nevertheless contradicted his description of American society as vulgar and materialistic. Unlike Marriott-Watson, Northcote was not prepared to see American women as part of the competitive, money-conscious commercial world.

Most of the articles written about United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emphasized the American attitude towards money, both in the earning and the spending of it.⁷⁵ For Northcote, this aspect of American culture constituted the 'salient difference' between the two countries. This emphasis owes

much to the tradition of classifying the business classes in Britain as 'the moneyed classes' and attributing monetary motives to all aspects of their behaviour. Disparaging of the different values held by the urban middle classes, the aristocracy traditionally considered them to be not only socially inferior, but also morally defective. Much emphasis, for example, was placed on the ability of a man of independent means to be objective in the political arena; as Taine observed:

the monied man and the man of business is inclined to selfishness; he has not the disinterestedness, the large and generous views which suit a chief of the country; he does not know how to sink self, and think of the public.⁷⁶

But by the closing years of the nineteenth century the old, hard core of the aristocracy was fighting a losing battle against the various encroachments on its power and position, so that these expressions of contempt for American entrepreneurs and their lifestyle were no more than fading echoes of a past era.

Blaming foreigners for the decline in standards in Society enabled the old ruling class to condemn with more ferocity the changes that were occurring within its social structure – changes which owed much more to domestic developments within the British economy than to the entry of foreign plutocrats into high society. It was, at the same time, easier and safer to condemn foreigners than to attack the British entrepreneurial class, and yet the criticism of foreign plutocrats was made largely in the familiar terms used to denigrate upwardly mobile members of the urban middle classes.⁷⁷ The antagonism towards the speedy entry of plutocrats into elite society was, however, inevitable. In the past, it had been possible to measure the power of aristocratic social prestige (and wealth) in terms of the number of generations it took for a rising family to be assimilated into the elite. It was bound to be disconcerting now that it took less than one generation to gain access to the elite, hence the lament that it was no longer possible to determine who was, and who was not, a gentleman.⁷⁸

The stereotype of the impoverished peer who sells his title to redeem his position in the leisured, gentlemanly class presupposes the existence of a rich woman prepared to buy herself a title and social distinction, and the result – a marriage of convenience – is seen as

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a perversion of the sacred vows of marriage, as a kind of prostitution. These negative images of the impoverished peer, the heiress, and their unholy contract imply, in turn, an accepted standard of behaviour according to which men and women do not act for monetary motives; and, for the middle and upper classes at least, this standard was compatible with the gentlemanly code and the cult of domesticity.⁷⁹ The two images of women which relate to the cult of domesticity and its antonym, i.e. the Angel in the House and the Seductress, are both products of a patriarchal culture in which women are regarded, alternately, either as pieces of property or as sex objects. In other words, women do not exist for themselves; they exist for men as types, either as alluring mistresses or as blindly devoted wives, mothers, and daughters.

The stereotype of the American heiress was an intensely derogatory image of the American women who married into the British peerage. By classifying them as daughters of plutocrats, the stereotype attributed vulgar, materialistic motives to these women. The image also promulgated the view that the heiress was a seductress who used her beauty and cunning to lure young men away from their duties and responsibilities as members of the ruling class (duties which included marrying within their own class). The concentration on the physical attractiveness and beautiful clothes in the descriptions of American women is evidence of this. Such details were not merely given to satisfy the interests of fashionable peereesses, or, if so, it would be too naïve to assume they were received simply as details of current fashion. Rather, they contributed to an envy and distrust of these women with their superior financial resources. And this, in turn, points to the complicity of aristocratic women in the creation of the heiress stereotype.⁸⁰ After all, they had the most to lose by the opening up of the aristocratic marriage market to women from the moneyed classes because, by the same token, the market was not opened up to the male members of these classes. Aristocratic women lost (male-defined) caste by marrying out of their class. Within their (albeit subordinate) position in the aristocratic social structure, women had a certain amount of room for manoeuvre, influence, and power, but they believed this sphere to be threatened by the introduction of American women with greater financial independence. Unable to avoid their own entrapment in patriarchal society (except by

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undergoing great personal sacrifice), they acquiesced in a male ideology which regarded women as appendages of men.